POSTLUDE

Reimagining Matthew – Beyond Advent

(with a full account of dating and provenance)

MOTHY VARKEY

REIMAGINING MATTHEW offers a valuable Advent resource, based on the Australian Lectionary Sunday readings for Year A – for all who believe in Jesus’ divine status and his saving life and death – as outlined in the Gospel of Matthew. Unlike other gospels in the New Testament, Matthew’s gospel was the most widely used gospel in the liturgical and missiological life of the early church – given how Matthew defines and gives a clear identity to his community/audience by “naming” them “Church” (16:18; 18:17), not just one of the many groups. This resource material, therefore, will definitely enrich and enlighten the liturgical life and celebrations of the church, not only during this Advent season, but also during one’s entire spiritual journey.

All the eight scholarly expositions in this resource material, especially the four studies which use the Sunday readings generated by the Lectionary, are discussed, and their corresponding (assigned) texts are arranged in such a way that they might not only link - not necessarily chronologically – readings for various liturgical seasons, especially the Advent season, but also cover the Lectionary readings for the whole of year A. Such a customary ordering and prioritising of the gospel passages is very useful and sensible insofar as it serves the liturgical purpose and seasonal celebrations of the church.

While not posing any major threat either to the doctrinal beliefs and liturgical practices of the church or to its being, this ecclesial arrangement of the canonical narratives does raise a pertinent issue. Does such a liturgical and ecclesial ordering of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ first coming,
life, death, resurrection, and second coming provide a convincing and coherent interpretative method that can take the Gospel of Matthew beyond Advent?

This is perhaps the rationale for having a postlude of this texture in this Advent resource which can throw some light on these issues. My task in this postlude, therefore, is not to proffer any one or more methods for interpreting Matthew’s gospel, but to show the warrant for keeping various key Matthean emphases side by side. In this final section of this Advent resource, I briefly examine some contemporary scholarly assessment of the historical background, the theological and physical location, and the date of the Gospel of Matthew.

THE DATE OF COMPOSITION

The dating of Matthew’s gospel ranges from 40 to 100 CE which means there is no consensus among scholars at this point. But Matthew was almost certainly written between 70 and 100 CE, in all probability between 85 and 90 CE. This terminus ad quem is suggested mainly for four reasons: (1) Matthew seems to have used the writing of Mark’s gospel, which according to most scholars was composed either during or shortly after the Jewish war of 66-70 CE; (2) Ignatius of Antioch, who died in 107 CE, knew the gospel in the written form; (3) the allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem temple (22:7), which receives confirmation in the Matthean apocalyptic discourses of chapters 24-25; and (4) the theological concerns and perspectives of Matthew are those of a “second generation” Christian.

THE PROVENANCE OF MATTHEW’S GOSPEL

We are in equal straits when it comes to navigating the actual geographic location where the Gospel of Matthew was written. Scholars have offered various suggestions – Jerusalem or Palestine, Transjordan (Pella), Caesarea Maritima, Phoenicia, Alexandria, Galilee, Syria (outside of

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2 Since there is no convincing evidence that Mark knew of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, a date prior to 70 CE seems more probable. In any event, the dating of Mark around this general period puts the composition of the Matthew’s gospel, which was directly dependent on Mark, in the post-war period. This supposition is confirmed by the Matthean parable of the wedding feast (22:1-10), which contains a relatively unambiguous reference to the destruction of the Jerusalem and its temple.

3 The Hermeneia commentary on Ignatius puts his death in the commonly attested time of 114-116 CE.


6 Benedict T. Viviano, “Where was the Gospel according to St. Matthew Written?,” CBQ 41 (1979), 533-46.


Beyond Advent | Reimagining Matthew

Antioch), Damascus, Antioch etc. But Syrian Antioch seems to be more probable, given Peter’s prominence in Matthew and the success of the Gospel of Matthew, which must have been accomplished by the backing of a major eastern Christian community. “Although we have found the evidence for placing Matthew in Antioch to be considerable, we must plainly state that we do not claim…a high degree of certainty…So while, in our judgment, the First Gospel was probably put together for the church of Antioch, this conclusion remains no more than the best educated guess.”

THE SITZ IM LEBEN (“LIFE SETTING”) OF MATTHEW’S COMMUNITY AND AUDIENCE

Matthew is the only gospel that records Jesus’ surprising words constraining his and his disciples’ immediate mission to Israel. In 10:5-6, Matthew has Jesus firmly forbid his disciples from engaging mission to the Gentiles: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (cf. 10:23: “all the towns of Israel”). Later in the narrative, when Jesus himself is entreated by a Gentile woman, he responds by saying “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This reflects the Jewish theological orientation of the gospel.

On the other hand, and seemingly against this Jewishness of Matthew’s gospel and community, we see a strong stance in favour of the Gentiles: the genealogy contains Gentile women (1:3, 5, 6); Magi from the east (2:1-12); a Roman centurion (8:5-13); a Canaanite woman (15: 21-28); a Roman soldier’s confession (27:54); the Great Commission (28:18-20), and so on. Moreover, Jesus’ virulent attack on the Jewish leaders (chapter 23) and the references such as “their/your synagogues” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17 etc.), “their scribes” (7:29), “evil generation” (12:45), “the Jews” (28:15), and “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Mat 27:25) etc. seem to show Matthew’s negative relation to Judaism. Here, then, we have what is possibly the major puzzle in Matthew’s Gospel, which best explains the divergent understandings and positions on how to interpret Matthew’s gospel.

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11 Joachim Gnilka, Das Matthäusevangelium (HTKNT, 1; Freiburg/ Basel: Herder, 1986), 1:515.


We know from Galatians that Peter was an influential figure in Antioch (cf. 2:11) and the later patristic traditions confirm his long-standing association with the church there.


15 Davies and Allison, Matthew, 1:146-7.
Scholars have understood this conundrum differently. Some, in fact, have argued that the use of “their synagogues” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54; cf. 23:34) in opposition to “the church” (16:18; 18:17), abrogation of the Torah (5:21-48), the seeming replacement of Judaism by Christianity in 21:43, and the gospel’s christological claims about Jesus etc. suggest a physical and ideological separation of Matthew’s community from the larger Jewish society (extra muros position) at the time of the composition of the gospel.\(^\text{16}\) This means the community addressed by Matthew were now defining themselves in opposition to Judaism.\(^\text{17}\) But this position is not likely on the following grounds:

1. Perhaps the most “vital” evidence for Matthew’s affirmative relationship to Judaism is the gospel’s affirmation that all of the Torah remains valid till eternity (5:17-19). A group like Matthew’s which affirms the Torah/Law thus belongs within Judaism.

2. Though Matthew’s treatment of the synagogues appears to be negative,\(^\text{18}\) the distancing pronoun “their” does not indicate a complete theological break from Judaism,\(^\text{19}\) because “their synagogues” seemingly implies that there is an “our synagogue”.\(^\text{20}\) Furthermore, Matthew 10:17 and 23:34 claim that Jesus’ disciples and the Matthean community will be “flogged” (a Jewish mode of punishment) in “their synagogues” (6:2, 5; 23:6).\(^\text{21}\) This


entails that the Matthean community is still present in the synagogues, not as silent listeners, but as a community engaging in mission campaign to Jews (10:5-6). More so, we find that the Matthean Jesus is still teaching and preaching in “their synagogues” (4:23; 9:35), which suggests that not all the synagogues were hostile to Jesus. This means that there was no uniform or collective move against the Matthean community on the part of the Jewish community. Thus, it is clear that albeit Matthew uses “their/your synagogue(s)”, he and his community still genuinely belong to Judaism. But, those passages which mirror opposition prove that the Matthean community is in conflict with the Jewish people in those synagogues and those who rule such synagogues, but has not entirely severed its ties with Judaism.

3. Matthew carefully separates the positive response of the crowd (9:33; 12:23; 21:8-10, 15, 46; 22:33) and the manipulative Jewish leaders (26:47, 55; 27:15-26) to prove that the leaders do not represent Judaism, and, hence, the blatant dismissal of the Jewish leaders does not entail rejection of Judaism.

Thus, we may assume that, at least at the time of the composition of the gospel, Matthew’s community considered themselves to be belonging to Judaism, which, however, would not have been possibly accepted by the Jewish leaders, which sits well with the first century Judaism. That is, the Matthean community was engaged in an internal Jewish conflict; Matthew’s relationship to Judaism is intra-mural, which is likely. However, given the multifaceted relationship between

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Matthew and Judaism and the complex diversity of the first century Judaism, such an “inside” “outside” separation is “deceptively small”:26 “inside” or “outside” of what? This best explains why the quest for a responsible understanding of Matthew’s gospel has always been an arduous challenge.

TOWARDS AN EDUCATED READING OF MATTHEW’S GOSPEL.

From this discussion it is clear that the plurality and diversity of key issues in defining the theological location of Matthew’s gospel and community warrants our engagement with more than one theological position, so as to constitute a responsible hermeneutical optic. The problem of situating Matthew’s gospel within the theological landscape of first century Judaism stems both from the ambiguity of the evidences within the gospel itself, and from the difficulty of mapping the complexity of Judaism and its relationship to various early Christian movements such as the Matthean community. Therefore, I may suggest the following vantage points:

1. **Affirmation of history:** For Matthew – unlike in Luke, who begins his genealogy with Adam (Lk 3:38) – history begins with the calling of Abraham (1:2). God’s dealing with his people is affirmed and continued, and not replaced or made redundant, in Jesus. Matthew achieves this by juxtaposing the genealogy (1:1-17) and the birth of Jesus (1:18-25). This is further evident in Matthew’s apocalyptic account of Jesus’ death (27:51-54), where he links Jesus’ death to the resurrection of the “holy ones” (27:52), who symbolically represent the history of the people of God.

2. **The primacy effect of 1:21:** For Matthew, unlike other “canonical” gospels, Jesus’ primary role is to “save his people from their sins” (1:21). That is, Matthew defines Jesus’ birth, naming and commissioning in salvific terms (1:21), so that as the name is used in the gospel, the audience may recall this commissioning and evaluates his actions and words in relation to it (cf. 27:42). Therefore, 1:21 exercises a “primacy effect” whereby it shapes the expectations and understandings Matthew’s audience throughout the gospel. Accordingly, it is clear that the interpretation of the name in 1:21 is programmatic for the entire life and ministry of Jesus. This means Matthew’s gospel may be read through the eyes of 1:21, not through 26:28, which, otherwise, would mean that the life and ministry of Jesus were only a means of arriving at his death.

3. **Sufficiency of the Torah/Law (5:17-48; 19:16-23; 22:34-40):** For Matthew, and for Jesus, the Law remains in force because Jesus’ mission is not to abrogate the Law, but to fulfil

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Beyond Advent | Reimagining Matthew

it (5:17-19). Therefore, antithesis in 5:21-48 means that Jesus is only enhancing the true sense of the Torah, and not giving a second opinion regarding what the Torah requires to be saved (19:16-23); “enhancing the Torah’s strictness or refusing to do what it permits is not abrogation”. Jesus interprets the Torah in the way it should be interpreted, and, hence, Jesus’ interpretation cannot be at variance with the demands of Torah. This shows that the antithesis is not between Jesus and the Torah, but between how it was being interpreted and how it should be, as illustrated elsewhere (19:16-23; 22:34-40).

4. Jesus’ role as the teacher and judge: For Matthew, Jesus is not only the saviour (1:21) but also the judge to come (3:11-12; cf. Mk 1:7-8; LK 3:7-9). This is further evident in the relation between Jesus’ teachings and the criterion for the last judgment; Jesus the teacher is also the one who pronounces judgment. That is, Jesus’ role as the coming judge (3:11-12; 25:31-46) is closely linked to Jesus’ other saving roles such as teacher and shepherd (2:6) which Matthew makes for Jesus.

5. CONCLUSION

This concluding section of Re-imagining of Matthew has attempted to provide an overview of contemporary scholarly discussions of Matthew’s physical location and date of composition, to outline some of the issues one might encounter while reading and interpreting Matthew, and to suggest a few educated strategies for interpreting Australian Lectionary readings for Year A, constructed on Matthew’s gospel. As is most likely, Matthew’s gospel is the literary product and expression of a Jesus’ community’s theological response to and encounter with the issues of uncertainty and continuity in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem and its temple. This provides enough resources as to how each modern-day Jesus’ community (church) may respond to the theological questions and historical challenges that constitute its respective life setting. We must learn to read Matthew’s gospel with first century eyes and twenty first century questions (N.T.Wright).

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27 Sim, Gospel, 130. Similarly, but with varying nuances, Snodgrass, “Matthew,” 551-2; Hagner, Matthew, 1:109-12; Harrington, Matthew, 90-2; Roger Mohrlang, Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives (SNTSM, 48; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 24-5.

28 Cf. Daube, Judaism, 55-62. He cites forms of refutation of opinion in rabbinic tradition, using the phrase, “But you must say”. This falls short of the authority expressed here, but the differences should not be exaggerated. See also Betz, Sermon, 208-9.