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MATTHEW AND THE HOUSE-CHURCHES

by MORRIS A. INCH

DR. INCH, Professor of Bible in Wheaton College, Illinois, presents a short study which throws light not only on the possible life-setting of the Gospel of Matthew but also on the life and structure of early Christianity.

SHERMAN Johnson raises the rhetorical question: "But why did laymen and readers in the house-churches of the Graeco-Roman world read Matthew so avidly?"¹ The reasons which he introduces to explain the interest seem to be generally assumed by the commentators as the more significant ones, viz., the completeness of the narrative, and its unique qualification for ecclesiastical purposes. It is especially the latter which Johnson singles out, illustrating how suitable Matthew's style is for lectionary use.

Matthew does qualify for its completeness and church utility, but the question is whether there may be a more basic motif and reason for its popularity. It is this possibility which I will pursue.

I. DETERMINATION

That the smooth and pithy style of Matthew accommodates it to the church service may well be incidental to its organization. The more critical issue has to do with whether its primary concern is with the record or teaching of Jesus. Johnson seems to assume that it is with the former and many agree. But why? Two evidences are generally introduced: the historical perspective and its extent. That is, Matthew delves into what occurred and this to a marked degree.

But before considering these arguments, let us weigh the alternative interpretation—that it is the teaching of Jesus which structures the book. The bulk of the instruction in Matthew falls into five sections, each terminated by a version of "when He had finished these words" (Matt. 7: 28; 11: 1; 13: 53; 19: 1; 26: 1). These pivoted references not only conclude the formal instruction, but introduce subsequent activity, often punctuated by dialogue.

Look at these teaching sections more carefully. They deal in succession with life in the new community, the work and behaviour of the disciples, the mystery of the kingdom, excellence, and the

¹ *Interpreter's Bible*, VII p. 232.

consummation. Consider, further, how the life of Christ ties into these blocks of teaching. The first three sections precede periods of relative obscurity, popularity, and opposition. The fourth marks the point at which Jesus leads His followers away from the familiar confines of Galilee to Peraea and Judaea, and the last introduces the passion account.

There is one segment remaining, the introduction to Christ's life and ministry (Matt. 1: 1-4: 25). It is its inclusion which, I think, tends to mislead us on Matthew's basic thrust. It was necessary to fill out the account, but may obscure for us the content which gave it such an appeal to its Graeco-Roman readers of yesterday.

Imagine that the first gospel began with 5: 1. (For all intent and purposes, the teaching does begin here.) We read: "And when he . . ." and that is as far as we get. Who is He? The introduction establishes, both in terms of His genealogical and circumstantial qualifications, Jesus' Messianic claims. That is, it is not history alone but the historical legitimacy of Jesus' instruction which is at issue.

Henry Theissen concludes: "Matthew wrote to encourage and confirm the persecuted Jewish Christians in their faith, to confute their opponents, and to prove to both that the Gospel was not a contradiction of the teachings of the Old Testament, but rather a fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and to David."² Notice the order to his words, starting with gospel, and providing continuity with what preceded it.

So much for the historical perspective in general, but what of the amount of factual detail in Matthew? Two considerations seem trenchant. The detail, with exclusion of the Messianic introduction, is much less impressive than in Luke, and in some ways less so than with Mark, while John's apologetic purposes make comparison there difficult. Moreover, Matthew comparably elaborates the teaching sections as well, likely suggesting that we are dealing with a stylistic factor more than the author's concern with the historical particulars as such.

In summary, we appear to have in Matthew five major pedagogical sections, each introducing the disciples to a new course of events, representing Christian faith as a Messianic openness, a versatility born of commitment. The prime concern of the book is, I suggest, to inculcate such a perspective, and the reason for its ready acceptance that it uniquely suited the needs of persons in cultural transition. It remains to elaborate what this thesis might imply.

² Henry Theissen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 137.

II. DESCRIPTION

For a passage which at face value seems so relatively unobscure, the Sermon on the Mount has lent itself to a remarkable variety of interpretations. This may suggest that we are not seeing it clearly in the larger context and purpose of the work.

To whom was the message addressed? Jesus saw the multitudes and retired to the mountain, where He assumed a teaching position and the disciples came to Him (Matt. 5: 1). Yet, as He neared the conclusion of the series of instruction, the multitude was amazed at His teachings by reason of the authority He assumed (Matt. 7: 28-29). Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains the situation simply by saying that Jesus taught His disciples in the presence of the multitude. That is, the teaching was directed to the disciples, but "the aim is to bring *all* who hear it to decision and salvation."³

The sermon in general and beatitudes in particular anticipate the text of Matthew:

They express divergence from the established norms of society, the cost of discipleship, and the consequent happiness. The principles which they convey were personified in Christ. The Beatitudes are but guidelines; one's relationship to Christ is the crux of the issue. They are not so much a list of things to do as aids to the compulsive obedience felt by the disciples. They were also words of comfort which would be so necessary for the difficult days that lay ahead for those first disciples—and which no disciples may avoid. The Beatitudes set the tone for the Christian life; they are the priorities which make life meaningful.⁴

What the disciples were witnessing in Christ, they should expect for themselves. This, it seems likely, is what the Graeco-Roman readers of Matthew were impressed with, and the ideal to which they responded.

Faith in Christ is, in a sense, a cultural shock of divine proportion. Life in Christ stands over against the self life. However, Christ does not stand with one man, or one culture, against another; He stands in opposition to all defection from the divine will. This means that the encounter with Jesus is both perfect acceptance and thorough rejection. It is acceptance of the essential neutrality of parochial traits and the repudiation of all substitutes to the life in God. The gospel is good news to those in Him and bad news to those who turn the Messiah off. And that critical concept is spelled out for the disciples as they enter with Jesus into a period before the message became a live option for the multitudes, an experience paralleling precisely that of the early house-churches.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 119.

⁴ Morris Inch, *Psychology in the Psalms*, p. 67.

The second collection of Jesus' sayings introduces the disciples into the nature of their responsibilities, their work, and their behaviour. They receive such instruction as:

As you go, preach, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand".

Heal sick, raise dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give.

Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, nor even two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support.

And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it; and abide there until you go away.

Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.

But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak.

What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops.

With these (Matt. 10: 8-11, 16, 19, 27) and many other words, Jesus counselled the committed in the course they should take.

And the Christian vocation precipitates, as well as pacifies, culture transition. It is a work which transcends the changing of ways. It carries the Christian into the contemporary situation without waiting for it to come upon him. Moreover, the Christian vocation helps to structure the new situation in relation to the gospel.

Christian ministry, understood in these terms, is radical—not in its departure from a given past or present but its contrast with all life styles. This is so because the Christian does not simply attempt to labour like Christ but labours in Him. The Christian life is not replica but relationship; while consistent with the past it is creatively present. So the Graeco-Roman believers drew from Palestinian sources to serve the universal Christ. That was the dynamic of their commission.

And the ministry was bearing fruit. Not long after the turn of the century, Justin Martyr would boast: "For there is not a single race of men, whether among barbarians or Greeks, or by whatever name they may be called, of those who live in wagons or are called nomads or herdsmen living in tents, among whom prayers and thanksgivings are not offered through the name of the crucified Jesus to the Father and Maker of all things."⁵ Already there were intimations of the harvest to be expected, and the labour was seen as a labour to life. Matthew's text, no doubt, reinforced that sense of vocational reality.

⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 117.

Jesus' third block of instruction developed the mystery of the kingdom, and anticipated the opposition which was growing. The gospel both rends and restores; it separates brother from brother and makes brothers out of foreigners. The Spirit of God works in mysterious ways, shattering the citadels of time in favour of the reaches of eternity.

Seemingly in exasperation, the disciples asked Jesus: "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matt. 13: 10). His teaching seemed to *accentuate* the mystery, but Jesus countered that it *reflected* the mystery. There was a hardness of heart which, if it is to be pierced, will be done not by overpowering assault but an invitation to life. God is working, but in mysterious and wonderful ways.

We could speculate further. It was not simply that the gospel was received by some and rejected by others, but it permeated the power structure slowly—both in Jesus' day and in the time of Matthew's readers. Opposition grew among those who felt threatened by this new movement. The establishment was worried and, in turn, troubled the Christian community. Tacitus described the persecution developing:

Christ, from whom the name was derived, had been put to death in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate. The deadly superstition, having been checked for a while, began to break out again, not only throughout Judaea, where this mischief first arose, but also at Rome, where from all sides all things scandalous and shameful meet and become fashionable. Therefore, at the beginning, some were seized who made confessions; then, on their information, a vast multitude was convicted, not so much of arson as of hatred of the human race.⁶

Many would die, but many more lived daily in threat of death. Rejection and retribution increasingly stalked the believers, and they learned to live with these unwelcome companions. After all, they had also been the companions of Christ, and a servant is not to expect better treatment than his Lord. This was what they read in Jesus' teaching, witnessed in the record of His life, and experienced in their own.

The impression that this reality left with the church cannot be measured. Often it has been observed that the fellowship functions better under persecution than with affluence. Perhaps that is natural but, again, the situation could be accentuated by our historic memory of the way it *was*—and, therefore, presumably *is* to be. In any case, Matthew reflects the mystery of the kingdom in such a way as to help believers negotiate opposition and perse-

⁶ Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, 44.

cution. It was the case in the first century, and for any analogous time.

The next, and relatively abbreviated, passage on Jesus' teaching revolved around the question of who is greatest in the kingdom, coming to bear on forgiveness and being an offence to others (Matt. 18: 1f). And Jesus' comments immediately precede the Peraean and Judaeon ministries (Matt. 19: 1). That is, they were preparation for His Galilaeon company as they entered into less familiar circumstances. It was, in a qualified regard, a bi-cultural initiation.

And the basic problem in bi-culturalism in so far as the Christian ministry is concerned is to communicate effectively and allow an indigenous development. There were extensive provincial rivalries which threatened the spread of the gospel during Jesus' life and that of the early church. The difficulties would be extended or minimized as the disciples searched for cultural equivalents and allowed appropriate application. The Graeco-Roman believers sensed this because they were feeling their way through the experience.

Culture gaps are increased by preferences absolutized as ideals, and offences (real and imagined) incorporated into tradition. Now, the Christians were charged with witnessing to a Christ of universal access. It meant crossing cultural barriers, not to surrender or demand surrender, but to suggest that we, though legitimately different, can be one in Christ. For the Galilaeon Christian, it meant dialogue with the religiously neglected Peraean and the religiously saturated Judaeon. For the house-church convert, it was a virtually endless adaptation to novel customs and ideals carried along the Empire's trade routes.

The final instructional section deals with the end of the age, and it prepared for the approaching passion (Matt. 24: 3; 26: 2). Jesus' reply to the disciples' questions concerning the omega point

is an involved one, warning of the stresses of the time, the possibility of being misled, and the rigorous demands of discipleship. Then comes His contrast between "these things" (Matt. 24: 33)—which are pending, observable, and within their life span, and "that day and hour" (Matt. 24: 36)—which is expected, unpredictable, and in the Father's hand. That is, Jesus tells them that they must expect a time when life changes radically for them, when they are thrust from the relative security and comforting familiarity of the Hebrew commonwealth into a world where hostility meets them at every turn.⁷

Where the transition from Galilee to Peraea-Judaea was to enable the follower to deal with change, the passion lectures were prepara-

⁷ Morris Inch, excerpt from a multi-authored apologetics text in preparation for publication.

tion for change itself. Here the disciple would leave himself behind for a larger ministry, either to speak before the multitudes and/or die as the martyr.

Some years ago a man, having suffered for Christ's sake, confessed how he had come to the place where there was no reserve, no will to go on in the face of threat and abuse. "Then," he recalled, "I heard myself declaring my unqualified faith in Christ—as if Someone were speaking for me." This he reported and many have experienced a sort of leaving all behind and transcending every finite limitation with a confession of which he is not capable. The familiar foundations and reference points are no longer there, only Christ, His creative power, and the opportunity. The disciples were weaned from the Temple before the Romans destroyed it; and the ministries and martyrs from their life style before Christ detailed their service or welcomed them home.

The facet of experience is a fundamental contradiction; it is absurdity. In it life loses all meaning but expresses the most astonishing truth man is capable of this side of glory. It is when God's will is so welcome that our only concern can be for the other person. It musters what little may be left of life for a last climatic expression of confidence. It can even remove the black crape from Good Friday.

The first-century house-churches were alive—alive to Christ, the reality of Christian fellowship, and the responsibilities for world conquest. They were rejoicing in the blessedness which transcended their circumstances, coloured their ministry, and whetted their anticipation. In Matthew's gospel they found a text remarkably applicable to their situation. It helped them worship, will, and work. Its theme was Messianic, and it pictured the Messianic message as dynamic, open, and unashamed. Perhaps written by Matthew with the Hebrew Christian especially in mind, it was in the providence of God certainly intended for all those passing through cultural transition—a moving message for mobile people.

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