

Introducing Jesus

Study 4: Matthew's Picture of Jesus

Q. What's the point of the Old Testament?

The Setting of Matthew's Gospel

Historical evidence suggests that Matthew wrote his Gospel sometime in the 80's AD, i.e. after the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed during the Jewish Rebellion. Matthew himself is someone who knows the Jewish culture and history intimately so we can assume he is Jewish. Also, while Mark tends to explain Jewish customs for his readers (Mark 7:2-4, 15:42), suggesting a predominantly Gentile audience, Matthew often presents them without explanation – ceremonial washings (Mark 15:2); the temple tax (Mark 17:24-27); phylacteries and tassels (Mark 23:5); whitewashed tombs, Mark 23:27)). This suggests that Matthew's audience is predominantly Jewish. Nevertheless he writes to them in Greek. We can therefore conclude that Matthew was a Jew writing to Christians who were predominantly Hellenised (Greek culture) Jews.

As we saw in the first study, the Jews had lived under Greek cultural influence for over 300 years. Following the failure of the Jewish Rebellion (AD66-70) Jews began to disperse in larger numbers out of Palestine and into the wider Roman world. Such communities would have included the fledgling Christian communities who were, at this stage, a small sect within Judaism. Important features of this period would have included the following:

- With the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed there was no longer a physical focal point for their faith, culture and national identity. No place to offer sacrifices. No "home" where they could encounter God. No central spot to celebrate their sense of community.
- The Torah began to replace the Temple as the focus of Jewish identity.
- With the Temple gone, the Sadducee faction was all but gone; and with the military rebellion crushed the Zealots were a spent force. This was therefore the time of the rise of the Rabbi's, the successors to the Pharisees. As students of the Law (Torah) the Pharisees (Rabbi's) became the custodians of all things Jewish. They struggled fervently for the survival of the Jewish identity by replacing Temple with Torah, animal sacrifice with obedience to the Law.
- Within the Christian communities this movement expressed itself as a "Judaising" influence, i.e. as those who insisted that Gentiles first convert to Judaism before receiving the Gospel (Gal 2:11-14).

Matthew is writing at the cusp of the expansion of the Christian mission beyond Judaism and into the Gentile world. He is writing to Jewish Christians to reassure them that allegiance to Jesus is not a break from their Jewish heritage but a fulfillment thereof. Jesus is depicted as be strongly opposed to the Pharisees (Matt 23:13-19) who are seen as the bad guys throughout the book. Nevertheless this must not be seen as anti-Jewish, for Jesus has not come to abolish the Jewish law but to fulfill/reveal/complete it (Matt 5:17-20). Indeed, Matthew's main thrust is to show how the Gospel of Jesus is in harmony with and the culmination of all that Israel has hoped and dreamed over it's long history.

The Structure of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's Gospel can be seen as an edition of Mark's Gospel. Matthew must have had a copy of Mark's Gospel on his desk when he wrote. He includes almost all of the content of Mark and much of it is included word for word. He even follows most of Mark's structure with key turning points occurring when Jesus begins his ministry (4:17) and when Peter confesses him as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi (16:21).

Similar to Mark's Gospel, Matthew wants to show us that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. On this theme, the structure of the book can be summarized as follows:

- 1:1 – 4:16 The person of Jesus the Messiah
- 4:17 – 16:20 Proclamation of the Messianic Kingdom
- 16:21 – 28:20 Jesus the Messiah revealed to the world

What is most interesting about Matthew's Gospel (having read Mark's Gospel) is the way that Matthew adds material to extend this edition. These give us a clue to the specific intention of Matthew's writing and the particular way that he wishes to portray Jesus. There are essentially three major additions that he makes to Mark's writing:

- Details of Jesus origins and infancy – 1:1 – 2:23
- Five blocks of Jesus' teaching
 - Sermon on the Mount – Ch 5-7
 - Commissioning the Twelve – Ch 10
 - Parables of the Kingdom – Ch 13
 - Parables about the Church – Ch 18-22
 - Parables about Judgement – Ch 23-25
- Details about the Resurrection

**Q. Having read both Mark and Matthew, what differences did you notice?
What intrigues you or puzzles you about the differences you see?**

Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Torah

Matthew wants his readers to know that Jesus is, on the one hand, no do-it-yourself religious innovator but that he is the fulfilment of everything that was foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is therefore at pains to show the connections between Jesus and every part of Biblical, Messianic prophecy. On the other hand, Jesus goes beyond the mere letter of the Law as it is taught by the Pharisees (Rabbis). They are teaching a legalistic religion limited to Jews and focused in on itself. Jesus demands even greater righteousness than the Law does and, in so doing, opens the gates for all nations to receive the Blessing promised by God to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3).

To make his argument, Matthew makes use of a number of techniques, each of which we will consider in turn.

1. Jesus as the Faithful Israelite

Matthew begins his gospel by linking Jesus to his Jewish roots. In 1:1-17 Matthew gives us Jesus' genealogy, linking him to both David, the great King and Messianic model, and Abraham, the father of the nation. There can be no doubt then about Jesus' Jewish heritage. You recall from our first study that Hebrew thought would link people to their ancestors as valid representatives. Jesus can therefore stand in as

a full representative of Abraham. He is Abraham. He is Israel. And therefore he can carry the full weight of the prophecies, expectations and hopes of Israel.

Interestingly though, even in this early section of the book, Matthew includes an interlude which reminds us that the calling of Jesus/Israel has a global/international implication. Abraham’s call (Gen 12:1-3) was not only for his own sake but so that through him, “all nations will be blessed”. Wise men arrive at the Jesus’ manger (2:1-12), making it clear that Jesus’ birth has global significance way beyond the borders of Israel.

As the story of Jesus’ faithful obedience to God, even to the point of death on a cross, unfolds, the significance of his representation of Israel becomes clear: Where Israel had been unfaithful, Jesus is faithful; where Israel had failed in her role to be a blessing to all nations, Jesus would remain faithful to that role.

2. Jesus as the Fulfillment of Prophecy

On ten occasions, Matthew points out how events in Jesus life fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament. He uses the following formula (or similar words): “This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet...”. Here is a table of these occasions:

Matt	O. T.	Point
1:20-23	Isaiah 7:14	Emmanuel – God with us
2:1-6	Micah 5:2	Ruler born in Bethlehem
2:14-15	Hosea 11:1	“Out of Egypt I called my son”
2:17-18	Jeremiah 31:15	Slaughter of the innocents
3:1-3	Isaiah 40:3	John as the voice calling in the wilderness
4:13-16	Isaiah 9:1-2	“The people living in darkness have seen a great light”
8:16-17	Isaiah 53:4	“He bore our diseases”
12:15-21	Isaiah 42:1-4	Jesus, God’s chosen servant
13:34-35	Psalms 78:2	Teaching in parables
21:1-5	Zehariah 9:9	“Your king comes, gentle and riding on a donkey”

On a further dozen or more times, Matthew sites or alludes to Scripture in ways that indicate that Jesus’ life fulfils them.

On closer inspection Matthew seems to use some of these quotations from the Hebrew prophets out of context and some of the events seem historically questionable. While this might alarm our modern Western sensibilities, we should be cautious about applying modern forensic tests to a 1st Century document. Matthew’s concern here is not so much to “prove” that Jesus is who he says he is, but rather to show a link between Jesus and the eternal purposes of God. As one commentator puts it:

“Christians in the West tend to look to prophecy for its apologetic value. Knowing something ahead of time is proof of the message’s divine origin. Yet for Matthew, the fulfillment of Scripture is less about apologetics and more about God’s sovereign purposes. The establishment of patterns of “fulfillment” confirms that all of human history is heading toward its goal and culmination in Christ.” Mark Strauss

3. Jesus as the New Moses

The Torah or Law was, of course, the Law of Moses. It was Moses who gave the Law to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. For anyone to give a new replacement to the Law, they would have to be at least on a par with Moses. Matthew shows his readers how Jesus matches and replaces Moses as the giver of the Law.

As Moses went up the mountain (Sinai) to receive the terms of the first Covenant (Ex 19-20), so Jesus delivers his Sermon on the Mount to inaugurate the New Covenant and to deliver its terms to his followers (Matt 5-7). As Moses' face was glowing when he came down the mountain after his encounter with God (Ex 34:29-33), so Jesus' face shines on the mountain of the Transfiguration (Matt 17:2). As Moses wrote the five books of the Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy), so Jesus delivers five distinct blocks of teaching (see pg 19).

4. Jesus as the New Temple

With the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed, Pharisaic (Rabbinic) Judaism sought to replace the Temple with the Torah as the “place” where God could be found. Matthew takes this a step further: It is not the Law but the Giver of the Law who embodies the presence of God. In other words, where the Pharisees saw the Torah as the New Temple, Matthew sees Jesus as the New Temple.

The inner sanctuary of the Temple or “Holy of Holies” was understood as the place where God's presence (glory / shekinah) dwelt. Matthew uses the prophecy from Isaiah 7:14 to identify Jesus as Immanuel – God with us – Matt 1:23. Then at the moment of Jesus' death the curtain to the Holy of Holies is torn in two (27:51), implying that God's presence is no longer bound within a building. Finally, in his last words to his disciples, as he gives them their Great Commission, Jesus promises them his ongoing presence “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (28:20)

Two other aspects of the Temple are also linked to Jesus. As the place of the presence of God, the Temple was where sacrifices could be made for the sake of atonement. Jesus offers himself as the sacrifice of Atonement (26:28). The Temple was also the place of meeting (i.e. where people could meet one another and where God would meet them). By forming a habit of shared community meals and instituting the Lord's Supper as an ongoing celebration, Jesus made these meals the replacement of the Temple as a place of meeting – a place where he himself would be present.

Q. Q & A

The Content of the New Torah

In such a short study it is impossible to do justice to all the contents of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel. Nevertheless, we will take a quick look at some of the major themes and how Jesus taught them. It is worth pointing out, since this is a study aimed at uncovering how the Biblical authors portrayed Jesus, that it is in the content of the teaching itself that we hear the voice of Jesus. I would therefore urge you to read the teaching sections in Matthew's Gospel again after this study to listen carefully once more to the words of Jesus. For now, just a summary...

1. A righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees

Many of Jesus' teachings in Matthew, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount (ch5-7), are shaped in the formula: "You have heard it said...but I say to you...". In other words, Jesus in Matthew is giving his disciples a new interpretation of the Law. This is not a new law or a rejection of the Law, but an attempt to get to the heart or true meaning of the law. There are three different ways that Jesus reinterprets and radicalizes the Law.

Interior disposition: In the case of murder and adultery (5:21-30) he insists on an inner disposition and not just outer action. This is seen by some moral philosophers as the strictest of all moral teachings. It is one thing to legislate what one must do. Jesus legislates how we must feel.

Absolute adherence: In the case of swearing oaths and divorce (5:31-37) Jesus demands that we obey absolutely without leaving any room "get-out clauses".

Beyond the letter of the Law: In terms of relationships with enemies (5:38-47) Jesus teaches a morality that goes beyond the letter of the law. If the law says we should love neighbours, Jesus says we should love enemies too.

2. Teaching in Parables

Matthew includes many more of Jesus' parables than Mark does. These can be grouped in three major blocks.

Parables of the Kingdom (Ch 13)

The Kingdom of God emerges suddenly and inexplicably in the world. We cannot control it. It demands that we make a decision for or against it and there is reward or punishment depending on how we decide.

Parables of Acceptance and Rejection (Ch 18)

Israel is warned that if it rejects God's offer, the blessing will be transferred to others. Nevertheless, these parables also warn those inside the church against complacency. The danger is as great for them as it is for Israel that the blessing might be transferred to others.

Parables of Judgement (Ch 24-25)

These parables warn the insiders (disciples / church) that their decision for the kingdom requires constant renewal.

Q. Q&A