

## UNIT 2B: NEW TESTAMENT

### 42: Synoptic Gospels - St Matthew

#### Provenance and Authorship

The Gospel of St Matthew includes virtually the whole of that of St Mark together with the Q sayings that it shares with St Luke and its own exclusive material which may or may not include the infancy narrative in the first two chapters. (It may be that these two chapters exist as a distinct and separate tradition). As to the date of this Gospel, this must be placed A.D. 65 in that it incorporates St Mark. Most commentators now place its composition in the ninth decade of the first century. The most probable place of writing is Antioch, for the Gospel not only presupposes the early expansion of the Church into a Gentile milieu, but it also has informed the theology of St Ignatius of Antioch, especially in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 19. St Ignatius writes of the Nativity of Christ in a manner not unlike a Midrashic commentary on St Matthew 1 and 2; and this was characteristic of how Christians in Syria interpreted the birth of Christ at this time. That the disciple-become-apostle St Matthew himself wrote this Gospel is universally attested to by the Fathers. This does not mean of course that the total content is attributable directly and exclusively to the Evangelist since, as we have seen, he clearly uses other sources. Papias writes that St Matthew transcribed the sayings of Jesus and his works in Aramaic with others translating this into Greek later on.<sup>1</sup>

Although the provenance of the Gospel is Syria in general and Antioch in particular, it is noteworthy that a predominantly Hebraic Gospel has been reworked for a Gentile audience. The Gospel quotes freely and extensively from the Old Testament in order to show that Jesus is the Messiah; and this is, of course, evidenced right from the beginning in the first chapter genealogy. To this end, there is also an editorial awareness that shows Christ's teaching at variance with that of the scribes and Pharisees. Furthermore, there is in this Gospel a divine purpose to unmask

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16.

lawlessness and false prophecy, (7:15-23; 24:11-12). Christ fulfils the law and the prophets in the law of love, but He in no way abrogates them, (5:17-20). The unity of the Old and New Testaments is thus preserved with a clarity and integrity that continues to challenge Jews today to read and learn from the New Testament, while Christians are also challenged to read and learn from the Old Testament.

Today equal importance is ascribed to all four gospels. However, during the Patristic age, the Gospels of St Matthew and St John “were the mostly widely read and therefore the most commented upon.” Furthermore, since “the use of Matthew began far earlier than that of John . . . it is no exaggeration to state that the faithful who lived between the end of the first and the end of the second centuries came to know the words and deeds of Christ on the basis of this text.”<sup>2</sup> We do well to remember that there were no systematic commentaries on St Matthew in the East until Origen in the 240s and in the West until St Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-367).<sup>3</sup> Thus in the Early Church both those searching for Christ and those who were already baptised members of the Church turned with their own hearts and minds and prayers to the actual texts, not to an interpretation or exegesis of some other person. We do well to follow their example, even if we now also respect the value of commentaries and homilies in expanding our understanding of particular books of the Bible. In this particular E-Quip lecture, extensive use has been made of the writings and preaching of the Church Fathers, as an example of how much they can help us in our own understanding of Scripture.

### **The Structure of the Gospel**

In the light of the theological emphasis in St Matthew's Gospel, it is perhaps unsurprising that many have noticed a fivefold quasi-pentateuchal structure in the material between the prologue and the epilogue as befits Christ, the new Moses. The prologue, of course, contains the birth narrative and the preparation of Christ

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<sup>2</sup> Manlio Simonetti, “Introduction to Matthew,” in Manlio Simonetti (ed.), Matthew 1-13, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: IL, 2001), Vol. 1a, p. xxxvii.

<sup>3</sup> Simonetti, p. xxxviii.

for His mission. The opening lines of the Gospel insisting that this is “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” establish that “the whole family is derived from a single source”—Abraham.<sup>4</sup> Christ was truly God and truly human. As Chromatius preached in the fifth century, “The bodily birth of Christ was in time; his divine birth was before time ... the one from a virgin mother, the other from God the Father.”<sup>5</sup> In one of the 90 sermons that St John Chrysostom preached on the Gospel of St Matthew, he pointed out that the verse of Matthew 1:23, “and His name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us),” “means nothing else than that they shall see God among us. Admittedly God has always been among us, but never before so openly.”<sup>6</sup>

The epilogue, or perhaps we should say the climax of the Gospel, chapters 27 and 28, focuses on the passion and the resurrection of Christ as the fulfilment of His work. The unity of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ is firmly established. Origen extends that unity to us in reflecting on the burial of Jesus that “all who are buried with Christ in baptism ... also rise with Him from the new tomb [of those who] belong to the ‘firstborn from the dead who holds primacy in all things’ (Colossians 1:18).”<sup>7</sup>

In between the prologue and the epilogue, we have, allegedly, five sections, (although some commentators have considered these divisions to be artificial and unreliable):

1. Narrative material followed by the Sermon on the Mount (3:1-7:29). This section with a reference to Christ finishing his sayings and teaching as one who had authority, not as the scribes (7:28-29).

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<sup>4</sup> St Hilary of Potiers, *On Matthew 1.1*, quoted by Simonetti, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Chromatius, *On Matthew 2.1*, quoted by Simonetti, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Homily 5:2-3*, quoted by Simonetti, pp. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 143*, quoted by Simonetti, Vol. 1b, p300.

2. Narrative material followed by a discourse on mission and martyrdom (8:1-10:42). Once again there is a reference at the end of this section to Christ finishing instructing his disciples.
3. Narrative and debate material followed by teaching of the Kingdom of Heaven (11:2-13:53) and the growing hostility of the scribes and Pharisees. Another reference to Jesus finishing His parables concludes this section.
4. Miracles and more commentary on the Pharisees is then followed by St. Peter's Confession of Faith and the Transfiguration. Christ then teaches about the Church and pastoral care and discipline within it. (13:54-18:35).
5. A Prequel to the Passion defined by Christ's teaching followed by a warning of the End Times (chapters 24-25).

Taking this material together, it would be a mistake to characterise St Matthew's Gospel as simply a corpus of New Covenant Law. In common with the other gospels, the death and resurrection of Christ are emphasised above all and not least within the teaching material itself, either directly in terms of prophecy, or derivatively by way of interpretation. The Beatitudes, for example, (5:1-12) are inexplicable without the hermeneutic or interpretative framework of the way of the cross. As in all the Gospels, what Christ teaches He himself fulfils in and through His voluntary sacrifice. Let us now see how this works out in practice by examining each putative section within the core of the Gospel.

### **The Teaching of the Gospel**

The collection of sayings designated as the 'Sermon on the Mount' is presented as Christ's prophetic rendition of the law in its original intent. Our Lord teaches as the new Moses; and throughout chapter 5 there is the refrain: 'you have heard it said . . .' followed by ' . . . but I say to you,' signifying His authority to interpret the Law. Throughout His teaching there is an emphasis on the spirit not the letter, on the transformation of the heart. Formalism, legalism and hypocrisy are the mortal enemies of a righteous life. A godly way of life is one of perfection and being

perfected, predicated upon God-likeness to the One invoked as Father (5:48). As St Hilary of Poitiers has reflected, faith “breaks the tendency we have to be peevish and urges us to bear life’s difficulties calmly.”<sup>8</sup> Such teaching is based on the conviction that God will provide everything that is needed to ensure this outcome. Chapters 6 and 7 contain further teaching on fasting, almsgiving, faith and prayer. After challenging His followers to enter by the narrow gate (7:13), Jesus warns against false prophets and graphically contrasts those who obey his teaching with those who do not in terms of the two householders, one who built on sand, the other on rock (5:24-29).

In the second section the narration of a number of miracles concludes with an important section on mission and persecution, contextualised in the calling of the Twelve and the endurance of the believers to the end when the Son of Man comes. St John Chrysostom points out that the Twelve “were not sent out until they had sufficiently benefited by following Him daily.”<sup>9</sup> (Christ treats us the same way in that He prepares us before He sends us out to do His will.) Throughout St Matthew’s Gospel there is a concern to prepare the Church for its trials as it witnesses to Christ in anticipation of the End of all things, that is, the Apocalypse and the coming of Christ again in glory.

In the third section Jesus elaborates in His parables about the teaching on the Kingdom of Heaven. (Notice how St Matthew’s Gospel invariably refers to the Kingdom of Heaven rather than the Kingdom of God—a traditional Hebraic reticence concerning the use of the word ‘God’). Christ’s teaching concerning the Kingdom of Heaven in this section reveals a growing hostility amongst His antagonists, the scribes and Pharisees, many of whom are now beginning to reject the implicit Messianic character of Christ’s authority.

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<sup>8</sup> St Hilary of Poitiers, *On Matthew 4:27*, quoted by Simonetti, Vol. 1a, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> St John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 32.3*, Vol. 1a, p. 192.

If it is clear that there is a Hebraic concern to show Christ as the true Messiah in this Gospel, in the fourth section St. Matthew demonstrates how Christ's teaching must be applied to the life of the Church as the ultimate fulfilment of Israel. In chapter 16, verses 18-19, when Christ explicitly teaches that "on this rock I will build My Church," the Greek phrase for "on this rock" is a feminine demonstrative pronoun and article which "does not refer to the person of Peter," but to his faith. "Christ would have used the masculine if He were referring to the person of Peter."<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, in the context of announcing guilt or innocence in verse 19, St Bede states:

Although it may seem that this power of loosing and binding [sins] was given by the Lord only to Peter, we must nevertheless know without any doubt that it was also given to the other apostles, as Christ Himself testified when, after the triumph of His Passion and Resurrection, He appeared to them and breathed upon them and said to them all: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained' (John 20:22-23). Indeed, even now the same office is committed to the whole Church in her bishops and priests."<sup>11</sup>

The authority that Christ Himself exercises is committed to all members of the apostolic band, not solely to its leader, St Peter. The pastoral implications of the collegial exercise of such apostolic authority in the early Christian community are self-evident. Unfortunately, over the centuries, in the Roman Catholic Church the misinterpretation of the role of St Peter in relation to apostolic authority has led to an excessive emphasis upon the authority of the Pope; however, this is now being addressed by Pope Francis with his subtle but firm commitment to collegial authority, fulfilling the earlier hopes of the Second Vatican Council.

In 18:15-20 practical teaching is given on ecclesiastical prayer and the exercise of pastoral discipline within the life of the Church at a "nuts and bolts" level. From

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<sup>10</sup> Endnotes for Matthew 16:18a, Holy Apostles Convent, *The Holy Gospels* (Holy Apostles Convent: Buena Vista, CO, 2nd ed. 2000). Available from [www.HolyApostlesConvent.org](http://www.HolyApostlesConvent.org).

<sup>11</sup> Endnotes for Matthew 16:19b.

this core the canonical and penitential tradition of the Orthodox Church will later emerge. In 18:18, once again the power of loosing and binding sins is extended to all the apostles, not solely to St Peter. The beautiful expression of God's love for humanity is clearly demonstrated in 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." In the words of St Cyril of Alexandria, "it is not the number of those gathered but the strength of their piety and their love of God that is effective ... even if only two in number harmoniously and deliberately define their requests, they will come to their goal."<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in the fifth section St Matthew arranges alongside more general teaching the eschatological material that in all the synoptic gospels (less so in St John) constitutes the crisis-driven, End-time framework for the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. In chapters 24 and 25 especially there is a more extensive discourse concerning the End than in any other gospel. Many of the parables presented there in the Gospel have an eschatological theme. At the conclusion of this section the Gospel has assembled all those elements that make the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus almost inevitable, yet it is still Christ who voluntarily takes upon Himself the humiliation and suffering of the cross. At the end of this Gospel there is included the Great Commission to make disciples, to teach and baptise, with a very early reference to the Trinity (28:19). The final line of the Gospel offers to both the disciples and to us the full assurance of Christ's presence with the Church when Christ promises "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (28:20). St. John Chrysostom offers a hopeful interpretation of these closing words of Christ: "He is in effect saying, 'These difficult things that you will undergo are soon to be finished with this present life. For this world will come to an end. But the good things you are to enjoy are immortal, as I have often told you before.'"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> St Cyril of Alexandria, *Fragment 215*, as quoted by Simonetti, Vol. 1b, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Homily 90.2*, quoted by Simonetti, Vol. 1b, pp.314.

## The Christology of St. Matthew's Gospel

Finally, reflect upon the Christology within St Matthew's Gospel, which has been evident throughout this lecture. This Christology was established at the very beginning in the prologue. As previously noted, Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us (1:23) and the Son of the Father (1:1, 18, 20, 23). In the temptation narrative (4:1-11), the repetition of the phrase 'if you are the Son of God' and the constant references to Deuteronomy 6-8 serve to contrast Jesus, the faithful Son of God, with God's disobedient son, Israel. In 11:18-19 there is an allusion to Christ as the Wisdom of God and in 11:28-30 as the Solace of mankind.

The cumulative effect of these confessions of faith, especially in the context of the Great Commission, is to present Christ as the Son from the Father upon whom the Holy Spirit rests. The Church is the fulfilment of the mission originally assigned to Israel, for the Church is the new covenant community of God, established by the Messiah Himself and granted full authority not only to regulate its own life in accordance with His teaching but also charged to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. As Antioch was clearly the seat of the first Gentile mission, it is then perhaps fitting that Antioch should be the most likely provenance for this Gospel!



# A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox biblical interpretation ought to have a three-level approach, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally:<sup>1</sup>

## Gospel of St Matthew 28:16-20—The Great Commission

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
<b>Exegetical</b>	<p><b>Historical / Contextual</b></p> <p><i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i></p>	<p>The precise location at which Jesus Christ told the 11 disciples to proceed (28:10, 16) is not explicitly given in any of the Gospels. However, for both the Transfiguration and the Great Commission the probable site is in Caesarea Philippi with its 9,000 feet mountain, rather than the traditional location of Mount Tabor with its small “mountain” of 1,800 feet which was occupied then by a Roman fortress. St Bede states that when Jesus Christ said in 28:18 “All authority is given to Me in heaven and on earth,” “He was not speaking here about the divinity coeternal with the Father, but about the Humanity He assumed” (<i>Homily II.8, Pascha, Homilies on the Gospels, Book 2, 71</i>).</p>	<p>The fact that Jesus Christ had earlier taken Peter, James and John “up on a high mountain by themselves” (Mark 9:2; Matthew 17:1) “to pray” (Luke 9:28) indicates clearly that Jesus Christ wished to be alone with His chief followers in order to give them an important message. We too are often asked to be alone with Christ in order to receive His word without distraction from those who are not aware of His presence in our lives.</p>
	<p><b>Allegorical / Typological</b></p> <p><i>(as derived from Tradition)</i></p>	<p>Whatever the precise location at which the disciples were given the Great Commission, St Bede reflects on 28:10 that the disciples were told “to leave for Galilee;” and the word “Galilee means ‘a crossing over accomplished’ or ‘revelation.’ It was good that He Who had now crossed over from death to life . . . was seen in Galilee by His disciples to set forth the victory of His resurrection” (<i>Homily II.8, Pascha, Homilies on the Gospels, Book 2, 70</i>).</p> <p>St Athanasius of Alexandria urges: “Let us note that the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, was preached by the Apostles, and was preserved by the fathers. On this the</p>	<p>St John Chrysostom challenges us: “You too can receive these awesome mysteries with a pure conscience. You can embrace Him not only in this life but also even more fully on that day when you shall see Him coming with unspeakable glory, with a multitude of the angels” (<i>Gospel of Matt. Homily 89.3</i>).</p> <p>Our ultimate response can only be in the words of Revelation 22:20 “Amen. Come Lord</p>

		Church was founded; and if anyone departs from this [belief in the Trinity in 28:19], he neither is nor any longer should be called a Christian” ( <i>Letters to Serapion of Thumis, 1,28</i> ).	Jesus.” However, before the end of the age each of us choose every day to what extent we will live as Christians.
<b>Interpretative</b>	<b>Spiritual / Ethical</b>	St John Chrysostom notes that Christ “promised to be not only with these disciples but also with all who would subsequently believe after them. Jesus speaks to all believers as if to one body. . . . Remember that this [“I am with you.”] is also said repeatedly to the prophets in the OT. Recall Jeremiah objecting that he is too young and Moses and Ezekiel shrinking from the prophet’s office [Jeremiah 1:6, 8; Exodus 4:10, 12; Ezekiel 2-3]. ‘I am with you’ is spoken to all these people” ( <i>Matthew, Homily 90.2</i> ). In other words, the spiritual and ethical strength of Christ is in all time, and beyond time.	We seldom consider ourselves as being in “one body” with the OT prophets, the disciples and all believers alive today. However, this is our true situation. We live out our lives in unity with the OT prophets, the disciples and fellow believers in confidence that Christ is saying both to all of them and to us, “I am with you” NOW “always even to the end of the age.” Amen.
	<b>Personal / Social</b>	St John Chrysostom reflects on 28:17 how the fact that St Matthew notes that even then among the 11 disciples “some were doubtful” means “Even up to the last day,” the disciples “were determined not to conceal their own shortcomings” in doubting the Resur-rection. ( <i>Gospel of St Matthew, Hom. 90.2</i> )	The unflinching honesty of St Matthew about the disciples’ weaknesses gives us considerable confidence that St Matthew is telling us the full truth about the final words of Jesus Christ.
<b>Transformative</b>	<b>The Call to Holiness</b>	For 28:19 St. Jerome stresses that the disciples are called first to “teach all nations; then they baptise with water those they have taught, for the body is not able to receive the sacrament of baptism before the soul has received the truth of the faith . . . and then, after faith and baptism, [they] teach them to observe all that He had commanded . . . so that those who were to believe and to be baptised in the Trinity would observe everything they had been taught” ( <i>Commentary on Matthew 28.18-20</i> ).	St John Chrysostom concludes: “Those who live faithfully, with good works, should strangely desire that day [at the end of the age] even as those who lack good works should fear it. So let us repent while there is opportunity. Let us rise out of our sins. We can by grace, if we are

			willing” ( <i>Gospel of Matthew Homily 90.2</i> ).
	<b>The Call to Witness</b>	Reflecting upon the early, remarkable affirmation of the Trinity in 28:19, St Jerome states: “They were baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit so that the three who are one in divinity might also be one in giving themselves. The name of the Trinity is the name of the one God” ( <i>Commentary on Matthew 28.18-20</i> ). Thus the existence of the Trinity and the presence of one God are a unity!	In 28:18 St Jerome challenges us that: “Authority was given to [Christ] in both heaven and earth so that He who once reigned in heaven might also reign on earth through the faith of His believers” ( <i>Ibid.</i> ). That is an awesome responsibility!

<sup>1</sup> In “*The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics,*” (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are: **1. Exegetical** - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine “the level of understanding of the biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality ...” (p. 190). **2. Interpretative** – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader’s contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197). **3. Transformative** – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages.

In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration. Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p. 115 f., Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the “literal” or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the inter-connectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.