

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

It may surprise the modern reader to realize that for the first two centuries of the Christian era, Matthew's Gospel prevailed as the most popular of the Gospel accounts. Not only was Matthew's text the most frequently quoted NT book among second century Christians,¹ in virtually all textual witnesses and canonical lists Matthew is placed first.

Several factors may have contributed to the premier position assigned Matthew's Gospel. Certainly its comprehensive detail and the systematic structuring of ethical and pastoral material contributed to the Gospel's favored place in the church. In addition, the Gospel's popularity was undoubtedly based upon its explicit Jewish tendencies that enabled the church to affirm its Jewish roots while at the same time distancing the Christian movement from the synagogue. In short, both in form and content, Matthew's Gospel provided second century Christianity with an eminently practical and useful compendium of what was foundational to the Christian faith.

The priority and dominance extended Matthew's Gospel prevailed as the consensus for roughly 1700 years, until the early decades of the nineteenth century. With the development of an historical consciousness, and the refinement of literary methodology, questions of historical reliability and Synoptic relationships dominated post-Enlightenment Gospel research. While the chronological priority of Matthew was not immediately challenged, the

¹See the comprehensive survey of Edouard Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus*, trans. Norman J. Belval and Suzanne Heche (Macon, GA: University Press, 1990).

privileged position given Matthew began to erode as scholarship presupposed that Gospel composition demanded a movement from the “more primitive” to the “more advanced.” Mark’s size, inferior quality, and seemingly “primitive theology,” suggested to many that it was Mark not Matthew that should be regarded as the oldest Gospel, and hence the most reliable for a reconstruction of the life and teachings of Jesus.² As a result, Matthew was gradually dismissed by many (esp. German scholarship), as a secondary development, being permeated by late and legendary additions (e.g., birth and infancy stories), representing more church tradition than a factual record of the life and teachings of Jesus.

The emerging nineteenth century consensus of the secondary character of Matthew received its most substantial endorsement in 1863 from H.J. Holtzmann, who argued that Mark wrote first and was used independently by Matthew and Luke. While subsequent defenders of Marcan priority have supplemented the theory with additional sources (e.g., Q, L, and M) to explain Synoptic relationships, the hypothesis that Mark is the earliest of the Gospel narratives has remained the dominant scholarly opinion for the past 100 years.³

The initial result of the emergence of Mark as the pivotal document to explain Synoptic relationships was a decline of interest in Matthew in the early decades of this century. It was to Mark, rather than Matthew that scholarship turned either to find raw materials from which to reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus, or to penetrate to the earliest form of the tradition in order to elucidate the possible factors within the Christian communities that generated the rise and preservation of certain text-forms (Form Criticism). As long as the scholarly agenda was preoccupied with penetrating behind the Gospels to isolate sources or to reconstruct early Christian communities, Matthew’s Gospel would remain only of secondary interest.

²As noted by W.R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem* (Dillsboro, NC: Western North Carolina Press, 1976), p. 1, the central issue in the eighteenth century was to establish a true chronology of Gospel materials to assure their historical accuracy.

³See Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem*; and H.H. Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis*, trans. D.L. Niewyk (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1980).

Graham Stanton singles out the date of 1945 as marking a new phase in Matthean studies.⁴ The first two decades after 1945 witness a number of studies addressing Matthean themes or sections of the Gospel that begin to call attention to the editorial skills and theological concerns of the Gospel's author. The shift to an emphasis on the role of the evangelist in his selection, arrangement, and modification of the material he received, brought renewed interest in Matthew as an effective communicator and sophisticated theologian (Redaction Criticism). However, such an assessment was ultimately grounded in the hypothesis of Marcan priority and the subsequent evaluation of how Matthew used Mark as his primary literary source. The result has been an exegetical method overly preoccupied with slight literary deviations from Mark, with little sensitivity to the interconnected sequence of events, and their contribution to the whole Gospel.

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of studies on Matthew, with many books and articles concerned to elucidate Matthew's Gospel as a "unified narrative" or "story" told by a competent story-teller who organizes his thought into a coherent sequence of events. The new concern for the Gospels as literary masterpieces demands that the reader be attentive to how Matthew develops his themes and focuses his account on a retelling of the story of Jesus in a way that does not merely rehearse the past, but speaks meaningfully as a guide for Christian discipleship.

Rather than reading Matthew through the lens of other Gospels or a hypothetical reconstruction of the evangelist's sources, priority has shifted to the whole Gospel as a unified coherent narrative. It follows that whatever written or oral sources the evangelist may have had access to, the writer has so shaped his composition that it has a life of its own, discernable only by attention to the structure of the parts and their contribution to the whole.

In order to read and appreciate Matthew's story of Jesus one must be attentive to the codes and conventions that govern the

⁴Graham Stanton, "The Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel: Matthean Scholarship from 1945 to 1980," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.25.3., ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983), p. 1893.

literary and social context of the first century. A coherent reading of any document demands an awareness of the literary rules that govern the various types of literature. Knowing the general category of literary genre of a text enables the reader to know what types of questions can legitimately be asked of the material. For example, if one is reading poetry, questions of factual accuracy or scientific precision may not be the most relevant inquiry for ascertaining a text's meaning. Knowing the genre of a writing enables one's understanding to be informed by the features and intentions that characterize the writing, and not by our modern expectations and concerns we may impose upon the text.

While Matthew's Gospel has certain affinities with the literary genres of biography and historiography, the Gospel is not strictly an historical biography. No Gospel writer was driven by an impulse simply to record the facts of what happened with strict chronological precision. In fact, one need only to read the Gospels side by side to see the freedom and creative manner with which each writer communicated his message. The authors have selected, arranged, and interpreted events, characters, and settings in the best way to communicate with their respective audiences. The result is four unique accounts of Jesus' life and teachings told from a particular "point of view," informed both by the primary events and the theological concerns and needs of the expanding church.

Matthew's Gospel builds reflectively upon the primary events to capture the significance of what happened in story form. An appreciation of the literary and communicative skills of the author enables one to recognize in the dramatic sequence of events a carefully constructed "plot." In this way the storyteller communicates his values and theological commitment and seeks to persuade the reader to accept his perspective.

COMPOSITION OF THE GOSPEL

Some issues and questions that may be extremely important for understanding one category of literature may contribute little to the understanding of another. For example, an informed interpretation of Paul's letters necessitates a reconstruction of the world

that produced the text. The modern reader would need to know as much as possible about the author, destination of the letter, and the factors that gave rise to the text. The letter itself will constitute a prime source for acquiring such information.

However, when one approaches Gospel narratives with the same concerns the matter is complicated by the lack of information afforded by the text. The anonymity of the Gospels, alongside their silence concerning the place, time, and circumstances that may have generated their writings, necessitates that such historical inquiries be answered in terms of probability. What this means is that there is no direct access, via the text, to the historical author or primary recipients of his document. The difficulty is centered in the fact that the text is not primarily designed to function as a “window” through which to gain access into the mind and environment of the author and original readers. The author does not purport to tell his own story or that of his readers, but the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Fortunately, following the sequential development and sense of Matthew’s story of Jesus does not depend on identifying with certainty the author or the historical and social matrix that may have prompted his writing.

In what follows, traditional introductory questions will be briefly discussed, alongside important insights afforded by literary theorists who focus on the Gospels as narratives.

A. AUTHORSHIP

The anonymity of the canonical Gospels necessitates heavy reliance on external evidence as a point of departure to establish Gospel authorship. The external testimony from the second century is virtually unanimous that Matthew the tax collector authored the Gospel attributed to him. Even before explicit patristic testimony regarding Gospel authorship there is convincing evidence that no Gospel ever circulated without an appropriate heading or title (e.g., KATA MAΘΘΑΙΟΝ, “according to Matthew”), identifying the person thought to be the author. The common assumption that the Gospels circulated anonymously until the mid-second century when titles were finally affixed to them has been

seriously challenged by Martin Hengel.⁵ While certain details of Hengel's theory regarding the origins of Gospel headings have been challenged, the lack of variation in the second-century tradition regarding Matthean authorship could well owe its origin to the time when the Gospels first began to circulate among the Christian communities.

The earliest patristic source addressing Gospel authorship comes from Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis (ca. 60-130), whose comments are available only in quotations preserved by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (ca. 260-340, *H.E.* 3.39.14-16). Eusebius' citation of Papias regarding Matthean authorship has been subject to various interpretations dependent upon the translation of key terms. The citation reads:

Matthew collected (συνετάξατο, *synetaxato*, "composed," "compiled," "arranged") the oracles (τὰ λόγια, *ta logia*, "sayings," "gospel") in the Hebrew language (διαλέκτῳ, *dialektō*, "Hebrew or Aramaic language," "Semitic style") and each interpreted (ἡρμήνευσεν, *hērmēneusen*, "interpreted," "translated," "transmitted") them as best he could (Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.39.16).

It appears that patristic testimony subsequent to Papias was dependent upon his testimony and thus perpetuated the tradition of Matthean authorship alongside the notion of an original Semitic version. The testimonies of Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1), Pantaeus (quoted in *H.E.* 5.10.3), Origen (quoted in *H.E.* 6.25.4), Eusebius himself (*H.E.* 3.24.6), Epiphanius (quoted in *Adv. Haer.* 29.19.4; 30.3.7), Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catecheses* 14.15), Jerome (*DeVir.* III.3), as well as Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), Chrysostom (347-407), Augustine (354-430), and Syrian and Coptic authorities are all unanimous in affirming that Matthew authored the first Gospel originally in a Semitic language.⁶ However, since the tradition seems ultimately to rest upon the view of Papias, as cited by

⁵See Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (ET, London: SCM, 1985), pp. 64-84.

⁶For a convenient summary see John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 116-135.

Eusebius, the accumulated evidence of patristic testimony, in the view of some, has very little independent worth. Especially since the idea of an original Semitic Matthew, from which our Greek Matthew has been translated has been challenged on textual and linguistic grounds. Matthew simply does not read like translated Greek. These and other difficulties with the view of Papias⁷ have resulted in many dismissing all patristic testimony concerning Matthean authorship.

While much critical opinion has assumed that Papias' errant view of an original Semitic Matthew discounts his testimony about Matthew being the author, in recent times the evidence afforded by the testimony of Papias has been reassessed. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that the terms Εβραϊδι διαλέκτω (*Ebraidi dialektō*), do not refer to the Hebrew or Aramaic language, but rather to a Jewish style or literary form. In this view, Papias would be referring to Matthew's penchant for Semitic themes and devices, not an original Semitic Gospel. Others have rejected such an interpretation as an unnatural way to read the passage from Papias, and prefer to acknowledge that Papias was simply wrong when he claimed that Matthew was originally written in a Semitic language. However, such an admission does not warrant the complete dismissal of the testimony of Papias concerning the authorship of Matthew. One must still explain how Matthew's name became attached to the first Gospel. The obscurity and relative lack of prominence of the Apostle Matthew argues against the view that the early church would pseudonymously attribute the Gospel to Matthew. Surely, patristic tradition had some basis for attributing the Gospel to Matthew. Therefore, as noted by Davies and Allison, "the simplistic understanding of Papias which dismisses him out of hand must be questioned if not abandoned."⁸

There is nothing inherent in the Gospel itself that convincingly argues against Matthean authorship. Contrary to the view of a few, the decided Jewish flavor of the Gospel argues decisively for the

⁷For a full discussion see R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 53-66.

⁸W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 1:16.

author of the first Gospel being a Jew.⁹ Other scholars have noted that Matthew's background and training as a "tax collector" along with other professional skills offers a plausible explanation for the Gospel's sophisticated literary form and attention to detail. Certainly the combined weight of external and internal considerations make the traditional view of Matthean authorship a reasonable, if not a most plausible position. However, in the words of R.T. France there is "an inevitable element of subjectivity in such judgments."¹⁰ Not only is hard data difficult to come by to establish the authorship of any of the Gospels, what is available is often subject to diverse but equally credible explanations. It follows that while the issue of authorship is an intriguing historical problem, it is extremely doubtful that any consensus will ever emerge given the nature of the available evidence.

The question must be raised whether the veracity of the first Gospel or its interpretation are ultimately dependent upon one's verdict concerning authorship. While one's theological bias concerning authorship may influence how the text is evaluated, the two issues are not integrally connected. Since the first Gospel offers very little (if any) insight into the identity of its historical author, recreating the figure behind the Gospel is neither relevant or particularly important for understanding Matthew's story of Jesus. Thus, while I see no compelling reason to abandon the traditional attribution of Matthean authorship to the first Gospel, no significant exegetical or theological concern hangs on the issue.

B. NARRATION OF THE STORY

Of much greater importance than deciding the identity of the author, is an evaluation of the way the author has decided to present his story of Jesus. In literary terms the way a story gets told is called "point of view."¹¹ A storyteller may tell his story in the first

⁹See extensive treatment by Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:17-33.

¹⁰France, *Matthew*, p. 77.

¹¹For detailed discussion see Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 1-42.

person (i.e., “I”), and portray himself as one of the characters in the story. From a first person point of view the storyteller would necessarily be limited to what he personally has experienced or learned from other characters. Matthew’s story is told in a third person narration, wherein the storyteller is not a participant in the story, but refers to characters within the story as “he,” “she,” or “they.” From such a vantage point the Matthean narrator provides the reader with an informational advantage over story characters, and thereby, situates the reader in an advantageous position for evaluating events and characters in the story.

Perhaps the most prominent characteristic of a third person narration is the storyteller’s ability to provide the reader with insights which are not normally available to one in real life. His ability to move inside his characters to reveal their innermost thoughts, feelings, emotions, and motivations, enables the reader to use these insights to form evaluations and opinions about characters and events within the story. For example, the narrator reveals when the disciples are amazed (8:29; 21:20), fearful (14:30; 17:6), sorrowful (26:22), filled with grief (17:23), and indignant (26:8). He knows when they understand (16:12; 17:13), and when they doubt (28:17). The overall impact of these insights enables the reader to better evaluate the traits exhibited by the disciples.

Similar insights are provided into the thoughts, emotions, and motivations of minor characters in the story. The inner thoughts of Joseph (1:19), Herod (2:3), the crowds (7:28; 22:33; 9:8; 12:13; 15:31), the woman (9:21), Herod the tetrarch (14:9), Judas (27:3), Pilate (27:14,18), the centurion (27:54), and the reaction of the women at the tomb (28:4,8) are all accessible to the Matthean narrator. The narrator even supplies the reader with inside information about the thoughts and motivations of the Jewish leaders (2:3; 9:3; 12:14; 21:45-46; 26:3-5; 12:10; 16:1; 19:3; 22:15). These insights function to establish in the mind of the reader the antagonist of the story.

The Matthean narrator is also not bound by time or space in his coverage of the story. Matthew provides the reader access to private conversations between Herod and the Magi (2:3-8), John and Jesus (3:13-15), Jesus and Satan (4:1-11), the disciples (16:7), Peter and Jesus (16:23), Judas and the chief priest (26:14-16; 26:40), and Pilate

and the chief priest (27:62-64). He makes known to the reader the private decisions made by the chief priest and the Sanhedrin (26:59-60), and the plan of the chief priest and elders concerning the disappearance of the body (28:12-15). The narrator is present when Jesus prays alone, while at the same time he knows the difficulties of the disciples on the sea (14:22-24). He easily takes the reader from the courtroom of Pilate to the courtyard of Peter's denial (26:70f.), and eventually to the scene at the cross (27:45). For the most part, the narrator in Matthew's story stays close to Jesus, and views events and characters in terms of how they affect his main character.

Whoever the actual historical author may be, it is clear that the Matthean storyteller narrates his Gospel in a way to reliably guide his readers through the story so as to properly evaluate events and characters. On occasion the narrator will interrupt the flow of the story in order to provide the reader with an explicit comment or explanation. These intrusions may take the form of various types of descriptions (e.g., 3:4; 17:2; 28:3-4; 27:28-31), summaries (e.g., 4:23-25; 9:35-38; 12:15-16; 14:14; 15:29-31), or explicit interpretive commentary (1:22-23, 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:15-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10). Detecting the narrator's voice in the story enables the reader to be sensitive to the manner in which Matthew instructs, leads, and encourages the reader to adopt a particular point of view.

SETTING OF THE GOSPEL

Traditional approaches to Gospel introduction usually treat under the heading of "setting" such issues as the date and place of the Gospel's writing, alongside the identity and problems confronting the community addressed. It is important to remember that practically speaking our exclusive source for information about the time and circumstantial factors generating the Gospel's production come only from the Gospel itself. No explicit outside information speaks directly to the issue of the social and historical conditions of the Gospel's primary readers. Essentially, scholarly efforts to establish a life-setting for the writing of the Gospel must search

the Gospel for possible clues that hint at the time and circumstances of the writing. The fact that, although reading the same evidence, scholarly proposals for the setting of Matthew's Gospel have resulted in reconstructions that are opposed to one another should give one caution about dogmatic claims in such areas.¹²

A. DATE

Efforts to recover the environmental setting that best explains the form and content of Matthew's Gospel have not resulted in a scholarly consensus. Concerning the date of the Gospel's composition scholars are divided into two broad proposals. The majority view is that Matthew was written after Mark sometime between the dates of A.D. 80-100. However, the arguments adduced to establish such a dating scheme are largely based upon prior judgments concerning the order of Gospel composition or hypothetical reconstructions of developments in the first century. Pivotal to the post-70 dating of Matthew is the contention that Matthew knew and used Mark as a major source for the writing of his Gospel. Since the consensus of scholarly judgment dates Mark in the 60s, it is therefore likely that Matthew composed his Gospel sometime after A.D. 70. Of course, if one rejects Marcan priority or the suggested date for Marcan composition, the argument fails to be convincing.

A post-70 date has also been assumed based upon Matthew's explicit language concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and his references to the "church" (16:18; 18:17). Such language is thought to be anachronistic and therefore indicative of a post-70 composition. The reference to a "king" in the parable of the wedding feast who "sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city" (22:7), appears to reflect historical knowledge of Jerusalem's destruction retrojected into Jesus' ministry as prophecy. However, apart from the fact of whether Jesus could predict Jerusalem's fall, the wording of 22:7, as France observes, "is precisely the sort of language one might expect in a genuine prediction of

¹²For a convenient list of proposals see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:138-139.

political annihilation in the Jewish context, and does not depend on a specific knowledge of how things in fact turned out in A.D. 70.”¹³ There also is no need to read a developed ecclesiology into Jesus’ references to the “church.” The term ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) in Matthew says nothing about church order, and with the communal imagery attached to the term in Jewish circles (cf. Qumran), it becomes entirely credible that Jesus could speak of his disciples as constituting an *ekklēsia*.

Perhaps the most heavily relied upon argument for dating Matthew in the last decades of the first century is the decided Jewish polemic that seemingly dominates the first Gospel. It is thought that formative Judaism in the post-70 period provides the most suitable background for Matthew’s portrayal of the Jewish leaders and his underlying view of Israel. After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 it was the Pharisaic movement that emerged as the normative form of Judaism. Pharisaism was particularly suited to bring stability and a renewed sense of Jewish identity after the tragedy of A.D. 70. The Pharisees saw themselves as “the most accurate interpreters of the law” (see Josephus, *JW* 1.5.1; 2.8.14; *Life* 38.191), and definers of both the social and cultic boundaries delimiting the covenanted people of God. The community addressed by Matthew’s Gospel is thought to be a rival to a post-70 formative Judaism, having endured severe hostility and rejection by official Judaism.

However, the evidence does not warrant the supposition that Matthew’s community has severed all contact with the Jewish community. Furthermore, not enough is known about pre-70 Pharisaism to emphatically deny a setting for Matthew’s Gospel before Jerusalem’s destruction. Indeed, an impressive list of scholars have cogently argued for a pre-70 dating of Matthew.¹⁴ Not only does such a view have solid patristic evidence, some passages in Matthew may be intended to imply that the temple was still standing at the

¹³See France, *Matthew*, p. 84.

¹⁴For example see Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 602-606; France, *Matthew*, pp. 88-91; D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 21; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 8-11.

time of the Gospel's writing (cf. 5:23-29; 12:5-7; 17:23; 16:22; 26:60-61). It appears that the evidence is not sufficiently decisive so as to completely discredit all competitive views. Fortunately, understanding Matthew's story of Jesus is not dependent upon reconstructing the historical context from which the Gospel emerged.

B. PLACE OF ORIGIN

Even less important for a competent reading of the first Gospel involves the effort to decide the Gospel's precise place of origin. Because of its large Jewish community and strategic role in the Gentile mission most Matthean scholars have opted for Antioch of Syria as the Gospel's place of origin. Other proposals have included Jerusalem, Alexandria, Caesarea, Phoenicia, and simply "east of the Jordan." While certain evidence may tend to weigh in favor of one provenance over another, in the final analysis we cannot be certain where Matthew's Gospel was composed. Nevertheless, as observed by France, deciding "the geographical location in which the Gospel originated is probably the least significant for a sound understanding of the text."¹⁵ Much more relevant to the interpretation of the gospel is the dimension given the discussion of "setting" by a literary reading of the first Gospel.

C. NARRATIVE WORLD

In literary terms the discussion of "setting" does not involve the delineation of factors generating the text, but rather the descriptive context or background in which the action of the story transpires. Settings, as described by the narrator, are like stage props in a theatrical production. Oftentimes, the narrator's description of the place, time, or social conditions in which action takes place is charged with subtle nuances that may generate a certain atmosphere with important symbolic significance. For example, early in Matthew's story the narrator relates places and events to create a distinct atmosphere from which to evaluate his central character,

¹⁵France, *Matthew*, p. 95.

Jesus. The story opens with a series of events that are calculated to evoke memories of Israel's past, and thereby to highlight the significance of the times inaugurated by Jesus. By means of a genealogy, cosmic signs, dream-revelations, the appearance of the "angel of the Lord," and the repeated reference to prophetic fulfillment, the narrator highlights God's renewed involvement with his people and the climactic nature of the times realized in Jesus. The locations of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Egypt evoke feelings of continuity between Jesus' history and that of Israel's. Other locations such as the "desert" and "mountain" function to create a certain aura around events and characters in the story. Later in the story specific locations such as "synagogue," the "sea," and the "temple" all contribute to a distinct atmosphere from which to evaluate the course of events. While real-life settings of the author and his readers can only be reproduced in terms of probability, the temporal and spatial settings established in the story provide an integral context for interpreting Matthew's story.

THE LITERARY CHARACTER OF MATTHEW

A. LITERARY AND RHETORICAL SKILL

Since Matthew's text would have been handwritten without systematic punctuation or modern techniques for delineating structural features such as bold print, underlining, paragraph indention, or chapter headings, any clues for discerning the structure and nature of the composition is dependent upon "verbal clues" within the narrative itself. Within both Hebrew and classical traditions communication on a literary level assumed a level of competency in conventional communicative techniques. While NT authors may not have been formally trained in rhetoric, an effective exchange of ideas demands some awareness of conventional patterns for communication. A study of Matthew's literary style puts emphasis on the literary devices he employs to lead the reader to experience his story in a certain way.

Reading Matthew's story (whether orally before an audience, or in private), would have demanded that the reader attend to the

various structural features which might illumine the meaning and flow of the narrative. Some of these literary strategies function on a broader structural level providing the text with a sense of progression and cohesion (e.g., see the formulaic phrases in 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1; and 4:17; 16:21). However, most structural features primarily contribute to a sense of cohesion within smaller textual units. These features may highlight or bracket unifying themes by opening and closing distinct units with similar words or phrases (see, e.g., 4:23-24 and 9:35); build anticipation by foreshadowing subsequent events (e.g., ch. 2 foreshadows the passion narrative); or stimulate reflection and a sense of development in the story by verbal repetition and episodic similarities (cf. 8:23-27/14:22-33; 9:27-31/20:29-34; 9:32-34/12:22-34; 14:13-21/15:32-38). These elements along with Matthew's fondness for grouping materials according to a thematic or even numerical scheme,¹⁶ are indicative of an environment largely educated through oral proclamation not the written word.¹⁷ Matthew's compositional scheme greatly facilitated learning by providing the listener (or reader) with a coherent and orderly presentation that aided comprehension and memorization.

The meticulous structural concerns, both in the whole and the smaller details of Matthew, have been widely recognized by scholarship. However, as we shall see in the next section, there is great diversity with respect to the overall structural pattern of the first Gospel. The difficulty lies with going from clearly delineated structural features in the smaller units of text, to the use of the same devices to explain the total composition. Often the analysis seems forced and unable to fit the details into a single coherent pattern. It may not always be easy to identify the precise contribution that a particular literary device makes to the overall composition of a literary work, and certainly there always exists the danger of reading too much into a text by artificially imposing symmetrical patterns where none exist. However, these problems are overcome by a

¹⁶See especially his fondness for threes and sevens; as documented by Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:85-87.

¹⁷See Paul J. Achtemeier, "Omne verbum sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (Spring 1990), 3-27.

greater sensitivity to the nature and function of literary devices, and not by ignoring these features of a text. The question remains concerning what features might provide clues to the overall structure of Matthew's Gospel.

B. STRUCTURAL-PLOT

Consideration of Matthew's skill in the smaller portions of his text has stimulated numerous efforts to locate structural indications that may provide the organizing pattern for the entire Gospel. Structural appraisals of Matthew's Gospel usually begin with the discovery of a literary device or formulaic expression that appears to be unique to the evangelist. However, while scholars may agree on the existence of a literary device or formula, they may diverge widely concerning the function or theological significance of a literary feature. For example, although the expressions *καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς* (*kai egeneto hote etelesen ho Iēsous*, "and when Jesus had finished;" 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1), and *ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς* (*apo tote erxato ho Iēsous*, "from that time Jesus began," 4:17; 16:21) are recognized to be structurally significant, it is difficult to establish that Matthew consciously adopted these expressions as the organizational key to his entire Gospel. As helpful as these phrases are for marking off the major discourses of Jesus or highlighting major new developments in the story, neat structural schemes based upon repeated formulae cannot do justice to the subtle twists and turns of the dramatic flow of Matthew's story.

Several scholars have centered on Matthew's use of Mark to determine the structure of his Gospel. Attention has been called to the peculiar Matthean organization of 4:12-13:58 in contrast to the faithful following of Marcan order in 14:1-28:20. Certainly a source-critical study of Matthew must account for the seemingly independent structural form and sequence in the first half of the Gospel as opposed to the latter half. However, it is doubtful that Matthew intended his readers to compare his Gospel with Mark in order to understand his structural scheme. If Matthew could clearly structure patterns on a smaller scale, independent of Mark, why not on a larger scale? Furthermore, there are too many structural peculiarities even in the second half of the Gospel to assume that Matthew

merely succumbed to a slavish reproduction of Mark in the second half of his Gospel.

More recent investigations have delineated the Gospel's structure in terms of how the individual events or episodes connect sequentially to form a discernable plot.¹⁸ It is the organizing principle of plot which determines the incidents selected, their arrangement, and how the sequence of events or episodes are to impact the reader. Given the episodic and thematic flavor of Matthew's narrative, his plot development does not exhibit a linear tightness or the flair for the dramatic found in other narratives (cf. Mark). Nevertheless, Matthew does tell a story, and thus the various episodes are carefully interrelated by causal and thematic developments. There are definite major and minor story lines and character development, with certain episodes marking key turning points in the unfolding drama. An analysis of plot has the advantage of moving the discussion away from isolated literary devices or contrived symmetrical patterns, to a consideration of how the sequence of events and portrayal of characters connect meaningfully to tell a continuous and coherent story.

Matthew's story is organized around several narrative blocks comprised of events that are interconnected according to a particular emphasis or theme. The unifying factor giving coherence to the overall sequence of events is the explicit and implicit presence of the central character Jesus in virtually every episode. Within this story-form events of similar nature are often clustered or repeated for their accumulative impact, as various themes are reinforced and developed. An analysis of the sequence and function of Matthew's major narrative blocks enables the reader to discern an overall progression of events according to a consciously constructed plot. The following seven narrative blocks provide the story with a clear sense of dramatic progression:

¹⁸For discussions on "plot" consult the following essays: Frank Matera, "The Plot of Matthew's Gospel," *CBQ* 49 (April 1987), 233-253; H.J.B. Combrink, "The Structure of Matthew's Gospel as Narrative," *TynBul* 34 (1983), 61-90; M.A. Powell, "The Plot and Subplots of Matthew's Gospel," *NTS* 38 (1992), 187-204; Warren Carter, "Kernels and Narrative Blocks: The Structure of Matthew's Gospel," *CBQ* 54 (July 1992), 463-481; J.D. Kingsbury, "The Plot of Matthew's Story," *Int* 46 (October 1992), 347-356.

- 1:1–4:16 Establishing the identity and role of Jesus, the protagonist of the story.
- 4:17–11:1 Jesus embarks upon a ministry of teaching and healing to manifest God’s saving presence in Israel.
- 11:2–16:20 While faulty interpretations of Jesus’ ministry lead to misunderstanding and repudiation, the disciples, through divine revelation, are provided special insight into Jesus’ person and mission.
- 16:21–20:34 During Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem he engages his disciples in explicit discussion concerning the ultimate values, priorities, and intentions of his messianic mission.
- 21:1–25:46 Upon entering Jerusalem Jesus’ actions and teachings lead to conflict and rejection by the Jewish authorities.
- 26:1–27:50 While hostility and misunderstanding coalesce in betrayal, desertion, and death, Jesus is resolved to consciously and voluntarily fulfill the divine plan.
- 27:51–28:20 God ultimately vindicates his Son as evidenced by cosmic signs and by raising him from the dead and giving him authority to commission his disciples to a worldwide mission.

OUTLINE

- I. ESTABLISHING THE IDENTITY AND ROLE OF JESUS THE CHRIST – 1:1-4:16**
 - A. Genealogy of Jesus – 1:1-17**
 - B. The Annunciation to Joseph – 1:18-25**
 - C. The Infancy of Jesus – 2:1-23**
 - 1. The Gentile Pilgrimage – 2:1-12
 - 2. The Messiah's Exile and Exodus – 2:13-23
 - D. The Mission and Message of John the Baptist – 3:1-12**
 - E. The Baptism and Commission of Jesus – 3:13-17**
 - F. The Testing of the Son – 4:1-11**
 - G. Introducing the Ministry of Jesus – 4:12-16**
- II. GOD'S SAVING PRESENCE IN THE MIDST OF HIS PEOPLE – 4:17-10:42**
 - A. Programmatic Heading: Proclamation of the Kingdom – 4:17**
 - B. Call of the Disciples – 4:18-22**
 - C. Programmatic Summary – 4:23-25**
 - D. Sermon on the Mount: Ministry in Word – 5:1-7:29**
 - 1. The Setting – 5:1-2
 - 2. The Beatitudes – 5:3-12
 - 3. Salt and Light – 5:13-16
 - 4. Jesus and the Law – 5:17-20
 - 5. Practicing Greater Righteousness Toward One's Neighbor – 5:21-48
 - a. Murder – 5:21-26
 - b. Adultery – 5:27-30
 - c. Divorce – 5:31-32
 - d. Oaths – 5:33-37
 - e. An Eye for an Eye – 5:38-42
 - f. Love Your Enemies – 5:43-48

6. Practicing Greater Righteousness Before God – 6:1-18
 - a. Summary – 6:1
 - b. Giving to the Needy – 6:2-4
 - c. Prayer – 6:5-15
 - d. Fasting – 6:16-18
7. The Priorities and Values of the Greater Righteousness – 6:19-34
 - a. Treasures in Heaven – 6:19-24
 - b. Worry – 6:25-34
8. The Conduct of Greater Righteousness – 7:1-12
 - a. Judging Others – 7:1-5
 - b. Honor What Is Valuable – 7:6
 - c. Ask, Seek, Knock – 7:7-11
 - d. The Golden Rule – 7:12
9. The Call for Decision – 7:13-27
 - a. The Narrow and Wide Gates – 7:13-14
 - b. A Tree and Its Fruit – 7:15-23
 - c. The Wise and Foolish Builders – 7:24-27
10. Conclusion – 7:28-29
- E. Ministry in Deed – 8:1-9:34**
 1. Cleansing of a Leper – 8:1-4
 2. Request of a Gentile Centurion – 8:5-13
 3. Peter's Mother-in-Law – 8:14-15
 4. Summary and Fulfillment Citation – 8:16-17
 5. Two Would-Be Followers – 8:18-22
 6. Stilling of the Storm – 8:23-27
 7. The Gadarene Demoniacs – 8:28-34
 8. Healing of the Paralytic – 9:1-8
 9. Jesus' Association with Tax Collectors and Sinners – 9:9-13
 10. Question on Fasting – 9:14-17
 11. Raising the Ruler's Daughter and Cleansing the Unclean Woman – 9:18-26
 12. Healing Two Blind Men – 9:27-31
 13. Healing of a Deaf Mute – 9:32-34
- F. A Call to Mission – 9:35-10:4**
- G. The Missionary Discourse – 10:5-42**
 1. Instructions for Mission – 10:5-15

2. Persecution and Response – 10:16-23
3. The Disciples' Relationship to Jesus – 10:24-42

III. ISRAEL'S MISUNDERSTANDING AND REPUDIATION OF JESUS – 11:1-14:12

- A. John's Question from Prison – 11:1-6**
- B. The Person and Mission of John – 11:7-19**
 1. Identification of John by Jesus – 11:7-15
 2. Rejection of John and Jesus – 11:16-19
- C. Unrepentant Cities – 11:20-24**
- D. Jesus' Response and Invitation – 11:25-30**
- E. Sabbath Controversy: Incident in the Grainfield – 12:1-8**
- F. Sabbath Controversy: Healing in the Synagogue – 12:9-14**
- G. The Character and Mission of God's Servant – 12:15-21**
- H. The Beelzebul Controversy – 12:22-37**
- I. The Request for a Sign – 12:38-42**
- J. A Concluding Analogy – 12:43-50**
- K. Jesus' True Family – 12:46-50**
- L. The Parables of the Kingdom – 13:1-52**
 1. The Parable of the Four Soils – 13:1-9
 2. The Purpose of the Parables – 13:10-17
 3. The Interpretation of the Parable of the Soils – 13:18-23
 4. Parable of the Weeds – 13:24-30
 5. Parable of the Mustard Seed – 13:31-32
 6. Parable of the Leaven – 13:33
 7. The Purpose of Parables – 13:34-35
 8. The Interpretation of the Parable of the Weeds – 13:36-43
 9. Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl – 13:44-46
 10. Parable of the Dragnet – 13:47-50
 11. Trained in the Kingdom – 13:51-52
- M. Rejection at Nazareth – 13:53-58**
- N. The Death of John the Baptist – 14:1-12**

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- A. Feeding of the Five Thousand – 14:13-21**

- B. Walking on the Water** – 14:22-33
- C. Summary: Healings at Gennesaret** – 14:34-36
- D. Jesus and the Teachings of the Pharisees** – 15:1-20
- E. The Canaanite Woman** – 15:21-28
- F. Feeding of the Four Thousand** – 15:29-39
- G. Request for a Sign** – 16:1-4
- H. The Leaven of the Pharisees and Saducees** – 16:5-12
- I. Confession at Caesarea Philippi** – 16:13-20
- V. THE WAY OF THE CROSS** – 16:21–20:34
 - A. The Things of God Versus the Things of Men** – 16:21-28
 - B. Transfiguration** – 17:1-8
 - C. The Coming Elijah** – 17:9-13
 - D. The Power of Faith** – 17:14-21
 - E. The Second Passion Prediction** – 17:22-23
 - F. Jesus and the Temple Tax** – 17:24-27
 - G. Fourth Discourse: Life in the Christian Community** – 18:1-35
 1. Becoming Like a Child – 18:1-5
 2. Avoiding Offense – 18:6-9
 3. Value of the “Little Ones” – 18:10-14
 4. Reconciling an Offending Brother – 18:15-20
 5. Importance of Forgiveness – 18:21-35
 - H. Transition from Galilee to Judea** – 19:1-2
 - I. Marriage and Divorce** – 19:3-9
 - J. The Bewildered Response of the Disciples** – 19:10-12
 - K. The Little Children** – 19:13-15
 - L. The Rich Young Man** – 19:16-22
 - M. Wealth, Reward and Discipleship** – 19:23-30
 - N. The Generous Landowner** – 20:1-16
 - O. Third Passion Prediction** – 20:17-19
 - P. Requests on Behalf of the Sons of Zebedee** – 20:20-28
 - Q. Two Blind Men Receive Sight** – 20:29-34
- VI. CONFLICT IN JERUSALEM** – 21:1–25:46
 - A. Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem** – 21:1-11
 - B. Demonstration in the Temple** – 21:12-17
 - C. The Fig Tree** – 21:18-22
 - D. The Authority Question** – 21:23-27

- E. Parable of the Two Sons** – 21:28-32
 - F. Parable of the Tenants** – 21:33-46
 - G. Parable of the Wedding Feast** – 22:1-14
 - H. Confrontations with the Religious Leaders** – 22:15-46
 - 1. Paying Taxes to Caesar – 22:15-22
 - 2. Marriage in the Afterlife – 22:23-33
 - 3. The Greatest Commandment – 22:34-40
 - 4. The Son of David – 22:41-46
 - I. Denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees** – 23:1-39
 - 1. Do Not Practice What They Preach – 23:1-12
 - 2. Woes against the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees – 23:13-36
 - 3. Lament over Jerusalem – 23:37-39
 - J. Fifth Discourse: Judgment to Come** – 24:1-25:46
 - 1. Introduction – 24:1-3
 - 2. Warnings Not to Be Deceived – 24:4-14
 - 3. The Coming Tribulation in Judea – 24:15-28
 - 4. The Climactic Fall of Jerusalem within “This Generation” – 24:29-35
 - 5. The Coming Judgment of the Son of Man – 24:36-25:46
 - a. The Coming Son of Man – 24:36-51
 - b. The Ten Virgins – 25:1-13
 - c. Parable of the Talents – 25:14-30
 - d. Judgment of the Son of Man – 25:31-46
- VII. THE PASSION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS** – 26:1-28:20
- A. The Plot to Arrest and Execute Jesus** – 26:1-5
 - B. Anointing in Bethany** – 26:6-13
 - C. Judas’ Betrayal** – 26:14-16
 - D. Preparation for Passover** – 26:17-19
 - E. The Last Supper** – 26:20-30
 - F. Jesus Predicts the Disciples’ Desertion and Denial** – 26:31-35
 - G. The Gethsemane Prayer** – 26:36-46
 - H. The Arrest of Jesus** – 26:47-56
 - I. The Hearing Before Caiaphas** – 26:57-68
 - J. The Denial of Peter** – 26:69-75

- K. Transition to the Roman Authorities – 27:1-2**
- L. The Suicide of Judas – 27:3-10**
- M. The Trial Before Pilate – 27:11-26**
- N. Mockery and Abuse of Jesus – 27:27-31**
- O. The Crucifixion – 27:32-44**
- P. The Death of Jesus – 27:45-56**
- Q. The Burial of Jesus – 27:57-61**
- R. Keeping Jesus in the Tomb – 27:62-66**
- S. The Empty Tomb – 28:1-7**
- T. The Appearance of Jesus to the Women – 28:8-10**
- U. The Bribing of the Guards – 28:11-15**
- V. The Great Commission – 28:16-20**