

## Excursus: Stories of Jesus in Matthew

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*The pervading themes running through the four literary compositions of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are of a Christological nature. Messianic themes or motifs are found in the Gospels in the names or titles ascribed to Jesus in his sayings, his stories or parables, his discourses and debates, in the reactions of the people to him, in his miraculous deeds, and in the narrative comments of the authors of these compositions. The themes of greatest significance in the Gospels are those having to do with the messianic identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the primary emphasis of the stories found in this composition. This is demonstrated in the following excursus on the stories of Jesus in Matthew.*

The Gospels of the New Testament Scriptures are titled under the names of their historical authors: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. These are considered canonical Gospels because the earliest Christians considered them to be the only recognized accounts of the story of Jesus that were traceable back to the apostolic message. As said in the previous lessons, these writings were the collected messianic stories concerning Jesus of Nazareth as told, proclaimed, and taught by those recognized as apostles of Christ. The messianic stories of Mark were believed to have the apostle Peter as their source. Those of Luke were believed to have the apostle Paul as their source, the Matthew and John's collections are themselves the source. These Gospels have been preserved through the centuries by Christians as treasures of inspired stories of the one they believe to be the Messiah or Christ – Jesus of Nazareth.

## The Gospel According to Matthew

Matthew (Levi, one of the twelve in the Gospels) is believed to have written his Gospel in Northern Palestine or, perhaps, Antioch of Syria in the early 70's AD. Second century Christian writers suggest that he wrote it originally in Hebrew or Aramaic and then translated it into Greek. Most linguistic scholars do not see a translation style of Greek in this Gospel. It is a somewhat sophisticated style of Greek which may indicate that Matthew did write it in Hebrew, which was the language used in the written document as inscriptions of Jerusalem. Its translation of the Hebrew text found in quotations are not from the Septuagint as is the case with Luke. It looks as though the writer has translated the Hebrew into Greek himself. The writer wants the reader to see Jesus as one who fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures, to see Jesus was a prophet and teacher like Moses, as one who came to Israel as its Messiah, not only to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, but to replace them as a rule of faith and practice. With the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, the appearance of Matthew's Gospel to the Jew and Jewish Christians following that time would have been providential.

All existing manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel are in Greek even though Papias says it was originally written in Hebrew. If Matthew's Gospel was written in Antioch, this would explain why it was translated into Greek; Antioch of Syria was thoroughly Hellenistic city. Perhaps, it was translated into Greek by someone with a greater facility in Greek than a Hebrew publican. It could be that Matthew allowed the translation by a scribe who was fluid in Greek, but he did so at his elbow making sure that what was written in Greek was what was written in Hebrew.

Matthew's Gospel appears to have been written for a Jewish or Jewish-Christian audience. Matthew's Gospel shares a good bit of the material found in Mark; out of 660 verses in Mark, 601 are found in Matthew's Gospel, verbatim. The same is true of Luke's Gospel as well, with 390 verses in Mark being found in Luke. This leads some scholars to think that Matthew copied Mark and added to it information he thought more useful to the audience for whom he was

writing.

All the material of all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) is a collection of messianic stories identified with Jesus of Nazareth. The oral nature of these stories was their only means of circulation for over 30 years prior to their being written down. Why should anyone be surprised to see a synoptic (i.e., to see with) characteristic in these Gospels? Why would one not see the same outline of the movement of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, the same stories of Jesus' miracles, the same stories of his teaching, his parables or stories, his saying, his debates, his conflicts with the Jewish leadership, the same stories of his private times with his disciples, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, and above all, his resurrection? When hearing the stories of the Irish *Shanahee* (Irish or Celtic Storyteller) one is very likely to hear him tell the same story, in the same words, with the same emphasis and story line as another *Shanahee* from another time and place. That is the nature of oral tradition, and the Jews were masters of this art as well as these Celtic storytellers. This fact is evidenced by massive collections of Jewish stories and teachings told by their rabbis and passed along for centuries as oral traditions. These stories exist today, collected in written form in great volume among the Hasidic and Kabbalistic rabbinic community. There one of the most esteemed rabbis is the *maggid*, who is a highly skilled storyteller.

### The Jesus of Matthew's Story

Matthew's presentation of Jesus is similar, yet to some extent, different, to that of Mark's Gospel. Matthew, like Mark, has a developed Christology that runs from the baptism of Jesus through his resurrection. The way he fills in the Christological presentation of Jesus through in these stories is unique to him. He used stories very similar to those of Mark; in fact, more than half of the stories are identical. However, Matthew brings in additional stories with their own insights as to how Jesus was perceived by the people of first century Galilee and Judea.

The parabolic collection Matthew adds to the stories of Mark are

of great significance to a more developed portrait of Jesus. The major differences begin with the genealogy of Jesus, which links him to the line of David, which would be necessary if Jesus was the fulfillment of the Davidic promise of 2 Sam 7:11-12. The stories of Jesus' birth and his early years are additions. He adds the stories of the temptations of Satan, a large block of teaching material in chapters 5-7 (the sermon on the mount). He adds a large collection of Jesus' own storytelling activity (i.e., the parables); especially, the parables and sayings relating to the kingdom. Jesus' teaching concerning the kingdom of God is very significantly placed in Matthew. There are additional miracle stories, special teaching sessions with the twelve, and a lengthy addition of controversy materials, including debates and rebukes of Jewish hierarchy.

As with Mark, Matthew portrays Jesus as a gifted rabbinic figure and miracle worker throughout the period of his Galilean ministry. Following Peter's confession and his acknowledgement that he was the Messiah (Matt 16), he sets his face toward Jerusalem to die. Where Mark's sequence of stories from this point on portrays Jesus in the role of the suffering servant of Isaiah, Matthew's stories give more emphasis to his role as the coming Son of David, the messianic figure of Israel's hope.

In his movement toward Jerusalem, Jesus continues to teach his disciples. There is an emphasis on the coming of the kingdom of God and, as he comes into Judea, opposition from institutional or established Judaism becomes more pronounced. After Jesus enters Jerusalem, he constantly finds himself involved in the rabbinic forum of debate with the scholars of Jerusalem in the colonnades of the Temple. Here is found the apocalyptic discourse concerning the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt 24:1-35) and a description of the end of time (24:36-46), given to a select group of his disciples, although Matthew himself was not present for the discourse. Matthew's stories give much greater detail to the events of Jesus' last days, his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and the resurrection. Matthew is also concerned that all of this be seen as happening in accordance with the Scriptures. The role of the Hebrew Scriptures and the interpretation they give to the events in the life of Jesus is very important to

Matthew.

## Names and Titles of Jesus in Matthew

The names or titles used to identify Jesus in Matthew's Gospel have the same significance as in Mark. The titles applied to Jesus give the reader significant insight as to how Jesus was perceived by those addressing him. As with Mark, the historical name "Jesus" is the most used designation for him, being found throughout Matthew's Gospel in 175 occurrences. The significance of this is that Matthew fully intends to present his reader with an historical figure who lived in the first century AD in Palestine. This emphasis is evident from the occurrence of such descriptive designations as, "Jesus the prophet from Nazareth" (21:11), "Jesus of Galilee" (26:69), "and Jesus of Nazareth" (26:71). He is also referred to as, "a Nazarene" (2:23), "a prophet" (13:57; 21:46), "the Carpenter's son" (13:53), and "a man" or "the man" (26:72; 27:19, 24, 47).

It is apparent that Matthew wishes to communicate to his reader that Jesus was considered to be the fulfillment of Israel's expectation of the coming of "the Messiah" (13 occurrences), who would be the "Son of David" (9 occurrences). The traditional concept of the Messiah is the sense in which the term is used throughout Matthew, with the exception of Jesus' own use of the term (16:20; 22:42; 23:10).

He is referred to "Lord" in 26 occurrences, all in the sense of one who possesses authority and is very highly esteemed. This is the sense in which Jesus is called "Rabbi" or "Teacher," which are found in 10 occurrences as titles ascribed to Jesus.

Matthew's third most frequently occurring title for Jesus is his self-designation, "the Son of Man" (23 occurrences), which Jesus uses in a twofold sense in Matthew. He uses this title as a self-designation identifying himself with those he came to redeem. In Hebrew this title would be "*Ben Adam*" meaning "son of Adam," and is used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures for one who is an offspring of Adam. However, it is used in the book of Daniel and in some esoteric Jewish writings of the first century period, as a designation

for a mysterious heavenly figure who comes into the presence of God on clouds in human form as a representative of every man, and because of his conquest of the earthly forces of evil is given great power and authority by God. Jesus' use of this title is very important to his understanding of who he was and what his messianic mission was to be.

Following this title in term of frequency is the 17 occurrences of "Son of God," with variations of "a son, the Son, my Son." There can be little doubt that this is the most important title to Matthew. Jesus was the longed for messianic figure, the Christ, the Son of David, the King of Israel or the Jews. But, of more significance to Matthew, it was "the Son of God" who was here in the person Jesus of Nazareth. But of all the titles used to identify Jesus, the most critical title to Matthew, in terms of the mystery of Jesus, was the one found in Isaiah 7:14. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." Quoting this verse from the Isaiah text, Matthew gives his readers an interpretation of the Hebrew *Immanuel*, which tells us, in no uncertain terms, who he believed Jesus to be.

*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and **they will call him Immanuel**"--which means, "God with us," (Matt 1:21-23).*

## Conclusion

This presentation of Matthew's Gospel as a development of messianic stories should help the reader to see how important it is to see the concept of gospel as a story, and the New Testament Gospels as a collection of stories. To approach the Gospels as theological compositions only sets the reader at a distance from them rather than being drawn into them, which is what happens when one sees them for what they truly are, "God stories" or "stories of God."

Everyone loves a story. Anyone can listen to a story. Everyone

enjoys hearing or reading a story. Most of us enjoy telling a story, whether about ourselves or someone else. We love hearing and telling jokes or funny stories. The beauty of this is that most everyone knows what a story is and how to recognize a good story. It is just one step from this to seeing how easy it can be to analyze a story; or, perhaps, we should say, "take a story apart." That is what story analysis is all about, i.e., taking it apart and looking at the various features that makes it a story.

The gospel is simply "God's story." The Gospel of Matthew is simply a story of collected stories making up a God's story - a story about God and a story told by God. The collection of articles under *Storytelling and Bible Study* will introduce the reader to a method of Bible study in which the book being studied is considered from the age-old art of story craft. Then the reader can enter into the stories, make the story their story, then become themselves a storytellers of the greatest and most wonderful story ever told.

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