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Preface

This is, yes, another commentary on St. Matthew's gospel, and like the others it is nothing more than a connected series of footnotes to the gospel text. But it is different from the others—different, indeed, from any biblical commentary known to its author. For one thing, its annotations are something of a mixed bag. They are not written from a denominational point of view, nor are they the work of a theologian, clergyman, or Bible scholar. Nor do they adhere to the historical-critical tradition that has shaped Bible scholarship for the past two hundred years. Instead, they reproduce what appear to be contemporary scholarship's majority interpretations (if interpretations so often questioned, debated, and revised can ever command a majority, much less a consensus), and they then expand their explications with a random sampling of materials from the reception of Matthew, that is, from the ways it has been read, understood, and applied over the last two millennia. Better: "some" of the ways, for few books have had this gospel's manifold influences, and any survey of its afterlife can only hope to be inclusive but not integral, illustrative but not exhaustive, selective but not systematic.

Behind this approach lies the persuasion that an essential way to understand—or experience—a text is to see it not only as a passive field for academic investigation but also as an active and creative force in the lives of individuals, in their religious communities, and in the events of history. One problem with scholarly inquiries into the Bible is that for all their sophistication and erudition they sometimes fail to convey the power of Scripture, the ways in which over the centuries people have been inspired, transformed, and in some cases mystified or even appalled by its hallowed words. So while other commentaries refer *back* to the text's composers, this one refers *forward* to its readers, since, as has been often observed, ideas have consequences, and the books that express them can exist as fully in the minds of their audiences as in the minds of their authors. Hence, it exploits that tension between what Matthew may have intended (as understood today) and the quite different, indeed often eccentric or bizarre ways his intentions have been received, assimilated, and sometimes manipulated over the centuries; it shows how the Christian denominations have adopted and adapted his words for their theologies and liturgies; it appeals to every reader's natural curiosity to know how other readers in other times have reacted to the first gospel; it testifies to the richness of Matthew's message, or perhaps to its ambiguities and elasticity; and it reminds us that many of our own "established" interpretations may seem equally odd or irrelevant to future readers of this influential text.

Furthermore, this commentary does not use as its source the best—i.e., the most accurate—of Bible texts and translations (currently the New Revised Standard Version), but that classic of English—or Tudor—translation, the King James Version, or KJV (commissioned in 1604, completed in 1611), also known as the "Authorized Version," though it was never officially authorized, only "appointed," or permitted, for use in English churches. The KJV was unheralded at its publication, unpopular in its early lifetime, and unoriginal, sometimes wrong, in its renderings; yet it has acquired a stature its composers could have hardly envisioned ("The Bible God uses and Satan hates"). It was based on few and defective manuscripts and has often been edited and amended, but it has been, for better or for worse, the Bible read by many of the figures cited here, and it is still the most familiar and available version today. And although more acceptable renderings will be noted here when the KJV is obscure or defective, in its obvious limitations the KJV remains a useful reminder of how approximate and provisional is any rendering of those distant Greek and Hebrew originals. It is another of the curiosities of this masterpiece that the first gospel was largely the work of William Tyndale (1494–1536), whose 1534 translation was only lightly revised by King James's appointees. The absence of Tyndale's name from its prefatory remarks is one of the great injustices of literary history, and since it is estimated that 84 percent of the New Testament is his, it is important to acknowledge his contribution to the creation of English prose.[1]

Finally, this work also differs from all other Bible commentaries in that it offers some—if not equal—space to those who have questioned, rejected, or even ridiculed Matthew's messages. In his Bible Sir Walter Scott wrote of such readers (lines Byron later copied): "And better had they ne'er been born, / Who read to doubt, or read to scorn." So this is not the part of the Bible's influence that comforts most believers (and Voltaire, Thomas Paine, and Robert Ingersoll are almost never mentioned in standard commentaries).[2] But Bible-bashing, like Bible-thumping, is a historically significant part of the experience of reading Scripture, and though its practitioners favor some of the same techniques—a narrow selection of texts, a calculated exclusion of alternative explanations, a numbing literalism, a willful disregard of context—that they deplore in their opponents, their comments have been widely influential and deserve to be recorded, especially since much of Christian orthodoxy was created in response to dissenters from the faith. So this approach necessarily entails many of the alleged misreadings of Matthew, and some of the following pages will mention interpretations, legends, and traditions that are discounted, disparaged, or dismissed by modern scholars—what Matthew Arnold, translating Goethe's *Aberglaube,* called "extra-belief."[3] The most egregious of these uses is, of course, the historical appropriation of the Hebrew Bible by Christians concerned to see in its sentiments, episodes, and personalities a foreshadowing of their own faith. The practice of typology (for so it is called) may often be arbitrary and anachronistic, but it is a large part of the historical record and should not be ignored. It is also important for understanding religious art, and visitors to museums and galleries as well as to European churches (the OT mosaics in Rome's Santa Maria Maggiore are a good example) will often see artworks and sculptural decorations that juxtapose scenes from the two Testaments. Another use of Scripture that dominates its reception is "proof-texting" (or, less charitably, "text-mongering"), the use of single verses, sometimes parts of verses, usually out of context, in an attempt to support, even establish, often conclusively, points of doctrine and morality. The proof texters' picking and choosing was calculated and tendentious, as will be evident as we follow Matthew through the centuries; and though this may not be a popular practice today, it is again a large part of the historical record and should not be ignored.

Here are some examples from that record. Many readers know that 16:18 ("Thou art Peter . . . I will build my church") is basic to Catholicism's claims for the papacy. But how many know that 9:2-7 is a foundation text for Christian Scientists? Or that Matthew, the only gospel to use the word *church,* is a central presence in Mormonism, and that "pearl of great price" (13:46) became the title of one of the Mormons' basic texts? Or that 5:34, forbidding oaths, was a fundamental provision of Quakerism? And that the "Harrowing of Hell" (27:52-53), found only in Matthew and often disregarded, has a special place in the art and spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy? As for Judaism, in the late Middle Ages, a Jew called Shem-Tob created a Hebrew version of Matthew to assist his people in their disputes with Christians, who had for too long used another Matthean verse, the "Cry of the People" (27:25), to justify their anti-Semitism. Historically, 4:17 not only provided the opening salvo of the Reformation, but in the same verse the translation of just one of Matthew's words, as *repent,* ended for Protestants the century-old tradition of auricular confession as well as the sacramental status of penance. And ubiquitous in Reformation writings is their "Call of the Savior" (11:28-30), which seemed to sum up all they found wrong in Romanism—though Matthew's accounts of baptism and the Eucharist also accounted for bitter divisions among the Reformers. The meaning of Jesus' words on divorce and adultery is still debated (recall how 5:28, on lust in the heart, almost derailed Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign in 1976). And 5:39, which helped change Tolstoy's life, has become as much a staple of Christian pacifism as 10:34 is for the militants of liberation theology. The "Christian perfectionism" of 5:48 has inspired both monks and Methodists, and it lurks behind most Christian cults and heresies. In Western culture, Matthew gave the Christmas scene its eastern star, its wisemen, and its "Flight into Egypt"; an allusion to Matthew helped Hamlet to resolve his tragic dilemma; and the first gospel continues to infiltrate our books

and films. The hell that is preached to us is largely Matthean, and in the gospel's final lines rests Scripture's only formulation of the Trinity while also establishing the basis for Christianity's missionary enterprises. Matthew is everywhere.

The following pages, then, will consist of a collage of secondary readings that testify to the constant vitality of Matthew, historically and culturally, in the lives of the Bible's readers. Their selection inevitably reflects the personal and professional orientation of their selector, who is a Roman Catholic and also a classicist, comparatist, and generalist; and its viewpoint is necessarily orthodox and conservative, if only better to highlight the variety of responses by those who redefined or rejected the traditions they had inherited. The consequence, then, is a miscellany of understandings and interpretations, and it is hoped that their sheer diversity and heterogeneity will dilute any, even unconscious, biases. The concern here is marginally postmodern, not to argue a thesis or establish some disembodied Truth, but to document historical meanings that reflect a variety of competing ideologies and subvert any complacent reading of Matthew as a master narrative of Christian orthodoxy. For it remains a fact that Scripture, so piously honored as master, has too often been employed as a servant in thrall to many an alien agenda. So we must often leave open the question of whether the Bible, and Matthew in particular, has directly enlightened and inspired or simply offered its readers an arsenal of proof texts to sanction ideas and positions conceived independently or inferentially.

This book is intended for the general reader, whose experience of the Bible today is usually fitful and fragmented, more likely to come from references and allusions in modern writers than from a systematic study in churches, synagogues, or schools. It is an endeavor to give in one volume, devoted to one gospel, some substance—if only randomly and superficially—to that hoariest of platitudes: that the Bible, "The Greatest Book Ever Written," has been the most influential book in Western civilization. And to its more restrictive corollary: that the King James Version has deeply influenced English writers. True enough, and here is one attempt to show how.

I cannot end these prefatory remarks without gratefully acknowledging my indebtedness to the office staff of the UCSB Department of Classics, Betty Koch, Anna Roberts, and, for her word processing skills, Liz Frech.

Introduction

> The Christian's Bible is a drug store. Its contents remain the same, but the medical practice changes.
> —Mark Twain

Scripture

The Bible is not a book, it is an anthology, a library, a literature—that is, a collection of books, and of books so different from one another in size and style and content that it might be compared to a newspaper, where we have quite different expectations of what and how we will be reading as we look at the headlines, the sports pages, the editorial cartoons, the classified ads, the society columns, the comics, and the straight news stories. Of course, the situation with the Bible is both simpler, since its books are more closely related than newspaper articles, and more complicated, since they are ancient works composed in unfamiliar languages and often alien in their references and opaque in their expressions. Furthermore, the books—originally scrolls—were not written all at one time, and so we cannot date their subjects as securely as we can the events described in a daily newspaper. And even if we could apply approximate dates to the Bible's various books, we would still have to make allowances for the times when the events in the books might have taken place; the times they were first reported; the times during which reports were passed along orally; the times when they were recorded in writing; the times during which the writings were copied and edited, combined and collated; and, for those reading the Bible in translation, the times when they were rendered into different languages, each with its own verbal peculiarities and syntactic conventions, prepared for publication, and, finally, printed. And since historical, cultural, and social circumstances change along with the times, readers have to assess how much these varying conditions might have influenced biblical writings at each stage in the process from the original event to the words on the pages they turn today.

Many readers will feel that since the characters and events of the Bible have had a special, indeed sacred, status in history, as the people and workings of God, theirs is a divinely inspired, revelational, and authoritative record (including those genealogies?)—one that was passed along with a special care and

concern for accuracy, perhaps even enjoying a grace of preservation. Others will wonder to what extent human weakness and willfulness may have intruded into this process, and they will draw attention to those passages that seem incompatible or inconsistent, if not directly contradictory, or that appear to betray the divine revelation they are meant to record and proclaim. And although many readers will insist on the "truth" of the Bible, most will have to admit that its truths operate on different levels; are not uniformly cogent; and have been variously selected, understood, and applied over the centuries. Similarly, even the most orthodox or pious reader of Scripture, the most fervent believer in its "oracular authority," "plenary inspiration," and "verbal inerrancy," will also concede that its words, all of which have been translated, sometimes have to be taken "in context" or less than literally. Hence, the preference of some of the Bible's defenders to speak, not of its inerrancy, but of its infallibility, its trustworthiness, its credibility, and its authority, at least as far as its spiritual content is concerned.

But putting the Bible "in context" raises more questions than it answers. Since the Bible's composers, like everyone else, inhabited several contexts, which are relevant? And how large the context? Must each verse be seen and interpreted as part of its chapter, each chapter as part of its book, each book as part of the Bible, the Bible as part of the civilization of the ancient Near East, the ancient Near East as part of the Western world, with the significance of each passage modified by these successive frames and locations? Must readers constantly refer each sentiment in the Bible to its authorial, theological, literary, or historical settings? But how to distinguish among settings so diverse that they encompass most literary genres and more than a thousand years of history? What to make, for example, of first-century Judea with its multiple and overlapping contexts: Hebrew in religion, Aramaic in language, Greek in culture, Roman in administration, urban and rural, orthodox and sectarian, peaceful and hostile? And how do our own early twenty-first-century contexts affect our understanding of the Bible's contexts? But will all of this contextualizing not relativize Scripture by ascribing and reducing it to a variety of composer concerns and a succession of social settings, each with its special pressures? Or is Bible study something more than cultural anthropology? Are there some portions so eloquent, so inspiring, that they transcend, even annihilate, context, becoming genuinely representative of the whole, capturing the true spirit—whatever that is—of Scripture? Can these passages stand alone as timeless, exemplary, and autonomous manifestations of God's eternal truth ("The Bible teaches us that . . .")? If so, which passages are they? And do they offer only incandescent moments of spiritual enlightenment, or can they also be stitched together as "proof texts" into a patchwork quilt of doctrines? Can, for example, the Sermon on the Mount be excerpted from Matthew's gospel and offered as "the charter of Christianity," or should it be regarded as a collection of Jesus' sayings that were probably never delivered at one time (hence the apparent inconsistencies)? And should it be read alone or in the light of the other gospels (in Luke's gospel, it seems to take place on a plain)? But even if readers concede that this Sermon was never actually delivered as a sermon, and that the Mount is a reference to Mt. Sinai in Exodus rather than to a physical feature of Galilean topography, do these concessions in any way detract from the significance, the importance, the truth of what Jesus preached? But how are readers to account for the divergent conclusions drawn from these words?

These are all troubling questions. Indeed, considerable ink—and even blood—has been spilt over them for hundreds of years, and it still remains the business of biblical scholars to sort them out and even presume to answer them. This they do in an annual flood of commentaries and books and articles that shows no sign of abating and that offers a dismaying prospect to any ordinary reader who consults them—which ones to choose?—in order to find out what is "really going on" in the Bible and how its contents should be understood. Today it is customary in a secular setting such as a public university to evade the "sacredness" of the Bible, its presence among us as what Coleridge aptly called a "believed book," and to claim that we are reading and interpreting it "as literature."[1] But the Bible, for all its human interest, narrative power, and rhetorical artistry, is not literature (if anything, it is closer to history or legislation), at least not in the ordinary sense of an imaginative work of art that we can attribute to a single author who was composing at a particular time in history; and it has traditionally made—and still makes—the kinds of "truth" claims on us that literature does not. That is, in invoking divine inspiration for its human compositions, it claims a residual authority and purports to tell us some ultimate and determinative truths about who made the world and why, how we should conduct our lives in the light of those truths, and what will happen to us if we fail to do so. This is how most people first come to know the stories of the Bible—for their doctrinal content and within the confines of church or synagogue worship. Readers may choose to question or qualify or even reject such claims, but they cannot deny that they are present in the Bible and have to be reckoned with.

Another sensitive area in Bible study and commentary is nomenclature, since names have ideological implications and can readily reveal prejudices and evoke passions. Should the Bible be seen as comprising the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament"? These are traditional and generally acceptable terms, in use since the second century (and will be retained here), though the English words suggest a last will or bequest that is unilateral, not a covenantal relationship between a loving ruler and His people; and Jews rightfully object to the implication that what is called "old"—their testament—has somehow been superseded by what is new. So they—and many others—now prefer "Hebrew Bible" and "Christian Bible," though some might understand the former

to mean a Hebrew-language Bible (though some small parts are in Aramaic). A simple alternative is to call them "Scripture(s)," which suggests the writing down of words that were normally read aloud, though it conceals the fact that the major faiths have different selections and arrangements of books.

There is also the problem of BC ("Before Christ") and AD (*Anno Domini* or "In the Year of the Lord"), divisions introduced in the sixth century by a Scythian monk named Dionysius Exiguus. These are clearly Christian designations, even though they have been used so long that most people are not conscious of their sectarianism, so many modern writers have begun to use BCE ("Before the Common Era") and CE ("Common Era"). It is too soon to say if these religiously neutral abbreviations will be generally adopted (and the year numbers themselves still mark Christ's birth-date as the great turning-point of world history). So in these pages the traditional abbreviations will remain in use.

One other convention will be retained that has now almost disappeared: the capitalization of pronouns referring to the deity of the Old Testament. It is old and respected, like the KJV itself, and it can often contribute to the clarity of written comments. Finally, in an area like Bible studies, where little is certain, much is contested, and there is no shortage of reasonable alternatives, all dates are approximate, all opinions tentative, and all conclusions provisional; and those weasel words, "seems," "appears," "probably," "perhaps," and the like will run riot through the following pages.

Gospels

Christianity's earliest documents are St. Paul's, all composed around the middle of the first century, so it is with them that the Christian Bible should logically begin.[2] But it also makes a great deal of sense to begin with the stories of its founder's life and ministry, even though—or perhaps because—the four evangelists present us with four rather different pictures of Jesus Christ, pictures that are closer to artists' portraits than to photographers' snapshots. This should not be surprising, since subjects always present different appearances to different portraitists, and it is never easy for artists to separate interpretations from representations, impressions from realities. The same holds for literary artists, particularly when, as in the Gospels, the authors are also drawing on an oral tradition and trying to combine history, biography, and theology (Muslims separate "The Life of the Prophet" from their holy book, the Koran). In addition, the four evangelists had to deal with the problem of picturing someone who was for them both Jesus and the Christ, man and God, human and divine; and it appears likely that none of them knew Jesus personally during his ministry, and hence all had to rely on various kinds of sources. Also, each of them was writing forty to sixty years after Jesus' crucifixion and inevitably saw his life in multiple perspectives: first, through the climactic events of Passion Week; then through the ensuing generation of (largely unrecorded) reaction, discussion, and preaching; and finally in the light of current concerns, both their own and those for whom they were writing. And as Jesus' followers they were composing narratives designed to express their convictions about Jesus as Messiah and Savior, versions of Jewish ideas that they had to translate—and how much was lost or distorted?—into the language of Greek pagans.

A gospel, then, is history and biography as interpretive narrative, as apology, as faith-confession, even propaganda (in a positive sense); it is not neutral or impartial or disinterested, and the evidence it offers for its own authenticity is only probable at best. The story it tells, though generally chronological, is often fragmented, discontinuous, and episodic, reflecting the various incidents of Jesus' life and preaching as they were recalled by those who had known him during his ministry, passed along orally or preserved in various literary formats (which constitutes the "dominical tradition"), and finally recorded by the four evangelists in full conviction of the reality of the resurrection and the divinity of Jesus. Furthermore, it is a story told for those who were "second-generation" Christians in the evangelists' communities; hence, it is often deficient in background information, especially for the crucial period before the Romans' destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, or it fails to address issues of interest to readers in subsequent ages. But however inconsistent, implausible, or tendentious the narratives may seem, no one has ever produced any factual evidence to prove that what the evangelists report of Jesus' public life did not happen; and that creation of modern scholarship, the elusive "Jesus of history," though often advertised as the "real" Jesus, stepping out from behind the ecclesiastical facade of myth and dogma, too often turns out to be the Jesus of whatever revisionist feels tempted to reinterpret the gospels. Investigators concerned to establish the facts of Jesus' life find little straw for their bricks as they come up with "agreed results" or "critically assured minimums" that are meager and diverse. Their consensus is always being revised, and little is left of Jesus' story if controverted words and deeds are excised from the narrative. Hence the inevitability of expansion, speculation, and interpretation—and all too often, a weakness for remotely plausible alternatives and fashionable revisions. In the end, readers can only say about the events of Jesus' life what has been said about his miracles: they are easy to deny, hard to disprove.

Of the four gospels, Mark's is the earliest and briefest, and if we can trust the tradition that he knew Peter, his is the most "apostolic" of the gospels. He presents Jesus as a man in a hurry, with event following event in rapid succession. Nothing is said of his birth or childhood, and his ministry is a vivid narrative of busy activity and crowded scenes (words for "crowd" appear more than

forty times), with his divine sonship only reluctantly revealed until it has been verified by his resurrection from the dead. Matthew's Jesus is a teacher, preacher, and lawgiver in the tradition of Moses, whose career offers precedents for episodes in Jesus' own life, particularly his infancy and his Sermon on the Mount. But Matthew goes on to present Jesus also as the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes, which seems to have been a significant issue for his own community. Many contemporary readers find Luke's portrait of Jesus has the most universal appeal of the four. Not only is it well written and supplemented by the Acts of the Apostles, but it shows a Jesus responding compassionately to the marginal figures of his time such as women, lepers, and the poor. The Jesus of John's gospel, written toward the end of the first century, is, by contrast, a remoter figure, more at one with his Father in heaven than with the crowds on earth. It is up to each reader, then, to decide how—or if—these four approaches to the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith cohere in a unified, convincing, and even inspiring impression. Or, as Matthew (22:42) puts it: "What think ye of Christ?"

For some the Gospels are, ultimately, the products of divine inspiration (variously understood); for others, of human invention with all its failings. But for both there is the problem of disagreements, inconsistencies, and contradictions among the four authors; and Muslims later made much of these variations in both Testaments, arguing that similar—and calculated—alterations had been made to eliminate references to Muhammad. In a relentlessly modern Protestant church called "The People's Liberal," in Peter DeVries' novel *The Mackerel Plaza* (1958), the "first split-level church in America," there is a "worship area" with a pulpit consisting of "a slab of marble set on four legs of four delicately differing fruitwoods, to symbolize the four Gospels and their failure to harmonize."[3] The same situation was faced early on, and Origen (185–254) characterized the discrepancies as "different sounds" from "one saving voice," while St. John Chrysostom (347–407) made them a powerful argument for gospel veracity: "For if they had agreed in all things, exactly even to times, and place, and to the very words, none of our enemies would have believed but that they had met together, and had written what they wrote by some human compact."[4] Or as William Paley (1743–1805) put it, the Gospels have enough variety "as to repel all suspicion of confederacy," and enough agreement "as to show that the accounts had one real transaction for their common foundation."[5] And in his classic defense of Christianity, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), Joseph Butler (1692–1752) pointed out that nature, God's other great book, exhibited similar disharmonies.[6] Hence, the difficulties in the narratives became signs of their authenticity, evidence that there had been no concerted effort to concoct a story too good to be true. This is not a very compelling argument, but it allows disagreements as well as agreements to confirm the reliability of the Gospels.

But why should there be precisely four portraits of Jesus? There were others circulating in the early church that are now grouped among the NT "pseudepigrapha," such as the *Gospel of Peter,* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas,* and the *Protevangelium of James,* sometimes called "secret," "lost," or "hidden" gospels.[7] They are secondary compositions, but they once filled more pages than do the canonical texts, they contain popular and devotional materials (along with various anomalies), and they have led a kind of half-life in the shadow of the canonical writings. Most are obviously late and derivative, though they may still reflect early and aberrant traditions, and they continue to intrigue those readers who like to imagine that they may contain startling and subversive revelations about Jesus that the ecclesiastical establishments want to conceal (in this melodrama the Vatican is usually the villain). They do not.

Finally, in the second century a writer named Tatian harmonized the four into one continuous narrative called the *Diatessaron* ("Through the Four [Gospels]"), based largely on Matthew and now surviving only in quotations, though it was very popular, often translated, and long used in Syriac-speaking churches. But there still seems a special rightness in the standard four portraits, and Irenaeus (140–202), an early bishop of Lyons, found an appropriate, if fanciful, universality in their number: "The Gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are. Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is spread over all the earth . . . it fittingly has four pillars."[8] The Gospels are often associated with four of the church's earliest centers: Rome (Mark), Antioch (Matthew), Athens (Luke), and Ephesus (John), their authors thought to be "apostles" and hence reliable witnesses to the faith. Or they can be matched with the four elements: air for Luke, the longest of the gospels; earth for Matthew with the incarnation implied in his infancy narrative; fire for John, the most spiritual of the four; and water for Mark, which begins with Jesus' baptism. Or they are identified with the four living creatures of Ezra 1:10 and Revelation 4:6-7, each the highest in its own area: man with Matthew because he begins his gospel with Jesus' human genealogy; the lion with Mark because he begins with the roaring voice of St. John the Baptist; the (sacrificial) ox with Luke because he begins with St. John's father, the priest Zacharias; and the eagle with John because he begins with the soaring quality of the Word. Or they represent the four covenants: with Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus; or the four Major Prophets of the Old Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Even though their story is told in four versions, which were first collected and given their traditional ascriptions in the second century (the earliest complete NT manuscripts date from the fourth century), the evangelists, writing in Greek, could provide only a biographical introduction to the faith that Jesus founded, the essentials (in their view) of a ministry that was to become a religion. And since they were in part adapting the tradition to their own circum-

stances, telling their audiences what they wanted them to know, they often fail to tell us modern readers what we would like to know. Hence, it was left to the Greek and Latin fathers in Christianity's early centuries not only to propagate his teachings in other languages but also to describe, define, and systematize them and then to defend them against dissident voices in their own ranks as well as against spokesmen for the powerfully competing systems of Judaism and paganism. They had to create a "Christology," that is, show how Jesus could be both God and man, and that he was indeed the messiah that seemed foretold in at least some OT texts and awaited by at least some Jews. They had to create a "soteriology," that is, an account of his earthly life in terms that would make of him not just a teacher and prophet but the Redeemer of mankind (however "redemption" might be understood), bodily resurrected from the dead and ascended into heaven. They had to create a Trinity, that is, reconcile their traditional insistence on God's unity with the evangelists' scattered references to a triad of divine powers. They had to create some sort of organization, both temporal and spiritual, that would faithfully continue the work of their Master and that could survive in a Mediterranean world that still acknowledged the gods of Mt. Olympus and officially worshiped the emperors of Rome. They had to create a system of sacraments that would liturgically witness to God's continuing presence in their churches and would serve worshipers as conduits of His graces. And since Jesus had not returned after the resurrection and the world had not ended or even changed, they had to establish the kingdom of God both as a spiritual reality in the hearts of the faithful, attainable through repentance and belief, and as a hope for the future, whether it be near or far, in this world or the next. And all of this had to be done on the basis of Jesus' words, often inconsistent and enigmatic, and his actions, often unreliably witnessed and imperfectly recorded, which were then passed on in languages he did not speak. They were given directions; they had to create a road map.

Matthew

Voltaire aptly called Matthew "the most circumstantial Gospel that we possess."[9] It is also the best known of the canonical four, so comprehensive in scope that it is called, paradoxically, both "the church's gospel" and "the Jewish gospel," and so influential—if not always popular—that it must count as one of the most important books in world history. It is also a book of proverbs, both memorable and quotable, even in translation; and when we think of our unappreciated favors as "pearls before swine," or separate the "sheep from the goats," or praise someone as the "salt of the earth," or burn the midnight oil, or brand a hypocrite as a "Pharisee," or wait until the "eleventh hour," or beware of wolves "in sheep's clothing," or hope to be one of "the chosen few," or note the "signs of the times," or complain of "the blind leading the blind," or point out that someone's left hand doesn't know what his right hand is doing, or keep to the "straight (better: strait) and narrow," or warn that those who live by the sword will die by the sword, or regret that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak," or "wash our hands" of something we are dismissing, or just "make light" of it, or are willing to go that extra mile, then we are quoting Matthew. It is from his Gospel, not Luke's, that we take our familiar versions of the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer. And even when words or sentiments are quoted that the Synoptics share in common, it is often assumed—as will happen in the following pages—that Matthew, the "teaching gospel," is the primary source. In fact, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that despite an undistinguished Greek style, words from Matthew have been pronounced, prayed, and intoned more often than those of any author we know; and when we hear "the Bible says," we will hear more often from Matthew than from any other book of Scripture. This kind of eminence was confirmed by Matthew's having the first place among the *NT*'s writings, the only Synoptic attributed to an Apostle. Long thought to have been the first written, it lost that distinction to Mark in the late nineteenth century; and even though Mark's current priority may seem to imply superiority, Matthew still retains its authority and prestige as the canonical exposition of Jesus' teachings and an early record of a community being formed on the basis of those teachings. He stands with John and Paul as one of the three great creators of a Christian identity, and, like theirs, his message has not always been welcomed.[10]

Matthew's gospel divides into three or four parts: the introduction of Jesus by way of his genealogy, birth, baptism, and temptation in the desert (1–4, though perhaps the infancy narrative, 1–2, should be separate); his public ministry in and around Galilee (5–16:20); and the last days in Jerusalem, with his passion, death, and resurrection (16:21–28:20). But at the heart of Matthew are the discourses of Jesus, which alternate with narrative sections and can be roughly divided into five groups (sometimes seen as corresponding to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the OT): the Sermon on the Mount (ethical), 5–7; the Mission Charge (apostolic), 10; the Kingdom of God Parables (kerygmatic, or revelational), 13; Community Discipline (ecclesiastical), 18; and the Second Coming (eschatological), 24–25. Each ends with a similar "completion" formula: "When Jesus had finished. . . ."

The gospel's author is unknown, although its status has always benefited from its attribution to the Apostle Matthew (called "Levi" in Mark 2:14), the tax collector of 9:9. But this attribution seems improbable since the author never adverts to his being an eyewitness of his gospel's events (nor does he ever indicate an eyewitness source), and it would leave unexplained his apparent dependence on Mark, who was not an apostle. Still, it is convenient to use

"Matthew" to designate both its composer and its contents, just as "Homer" is both an unknown author and also shorthand for what goes on in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Some conclude from his knowledge of Judaism that he was a converted Pharisee or rabbi, and he may resemble the good scribe of 13:52, a Jewish official but now "instructed unto the kingdom of heaven."

As for his sources, most commentators now accept the "Two-Source Hypothesis": that in addition to some 210 verses of his own material ("special Matthew"), the author-editor used Mark as a basis and narrative outline, retaining over 90 percent of its verses, and that an analysis of what was retained, omitted, revised, or added can often reveal the contours of his own (and sometimes inconsistent) theology. He also used another source, whether oral or written, now called *Q* (from the German word *Quelle*, "source") or the "Sayings Source," in Aramaic or Greek. First proposed in 1838, it was thought to be composed mostly of the sayings of Jesus. Dating from the 50s, it is a document that does not exist but has had to be invented to explain the materials—about two hundred verses—shared, often verbatim, by Matthew and Luke that are not in Mark, though there is also the possibility that Luke took these verses not directly from *Q* but from Matthew. And to thicken the mix, there is the remoter possibility that the Apostle Matthew may have been the original source of a document that underwent considerable editing and expanding before reaching its present form toward the end of the first century, that at one early stage there was an Aramaic Matthew, and that Mark is a later and abridged version of that ur-Matthew.

As for the date of Matthew, if the destroyed city mentioned in a parable at 22:7 looks back to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, then the gospel we read today may have been composed around 85, perhaps in a town in Galilee, where it has Jesus spend almost all his time, or more likely in Antioch, capital of the Roman province of Syria, the city where Jesus' disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Matthew is first cited by Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, in the second century; Syria is mentioned in 4:24; and the prominence the gospel gives to Peter may reflect his importance in the Antioch church, where one tradition made him a bishop before his removal to Rome. Composed in *koine* ("common") Greek, the lingua franca of Rome's Eastern empire, its intended audience seems to have been an urban community of Greek-speaking Jewish converts living in an environment of sectarian tension as they sought to position themselves as a separate and competing faction within the new world of synagogue Judaism.

The Romans had forced this new world into being in 70 by their destruction of the temple in the course of crushing the first Jewish revolt. As a consequence the Jews, once more dispersed in exile, had to reestablish their faith around their local synagogues and under the immediate leadership of the scribes and the Pharisees. The position of Jewish Christians within these synagogues must have become exceedingly difficult if not impossible, especially after the rabbis reformulated for the synagogue liturgy a prayer, the "Twelfth Benediction," that in some versions apparently included Christians among the heretics it cursed. Thus, in this gospel Matthew sought to define their situation as followers of Jesus by giving them an account of his life and teachings from birth to resurrection and also by locating their crucified leader within the Jewish tradition as the culmination of Israel's history and the fulfillment of her messianic hopes. His story is of Jesus' rejection, but although he can portray a Jesus harshly critical of Jewish officialdom, particularly the Pharisees (the Reformers would later find the virulence of chapter 23 useful in their attacks on the Catholic hierarchy), Matthew's references remain largely Jewish. By stressing the continuing authority of the Mosaic law, he warns his followers not to regard their new faith as a reason to scandalize other Jews: they should still pay their temple tax (17:24), honor the Sabbath (24:20), and heed the "scribes and the Pharisees" (23:2-3). But he also wants to amplify and extend their national tradition, showing Jesus both as a second Moses and as the Messiah, the son of David, and, especially, the "fulfillment" of OT prophecies (his sources are various, often from a version of the Septuagint, the third-century translation of the Old Testament into Greek, and his citations are mostly from the Prophets), a point he deliberately makes some eleven times, mostly in the beginning and middle of his gospel. This enables him to see in certain NT events the completion or validation of events from the Old Testament, an important consideration for his Jewish-Christian audience; and for many Christians prophecies have more evidential power than reports of miracles, since their fulfillment can be demonstrated. Some have even argued that Matthew deliberately chose incidents that would illustrate key OT texts, but it seems more likely that he added these references to the narrative, choosing some himself and taking others that were current among Jewish Christians and may well have been invoked by Jesus himself. John Updike has noted that it is Matthew "who handles Christian belief's awkward lumber—the threats of hellfire and outer darkness and the, to a modern reader, irksome insistence upon Christ's life as a detailed fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies."[11]

Since it is a fact of history that a church is emerging from the synagogue, Matthew's Jesus must create a "Christianity," warning the Jews that "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (21:43). So what Jesus tells his disciples is often what Matthew wants to tell his community fifty years later: that they are to do the will of God, a commitment that might be summed up by what he repeatedly calls "righteousness," a word not found in Mark. Matthew's sense of community is strong (he is the only evangelist to mention a "church"), so its members must also learn how to treat one another and how to defend against false disciples in their own ranks (ch. 18). But that is not all, for their Jewish sect is about to

become a universal religion, "catholic" in its literal sense. So eventually they must turn to the Gentile world, and as they pursue their missionary work they must define and defend their beliefs, all of this as they look forward to an end time and a second coming that seem forever delayed. Hence, Matthew finds himself at a divide of worlds, between a Judaism that is in transition and a Christianity that is still in its beginnings, between a law that is absolute and a law that will be superseded, between a righteousness that is external and one that is internal, between a salvation that is merited by good works and one dependent on faith, between a faith that is monotheistic and a leader who is the Son of God, between a community that is Jewish and an empire that is Roman. Thus, his gospel is inclusive, catholic, embracing both the contrarieties of human experience and the paradoxes of a faith in which God became man and the Prince of Glory died a criminal's death. Matthew witnesses all the contrasts, tensions, inconsistencies, and even contradictions that heterogeneity entails as it not only looks back to Israel and the Old Testament for its validation, but will also look forward in its final lines to "all nations" of the world.

THE GOSPEL OF *Matthew* AND ITS READERS