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Lifting the Burden

Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today

Brendan Byrne, S.J.



Matthew's Gospel and Judaism

From its earliest days Matthew's gospel has been recognized as the "Jewish gospel," the one most reflective of Christianity's Jewish background. At the same time and somewhat ironically in view of this, it is chiefly in relation to Matthew that the issue of New Testament anti-Semitism arises most keenly. Only in the Matthean Passion narrative do we hear from the crowd the fearful cry, "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25), a cry that has unleashed torrents of murderous Christian anti-Judaism and provided legitimacy for persecution and pogroms, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust of the last century. Likewise, it is only Matthew who records Jesus as saying to the chief priests and scribes, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits" (21:43), a statement that has fed the sense of Christianity as "superceding" Judaism as the people of God. As I hope to explain when discussing these and other sensitive areas of the gospel, such understandings are neither true to the original thrust of the narrative nor, even if they were, would they be ethically responsible. Nonetheless, recalling them points to the high importance of sorting out from the start the relationship of the First Gospel to Judaism in regard to both history and interpretation.

To spend some time on the historical question first: A significantly creative area in recent scholarship on Matthew has been a reconsideration of its historical position *vis-à-vis* the Judaism of its time. This has been part of a wider appreciation of the nature of Judaism as a whole in the centuries immediately before and after the time of Jesus. Before the destruction of the Jewish state and the sacking of Jerusalem, at the end of the First Jewish Revolt, 66–70 C.E. (the period for which scholars now prefer the less value-laden term "Second Temple Judaism") Judaism in Palestine presented a very pluriform face, with various movements and sects vying for influence and allegiance. Besides the Sadducees and Pharisees well known from the gospels, we can list the Essenes (among whom the people responsible for

the scrolls found at Qumran are probably to be numbered), more radical groups such as those who in the years immediately before the revolt became the "Zealots," disciples of John the Baptist, and, as I think we have to call them at this point, "Jesus messianists"—that is, those Jews who, without separation from the broad mass of the Jewish commonwealth, believed that Jesus of Nazareth, crucified in the early 30s by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, was the appointed Messiah, raised by God from the dead and destined soon to return in glory as Son of Man to complete his messianic work.

Let us linger for a moment on the Pharisees—the group that bulks largest in the Gospel of Matthew. The members of this movement were united in the belief that God had communicated to Moses not only the written Torah, making up the first five books of the Bible (Pentateuch) but also an oral law preserved and passed down in a body of codified traditional rulings, of which they in particular were the guardians. The rulings, chiefly focused on Sabbath observance and determination of what was "clean" and "unclean," enabled the Pharisees and those they sought to guide to live as God's people, holy and set apart, in the mixed society in which Jews now lived—mixed in the sense that Palestine contained Jewish and non-Jewish population in almost equal measure. While Pharisaism, like any religious practice, could degenerate into the kind of legalism attacked by Jesus in the gospels, at its best it represented a serious attempt to create for the people at large the possibility of living out, in a mixed society, the ideal of the book of Leviticus, that Israel should be a holy people, a nation of priests before the Lord (Lev 20:26; cf. Exod 19:6). The Pharisaic rituals of washing and cleanliness served to preserve and foster that distinct sense of identity.

The trouble was—and this is the view of Jesus, as presented in the gospels—that the "holiness" net could be drawn too tightly. Not only pagans but also some classes of Jews could be considered more or less permanently outside the pale because social disadvantage or occupation (for example, tax collecting for the Roman occupying power) rendered them permanently unclean. Taking up earlier tradition (cf. Mark 7:1-23), Matthew presents Jesus as severely criticizing Pharisees for disenfranchising their fellow Israelites in the name of what for him is not the God-given Torah but purely human tradition.

The destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. largely swept away the power of those groups, especially the Sadducees and priestly class in general, that depended on it for influence. Two groups stood to be less affected by this otherwise cataclysmic event. One was the Pharisees, for whom Torah

rather than Temple had long been the chief focus. The other group was the Jesus messianists, who had long since come to believe that the atoning function of the Temple and its sacrifices had been superseded once and for all by the shedding of Jesus' blood on Calvary (Matt 26:28; cf. Rom 3:25).

The stage was set, then, in the years following 70 C.E. for the ever-increasing ascendancy in Jewish religious and national life of the heirs of the Pharisees: the rabbis. The next hundred years or so represent the period known in scholarly parlance as the era of "Formative Judaism": Judaism on the way to becoming (around 200 C.E.) full-blown Rabbinic Judaism, the ancestor of all forms of Judaism that have survived to this day. During this time the leading rabbis sought to recreate the national life by gathering a shattered people around the Torah and the body of interpretive traditions that, as explained above, they held to be a separate fount of revelation derived from Moses. In the synagogues and circles of disciples that leading rabbis gathered around themselves this body of tradition, endlessly developed by intense study and discussion, showed how the Torah should be lived out in the conditions in which Jews found themselves at the time.

It is widely agreed today that Matthew's gospel and in particular its decidedly Jewish character reflect intense interaction, much of it hostile, with leading representatives of Judaism undergoing this transformation. A struggle to preserve the heart of Israel in difficult times was under way. Groups bitterly contested the terms upon which that was to be achieved. The intensity of the polemic against the scribes and Pharisees in the First Gospel reflects, then, not so much the practice of Jesus during his public life (ca. 30-33 C.E.), but these struggles of a later period. The Jesus messianists behind this gospel, who also had no cause to lament the loss of the Temple, found themselves under pressure from an ascendant Synagogue increasingly intolerant of groups who deviated from the vision of Israel they were trying to recapture and impose.

Lurking here is a central issue much exercising Matthean studies today. With respect to the community responsible for the gospel, should we have in mind a group that, however deviant and in dispute with other authorities, would still consider itself—and be considered—as existing within the broad Jewish commonwealth? Or, by the time of the composition of the gospel, is this group of Jesus messianists now so cut off and separate—though still engaged in polemics—that we really have to speak of a separate religion? *They* might have considered themselves to be still part of Israel, indeed to be the *true Israel* in continuity with the covenant people of old. But did the rest of the Jewish commonwealth still recognize them as Jews?—or, on the contrary, had there already taken place so

genuine a “parting of the ways” as to make it appropriate to speak now of two distinct entities: Judaism and Christianity!¹

Much in Matthew's gospel supports the former view. First, there is the immense sense of continuity with the Jewish tradition—in particular the insistence on the validity of the Torah and the “righteousness” it requires (5:17-20). Then there are the instructions from Jesus that appear to restrict the mission to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” forbidding going to the Gentiles (10:5-6; cf. 15:24). At one point (23:2-3) the gospel seems to recognize the authority of the scribes and Pharisees who “sit upon Moses' seat,” though their behavior is not to be imitated. Even the warning about being dragged “before councils” and beaten “in synagogues” (10:17) suggests ongoing submission to the discipline of Jewish religious authorities.

On the other hand, there is also much to suggest a final, definitive breach. References to “their synagogues” (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; cf. 23:34) and to “the Jews” as though to an alien, outside group (28:15) convey a very distancing impression. Despite the isolated injunction in 10:5-6, the all-important exit-line of the gospel, 28:19-20, makes clear that the missionary focus of the community now rests upon the Gentile world (28:16-20).² The most significant factor, however, is the one that is most obvious: the absolute centrality of what this community believed about Jesus—his personal status and his role in the design of God. Matthew's gospel makes clear from its very opening pages that the status and role of Jesus go far beyond conventional Jewish expectation concerning the Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah, son of David, yes, but he is also God's Son in a unique, transcendent sense, as established by the miraculous nature of his birth (1:20-25) and attested by various divine interventions (3:17; 17:5), culminating in his being raised from the dead. For the Matthean community Jesus, both in his lifetime and as risen Lord, is “Emmanuel” (“God with us”) in a transcendent sense never dreamed of by the prophet who formulated the relevant text (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). Conventional Jewish expectation has yielded to hope for his return as the Danielic “Son of Man” (7:13-14), who will institute universal judgment and definitively establish the “kingdom” or “rule”

¹ For a recent survey see Douglas R. H. Hare, “How Jewish Is the Gospel of Matthew?” *CBQ* 62 (2000) 264-77; also M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 97-101; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, SP 1 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991) 20-22.

² See Brendan Byrne, “The Messiah in Whose Name ‘the Gentiles Will Hope’ (Matt 12:21): Gentile Inclusion as an Essential Element of Matthew's Christology,” *AusBR* 50 (2002) 55-73.

of God on earth (Matt 16:27-28; 24:29-31). A final indicator of separation is the community's designation of itself as “church” (Greek *ekklesia*), a usage with no precedent in Judaism save as the Greek translation (LXX) of the Hebrew *qahal*, used of the community of Israel during the period of Sinai wandering.

For these reasons I believe and will presume in this reading of the gospel that the community responsible for it regarded itself as independent of the leadership currently ascendant in the Jewish world. At the same time it existed in a state of rivalry and competition with “the synagogue across the street,” and so disputed intensely the claims of the ascendant group to be the true Israel, gathered around the legitimate and valid interpretation of the Torah.

For both parties, the Pharisaic-Rabbinic and the Matthean Jesus Mes-sianist, the Torah is central. For both it is probably true to say, as I once heard a rabbi say with passion: “Israel is Torah and the Torah is Israel.” The issue between them concerns *interpretation*. For what was now becoming mainstream Judaism, the key to interpreting Torah and establishing the true Israel on that basis is the body of tradition handed down in oral form from Moses and guarded by the rabbis. The Matthean community, on the contrary, believes that it has the key to interpreting the Torah in the person of Jesus. For them Jesus is *the* interpreter of the Torah, enjoying as unique Son of God an authority far beyond that of Moses or any oral tradition purported to derive from him. Jesus is more than a “new Moses.” He is the Interpreter *par excellence*, authorized to challenge and in places to set aside rulings from Moses, even when formulated in the written Torah. Situated at the beginning of his public career, the Great Sermon (Matthew 5-7) irrevocably enshrines this claim.

We must be careful, however. Matthew does not present the community of the kingdom as the “replacement” of Israel or even as a kind of “New Israel” discontinuous with the old. Rather, in direct continuity with biblical Israel the community would see itself as having the key to bringing about the Israel that God intends for the era of the kingdom, a divine intent indicated in the Scriptures, which numerous events in the life of Jesus have already “fulfilled.” The “key” of course is the Torah authoritatively and definitively interpreted by Jesus, not only in his historical life, the memory of which they preserve, but also in the rulings he continues to impart to the community through his presence among them as risen Lord (18:20; 28:20). The quarrel of Matthew's community as reflected in its gospel is not with Judaism as such but with the Pharisaic-Rabbinic leadership that has vigorously contested its claims for the messianic status of

Jesus and sought to foster among the people at large an alternative view of the Israel that God wants, one based on Torah interpreted according to the "tradition of the fathers," whose guardians they assume themselves to be. Polemical statements such as that in Matt 21:43, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits," do suggest a belief that the rival leadership has really forfeited any claim to foster the people of God. The Matthean community appears to see in these leaders the lineal descendants of the "chief priests and scribes" who had clamored for the execution of Jesus and brought down upon themselves and their children the calamity of 70 C.E. (the true meaning of the "blood" charge of 27:25; see below).

Even as regards the ordinary populace, the gospel seems to reflect a stage when a mission to the Jews as such has been abandoned—its memory preserved only in earlier elements of the tradition. While treasuring its Jewish heritage and still seeing itself as "Israel," the community now seems to have its energy entirely directed to the Gentile mission. In other words, what we have in the gospel is the reflection of a community, Jewish in origin and character, that would now more readily identify with the Gentile churches who share its faith in Jesus as Messiah rather than with the Jewish groups to whom, through lack of success, it has virtually ceased to appeal. It is in fact very likely that the impetus to compose the gospel—in effect to commission a talented scribe among their number for the task—came from a desire to state in writing the understanding of themselves at which they had now arrived—probably in the mid-80s: that is, as comprising an inclusive Israel that it had always been God's intention to bring about, an Israel being gathered from the nations of the world preliminary to the return of Jesus as Son of Man to institute judgment and the consummation of the kingdom.

Adopting the course taken already by the author of Mark's gospel, this community or its selected scribe chose to make this statement of identity through the genre of a gospel: a narrative cast in the shape of a biography of Jesus that would portray his deeds and actions, even his eventual fate, as prefiguring and legitimating its own hopes, self-understanding, and mission. The greatest task—and achievement—of the Evangelist was to show that the inclusion within Israel of great numbers from the nations of the world was not an aberration, as their opponents might claim, but in fact the fulfillment of what God had intended all along and indicated clearly in the Scriptures. Hence the need of a scribe, "discipled for the kingdom of heaven" (13:52), who knew how to bring out of his store things new (Gentile) and things old (continuity with Israel).

In this sense neither Christianity as a whole nor Matthew's community in particular should be seen in relation to Judaism as child to parent. If we look to the decades immediately after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. we can say that both Formative Judaism (that is, Judaism on the way to becoming Rabbinic Judaism, as explained above) and the Jesus Messianist communities (that is, the communities gathered around the gospel who were to become "Christianity") were the legitimate "children" of the pluriform phenomenon known as Second Temple Judaism (Judaism prior to 70 C.E.).³ Thus, rather than being related as parent to child, the two movements are more like siblings, children of the same parent (which makes Rabbinic Judaism and mature Christianity "cousins" in a subsequent generation). Behind Matthew's gospel, then, and imprinted clearly upon it are the struggles and hopes of a group of believers engaged in an adolescent-like struggle to establish and clarify their identity as the nucleus of "true Israel" over against the claims of their rival and more numerous siblings. It is not surprising, then, that the gospel should reflect much of the love-hate relationship characteristic of adolescence.

This reconstruction of the likely historical circumstances of the community that produced Matthew's gospel goes a long way to accounting for the elements in the narrative that lead to its being seen as anti-Jewish. What the gospel reflects is the kind of struggle for the heart of Israel that many groups within the wider Jewish commonwealth were engaged in during an era of change and conflict. The writings of other groups totally *within* Israel, such as those of Qumran, exhibit polemics against rival leadership just as intense and rejecting as any to be found in Matthew—even more so in some cases. There is a sense, then, that the gospel reflects an *intra*-Jewish debate, which renders the charge of its being *anti*-Jewish untenable.

At the same time the gospel does clearly reflect a community distancing itself from the forms of Judaism gaining ascendancy. As that process continued in the following century and Christianity became a separate religion it was all too easy for the polemical statements in the gospel to lose their original reference and be employed as accusations against Judaism as such, a path taken with tragic frequency in the subsequent Christian tradition. Relatedly but increasingly strongly in recent decades awareness of the

³ A view formulated by the Jewish scholar Alan Segal; see *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 1, 142, 162, 179–81; also James A. Charlesworth, "Exploring Opportunities for Rethinking Relations among Jews and Christians," in *idem*, ed., *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present and Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 35–53, especially 41–42.

calamitous ethical consequences of this development has become widespread in Christian circles. It is incumbent upon Christian interpreters to make sure that in reading the “good news” out of Matthew they are not reading very bad news out of it for Jews. Interpretation that is responsible will not only work from a sense of the location of Matthew in its original historical setting but also appreciate that, more than any other of the gospels, it most unambiguously shows the rootedness of Christianity in Judaism and the utter impossibility of understanding the gospel without sympathy for that essential matrix. In dealing with particular passages of Matthew, especially those that are problematic in this respect, I hope to be able to point to ways of interpretation that are sensitive to this concern.

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Brendan Byrne, S.J.



The Design of Matthew

Almost all studies of Matthew's gospel agree that it is one of the most carefully structured documents in the New Testament. Determining its precise shape is less easy. Several models are on offer.

One Suggestion: the Fivefold Narrative + Discourse Structure

The Evangelist has left signposts that many consider indicative of structure in the shape of a phrase that five times forms a concluding comment on a discourse Jesus has given: "And it happened when Jesus had finished these words/instructions/parables" (the first seven words [six in Greek] are invariable). The phrase occurs:

- at the end of the Great Sermon (7:28);
- at the end of the missionary instruction to the disciples (11:1);
- at the end of the instruction given in the form of parables (13:53);
- at the end of the instruction on life in the Church (19:1);
- at the end of the long discourse on the future (26:1).

In each case the phrase marks a transition from the discourse just given to a narrative section less concerned with Jesus' teaching and more with his actions. Setting aside the infancy story (Matthew 1–2) on the one hand, and the Passion-Resurrection account (Matthew 26–28) on the other, and regarding the prelude to the public ministry (3:1–4:25) as an opening narrative section, then for the whole central body of the gospel we have a pattern in which, five times over, a narrative block is followed by a discourse concluded with the formula indicated above. This means that the body of the gospel (Matthew 3–25) consists essentially of five main sections or "books":

Book 1: 3:1–7:29

Narrative: Jesus' early public life in Galilee: 3:1–4:25

Discourse: Great Sermon: 5:1–7:29

Book 2: 8:1–10:42

Narrative: Jesus as healer and proclaimer of forgiveness: 8:1–9:37

Discourse: Missionary instruction of the disciples: 10:1–42

Book 3: 11:1–13:53

Narrative: Jesus encounters controversy and rejection: 11:1–12:50

Discourse: Instruction in parables: 13:1–52

Book 4: 13:53–18:35

Narrative: Final stage of Jesus' ministry in Galilee: 13:53–17:27

Discourse: Instruction on life in the Church: 18:1–35

Book 5: 19:1–25:46

Narrative: Jesus' ministry in Judea and Jerusalem: 19:1–23:39

Discourse: Discourse on the Future: 24:1–25:46

This "Five-Book" (Pentateuchal?) understanding gives a "handle" on the long central block of the gospel. Matthew did perhaps intend to allow the narrative to pause five times in order to communicate forcefully through the discourses a sense of Jesus as teacher and interpreter of the Torah. The schema is most convincing in regard to the five discourse sections, but less so in respect to narrative, since not everything reported in these sections clearly falls into that category, and in some cases the narrative section seems to look *back* rather than forward. (For example, the narrative of Jesus as healer and reconciler in chs. 8–9 seems to complement the presentation of him as interpreter and teacher in chs. 5–7.) Moreover, concentration on the schema obscures what in terms of the narrative flow appear to be important moments of transition. The description in 4:12–17 of the beginning of Jesus' public preaching in Galilee is clearly one of these, as is also the episode at Caesarea Philippi, 16:13–23, when, hard upon Peter's confession of faith, Jesus reveals his destiny to go up to Jerusalem to suffer and die.¹ We should not allow a rigid adherence to the fivefold narrative-plus-discourse pattern to obscure such features.

¹ Both passages feature the phrase "from that time on Jesus began . . ." (4:17; 16:21).

Another Suggestion:**Tracking the Unfolding Narrative Line**

With considerable debt to Francis J. Matera² I would argue that running along with this recurring pattern of discourse and indeed carrying the whole structure is a more significant narrative line focusing on the nature and direction of Jesus' messianic role. Behind this issue, and indeed pervading the gospel as a whole, is the bitter truth that the One whom the members of the early communities believed to be Israel's God-sent Messiah experienced, for the most part, rejection from his own people. The early believers who took up the proclamation of the Gospel in his name found that their experience matched that of Jesus: where he experienced rejection from the leaders of the people and acceptance from those on the margins, they experienced similar rejection from Jewish communities, along with increasing acceptance in the non-Jewish world beyond.

To a very large degree the gospel seems designed to state this issue and address it theologically. The narrative does this, first of all, by bringing out that the pattern—rejection from the Jewish world, acceptance by the Gentile—was foreseen in the redemptive design of God laid out in the Scriptures. Of key significance here are Matthew's distinctive "fulfillment" quotations: places where the narrative pauses ten times to state explicitly how some event connected with Jesus "fulfills" what had been written "by the prophet," an indication of God's intent for the messianic age.³

The narrative further parallels the experience of Jesus and that of the later Church (10:17–42; 24:9–14) by the use of a recurrent phrase drawing attention to the rejection-acceptance pattern in the life of Jesus. Several times, we are told, in the face of hostility from Jewish sources he (or others "on his side": Joseph; the magi) "withdraw(s)" (Greek *anachōrein*) into some secure region, usually Galilee, where the saving events proceed along another track. In the face of Herod's hostility the magi "withdraw" to their own country (2:12, 13). To escape Herod's massacre Joseph "withdraws" with the child and his mother to Egypt (2:14), whence, on returning, to avoid Herod's son (Archelaus), he "withdraws" to Galilee (2:22). Jesus himself "withdraws" four times: to Galilee, following John's arrest (4:12); in the face of hostility from Pharisees (12:15); in response to the

² Francis J. Matera, "The Plot of Matthew's Gospel," *CBQ* 49 (1987) 233–53.

³ Matt 1:22–23; 2:15; 2:17–15; 2:23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:18–21; 13:35; 21:4–5; 27:9; very similar quotations occur also in 2:5; 3:3; 13:14–15. See the Excursus: "Matthew as Interpreter of Scripture," in M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 151–54.

report of John's death (14:13); to the district of Tyre and Sidon following criticism from Pharisees (15:21).⁴ This "withdrawal" pattern occurs too frequently in the gospel to be merely accidental.⁵ Through it the Evangelist indicates the way in which the experience of Jesus himself foreshadows the Gospel's going to the Gentiles in the face of rejection from its original hearers. As Jesus "withdraws" into "Galilee of the Gentiles," so the Gospel will "withdraw" to a more receptive Gentile world.

In respect to the playing out of this pattern the gospel narrative falls into three major blocks:

1. Prologue to Jesus' messianic ministry to Israel: 1:1-4:11
2. The Messianic Ministry of Jesus to Israel: 4:12-28:15
3. The Messianic Ministry extended to the World: 28:16-20.

The central block may appear to bulk disproportionately large, especially in comparison with the last. But this final section, while slight in content, is vast in ambit: a missionary program extending to the end of time.

I propose now a "walk" through the narrative, noting the more significant signposts and turning points in these stages.

1. Prologue to Jesus' Messianic Ministry: 1:1-4:11

The account of Jesus' origins and childhood (1:1-2:23) introduces us to the person of Jesus and begins to hint at the mysterious path his messianic career will take. An intense concentration of Matthew's distinctive "fulfillment" quotations in this section (1:22-23; 2:15; 2:17-18; 2:23) makes clear that everything, even the checks and threats, unfolds according to a divine redemptive plan traceable in the Scriptures. The circumstances of Jesus' birth (following a virginal conception) show him to be God's Son in a unique and transcendent degree ("God with us" [Emmanuel]), far outstripping merely conventional expectation concerning the Davidic Messiah. The visit of the wise men (magi) from the East (2:1-23) foreshadows the pattern to be played out in his life and that of the Church: hostility/rejection from the Jewish leadership, acceptance/worship from the nations of the world.

Starting with the ministry of John the Baptist a series of scenes further indicates the direction Jesus' adult ministry will take (3:1-4:11). Following

his submission to baptism from John, we readers are privileged witnesses to the descent of the Spirit and the heavenly acknowledgment of him as the beloved Son, in whom the Father is well-pleased (3:16-17). He is Messiah, but a Messiah filially related to God in a most intimate and unique way.

The temptation (4:1-11) reveals the fundamental source of hostility to Jesus' messianic mission: the devil (Satan), whose rule in the world Jesus has come to supplant with the rule ("kingdom") of God. It also makes clear once and for all Jesus' determination, cost what it may, to be the kind of Messiah his filial relationship with God requires.

2. The Messianic Ministry of Jesus to Israel: 4:12-28:15

2.1. Early Galilean Ministry: Jesus: Interpreter, Healer, and Reconciler on Behalf of Burdened Humanity: 4:12-10:42

With John's public ministry brought to a close (4:12a), Jesus takes over the summons to repentance in view of the onset of the rule of God (4:12-25). He does so by "withdrawing" to Galilee, which, the Evangelist points out, fulfills a hint in the prophet Isaiah that in the messianic age God would shed light upon the Gentiles who formerly sat in darkness (4:12-17).

In response to a vision of burdened humanity (4:23-25), Jesus ascends a mountain, calls his disciples to him, and then, with the unparalleled authority he enjoys as unique Son of God, promulgates an interpretation of the Torah definitive for the community of the kingdom (5:1-7:29).

Alongside the portrayal of Jesus as teacher and interpreter of the Torah a series of episodes, including nine miracle stories; depicts him as healer and reconciler with God (8:1-9:37). Jesus defends his association with "sinners" by pointing to the prophetic text, Hos 6:6, for an indication of what God wants for the last age: "mercy, not sacrifice" (9:13). His *exercise* of mercy complements his burden-lifting interpretation of Torah.

Having begun his Galilean ministry by calling disciples (4:18-22), Jesus concludes this phase of his activity by sending them out as apprentices of his mission. The instruction they receive (10:1-42) foreshadows the experience of the later Church and reinforces the pattern already established: difficulty with Israel prompting outreach to a wider world.

2.2. Later Galilean Ministry: Crisis: "Not the Messiah We Were Expecting!": 11:1-16:12

A question, conveyed by disciples, from the imprisoned John the Baptist (11:1) makes explicit the crisis Jesus' teaching, healing, and reconciling

⁴Two remaining occurrences of the Greek term *anachōrein*—9:24; 27:5—are not relevant. Mark uses the term once only: 3:7 (// Matt 12:13). Luke not at all (but cf. Acts 23:19; 26:31).

⁵Cf. Deirdre Good, "The Verb *anachōreō* in Matthew's Gospel," *NovT* 32 (1990) 1-12.

activity is bringing on. More and more he incurs hostility in the public arena, while in private he communicates to his disciples a deeper understanding of the intimacy with the Father that underlies the direction of his messianic work (11:1–12:50).

The Parables Discourse, 13:1–52, with its central quotation from Isa 6:9–10 (13:13–15), shows that this divided response to Jesus' ministry was already foreseen by God.

In the context of growing hostility (13:53–16:12), the fate of John (14:1–12) prefigures what lies in store for Jesus. At the same time his ministry to the crowds (14:13–21; 15:32–39) and interaction with his own disciples (14:22–33) foreshadows the life and ministry of the Church, soon to emerge as the community of the kingdom. The wit and faith of a desperate Gentile woman compel Jesus to show himself, even at this stage, to be the Messiah (“Son of David”) in whose “name the Gentiles will hope” (15:21–28).

2.3. *The New Direction: The Messiah's Journey to Jerusalem:* 16:13–20:34

The turning point of Jesus' messianic ministry to Israel comes in the scene at Caesarea Philippi (16:13–28). His wider ministry to the Galilean crowds now yields to the formation of the disciples, destined to become, on the rock-foundation of Peter, the “building” of the Church (16:13–20). “From this time on” (v. 21) he begins to make known to them the costly destiny awaiting him in Jerusalem (16:21–28). The beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased (17:1–8) will fulfill his messianic mission through an obedient entry into the pain and suffering of the world.

These two intertwined themes—what lies ahead of Jesus in Jerusalem and the formation of the Church (cf. 18:1–35)—dominate this central section. As the journey to Jerusalem gets under way a series of episodes and instructions makes clear the costly values that must prevail in the community of the kingdom (19:1–20:34).

2.4. *The Messiah's Ministry in Jerusalem:* 21:1–25:46

At the end of the journey Jesus enters Jerusalem as its king but in a way—humble and riding on a donkey—that redefines messiahship (21:1–11). His reclaiming of the Temple as a base for teaching and healing rather than sacrifice (cf. 21:23) provokes a series of controversies with leading groups, in which he consistently gains the upper hand (21:12–23:39).

Finally, a remark from the disciples about the Temple (24:1) sparks a long discourse on the future (24:1–25:46). In a sequence of apocalyptic warnings and parables this communicates a double message to the disciples and the later Church: (1) the calamities that will occur should not cause them to lose hope; all have been foreseen by Jesus, who will return in glory to vindicate his suffering, persecuted followers and gather them for the kingdom. (2) But since he will come as judge as well as deliverer they must employ the time in between not in “sleeping” or inactivity but in pursuit of the good works that will earn his commendation, especially deeds of mercy done to him in the persons of “the least of his brothers and sisters” (25:31–46).

2.5. *The Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Messiah:* 26:1–28:15

The rejection of the Messiah approaches its climax as, aided by Judas, the chief priests and elders set in motion a plot to bring about his death (26:1–59). These human machinations are, however, encompassed within a wider divine plan traced out in the Scriptures, which Jesus fulfills (26:31, 55–56). The alterations Jesus makes to the Passover ritual when instituting the Eucharist (26:26–29) bring out the true meaning: he goes to his death to save “many” from their sins (26:28; cf. 1:21).

As Jesus hangs upon the cross before dying at the ninth hour (27:26–50) he is mocked in terms of his claim to be God's Son. God, seemingly, has abandoned him and Elijah has not come to save him. But as soon as Jesus dies, nature itself erupts in a turmoil foreshadowing resurrection (27:51–52). This leads the (Gentile) Roman centurion and his cohort to become the first to confess the crucified Jesus as “truly the Son of God” (27:54).

Despite the best efforts of the authorities to seal the tomb (27:62–66), when Mary Magdalene and her companions arrive they find an explosion of life. First through an angel and then by an appearance of the risen Lord himself the women learn that Jesus has been raised and is going ahead of the disciples to Galilee, where they will see him (28:1–10).

3. The Messianic Ministry Extends to the World: 28:16–20

The account of Jesus' messianic mission to Israel reaches its goal in the final, open-ended scene in Galilee. Short in content but vast in scope,

it provides the rationale for what the Church is and does until the end of time. Clad with his authority and assured of his continuing presence (“God with us” [Emmanuel]), it extends his messianic ministry to the nations of the world.

Conclusion

Throughout his life and ministry the gospel has told of Jesus “withdrawing” in the face of hostility from the leaders of his people to find fresh opportunity in another location (Galilee or a Gentile region). His Passion sets in motion the climactic instance of this pattern—even if it involves nonviolent submission to arrest and execution rather than actual physical withdrawal. His resurrection and appearance in Galilee completes the pattern. Through the mission of the Church his messianic power “withdraws” to the wider Gentile world, making him the Messiah in whose “name the Gentiles will place their hope” (12:21).

Matthew’s gospel, then, is designed to help the Church understand how its identity, mission, and experience flow from those of Jesus. The divine redemptive plan that lay behind his life and transformed rejection into a wider bestowal of life reaches into the Church’s story too and will continue to do so until the end of time. Rejection, failure, sinfulness do not have the last word as, again and again, the Church is summoned to “go to Galilee” to find her risen Lord.