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DISCOVERING MATTHEW

Content, interpretation, reception

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SPCK

First published in Great Britain in 2014

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–281–06717–6
eBook ISBN 978–0–281–06718–3

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

With grateful thanks to the staff and students of
St Stephen's House, Oxford
1994–2013,
and in memory of Eric Franklin,
priest and scholar

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Acknowledgements

Many colleagues and friends have been instrumental in the writing of this book (most of them unwittingly). As always, Christopher Rowland has been a particular inspiration. Some years ago I was privileged to teach a lecture course on Matthew with Chris, who taught me so much about the marginal dimensions of this 'ecclesiastical' Gospel. I have also benefited from the companionship and wisdom of my New Testament colleagues in the Faculty of Theology and Religion in Oxford, especially those colleagues in OPTET (Oxford Partnership for Theological Education and Training) with whom I have had the privilege of teaching Matthew in more recent years: Justin Hardin, Helen-Ann Hartley, Michael Lakey and Peter Walker. Among friends and family who have encouraged me to bring this work to completion are William Whittaker, and my mother, Pam Boxall. I am especially grateful to Philip Law at SPCK for his generosity in entrusting me with this book, and his patience in waiting for the final manuscript.

Particular thanks are due to my colleagues and students over 19 years at St Stephen's House, Oxford. Most especially I am aware of my profound debt as a New Testament scholar to the late Eric Franklin, whose immense learning, persistent questioning and pastoral sense have continued to inspire me, along with countless generations of ordinands and undergraduates. Although Eric was no great fan of Matthew (he thought him rather too much of a 'Staggers man'), I trust that from the eternal perspective he will accept this dedication in the Lucan spirit in which it is intended.

Abbreviations

AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HTS	*HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSS	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NT	*Novum Testamentum*
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TS	*Theological Studies*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

1

Introduction

The First Gospel

The Gospel according to Matthew has had a profound impact on Christian history and on human culture more widely. In Christian worship, preference has been given to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's version ('Our Father, who art in heaven', Matt. 6.9–13; cf. Luke 11.2–4: 'Father . . .'). The Matthean wording of Jesus' Beatitudes ('Blessed are the poor in spirit', 5.3) is far more familiar than Luke's equivalent ('Blessed are you poor', Luke 6.20). Through centuries of use, phrases from Matthew's Gospel have crept into common parlance: 'salt of the earth' (5.13); 'the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing' (6.3); 'wolves in sheep's clothing' (7.15). Even if modern scholarship now questions the traditional belief that Matthew was the first of the four canonical Gospels to be written, few will dispute its primacy of honour and usage. In its reception, if not its origins, it is the First Gospel.

A preference for Matthew over the other Gospels is manifest already in Christian literature of the late first and early second centuries (Massaux 1990–3). Early in the second century, Ignatius of Antioch quotes from or alludes to Matthew's Gospel on a number of occasions. He refers to the star of Matthew 2.2 heralding Christ's birth (Ignatius, *Eph*. 19.2). His description of Jesus' baptism as 'fulfilling all righteousness' (*Smyrn*. 1.1) echoes Matthew 3.15. His letter to Polycarp of Smyrna recalls Jesus' words to the Twelve about being 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (*Polycarp* 2.2 = Matt. 10.16; cf. *Smyrn*. 6.1 = Matt. 19.12; *Trall*. 11.1 = Matt. 15.13; *Eph*. 14.2 = Matt. 12.33). The *Didache* or 'Teaching of the Twelve Apostles' (possibly late first century) shares with Matthew the concern for the 'two ways' (*Did*. 1.1 = Matt. 7.13–14), and the rite of baptism 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (*Did*. 7.1 = Matt. 28.19). It also cites Jesus' teaching about turning the right cheek (*Did*. 1.4–5 = Matt. 5.38–42) and avoiding the excesses of the 'hypocrites' when fasting (*Did*. 8.1 = Matt. 6.16–18). Indeed, the author of the *Didache* seems to know Matthew as the only Gospel: 'And do not pray as the hypocrites, but as the Lord commanded in his Gospel, pray thus: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name . . ."' (*Did*. 8.2 = Matt. 6.7–13. Lake 1925: 1/321).

The evidence of surviving manuscripts of the Gospels in Greek and other languages points to a general preference for Matthew's version in the tendency among scribes to harmonize disagreements between the Gospels. In later centuries, scenes unique to Matthew, such as the magi worshipping the infant Jesus (2.1–12), the giving of the keys of the kingdom to Simon Peter (16.18–19) or the story of the soldiers guarding Jesus' tomb (27.62–66; 28.11–15), would inspire artists in their visual interpretations of the biblical text. Famous examples include *The Adoration of the Magi* by Botticelli (*c.*1475–6; Uffizi, Florence) and Rembrandt (1632; Hermitage, St Petersburg), Pietro Perugino's fresco *The Delivery of the Keys* (*c.*1481–2; Sistine Chapel, Rome) and *The Resurrection* by Piero della Francesca (*c.*1463–5; Museo Civico, Sansepolcro). Artists have also been inspired by the figure of the evangelist himself and his part in the story he recounts. The Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome contains three canvases by Caravaggio, depicting *The Calling of St Matthew*, *The Inspiration of St Matthew* and *The Martyrdom of St Matthew*. Musically, the most famous interpretation of Matthew's account of Jesus' suffering and death is probably Johann Sebastian Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.

Reasons for Matthew's popularity, religiously and culturally, are at least threefold. First, the Gospel is superbly and memorably ordered, suggesting an author who is master of his material. This has led to specific proposals that the evangelist was a converted rabbi (von Dobschütz 1995: 31–2) or a scribe and 'provincial schoolmaster' (Goulder 1974: 5), as well as the more traditional identification of Matthew as a methodical tax-collector (9.9; 10.3). The Gospel's juxtaposition of narrative and discourse, story and sermon, often regarded as a key to its structure, has been frequently commented upon. Matthew uses frequent repetitions: for example, his rounding off each of the major teaching blocks with 'When Jesus had finished . . .' (7.28; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1; 26.1) or his liking for the colourful phrase 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (8.12; 13.42, 50; 22.13; 24.51; 25.30). He is fond of 'triads' or groups of three: for example, Jesus' miracles are organized in groups of three in Matthew 8—9, and there are two triads of parables in Matthew 13 (for further examples, see Allison 2005: 202–5). He also uses doublets: examples of the latter are Matthew's inclusion of *two* stories of the healing of *two* blind men (9.27–31; 20.29–34) and his story of *two* Gadarene demoniacs (8.28–34), his counterpart to Mark's one Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5.1–20). Other numbers important to him include five (e.g. the five discourses or teaching blocks), seven (12.45; 15.34, 36, 37; 16.10; 18.22; 22.25, 26, 28; also seven 'woes' against the scribes and Pharisees, 23.13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29) and 14 (e.g. 1.17, repeated three times).

Matthew also makes use of chiastic (ABBA) and concentric (ABCBA) patterns (e.g. Matt. 5—7; 9.1b–8; 13.13–18; 18.10–14). He uses brackets, known by the technical term *inclusio*, to mark out significant sections of his book. One example is the repetition of the same summary statement at 4.23–25 and 9.35–38 (referring to Jesus' teaching, preaching and healing ministry in Galilee), which frames the Sermon on the Mount and the ensuing narrative of Matthew 8—9. Indeed, the book as a whole is located between a great *inclusio* (the statement at 1.23 that Jesus is Emmanuel, 'God is with us', is picked up at the very end by the risen Christ's statement 'I am with you always, to the end of the age', 28.20). Finally, there is a certain poetic rhythm to many of Jesus' sayings (e.g. 7.7–8; 12.25–26; 23.8–10; 25.35–39; Goulder 1974: 70–94).

Second, the widespread usage of Matthew in liturgy and catechesis has ensured the importance of this Gospel within the churches. It is the preferred Gospel in church lectionaries, a fact frequently noted across the centuries. 'Lastly, we may note the great honour in which his Gospel is held in the Church', declares a medieval lesson for the Feast of St Matthew (21 September), 'for it is read more often than the other Gospels, just as the Psalms of David and the Epistles of Saint Paul are recited more frequently than the other sacred writings' (Jacobus de Voragine 1941: 565). Matthew's catechetical value is due particularly to the prominence it gives to the teaching of Jesus. Indeed, for some scholars the careful ordering of the Gospel is evidence that it was originally written for the purpose of catechesis (teaching the faith). Paul Minear, for example, has offered a sustained reading of Matthew's Gospel as written by a teacher for other early Christian teachers, with the five Matthean sermons or discourses understood as teaching 'manuals' (Minear 1984). Minear is in fact picking up on a very ancient hunch about the Gospel. The Prologue to the influential fifth-century *Opus imperfectum* or 'Incomplete Work' on Matthew describes how the Christians of first-century Palestine, threatened with dispersion due to persecution, urged Matthew to compose his account of Christ's words and deeds, 'so that even if by chance they had to be without any teachers of the faith, they would still not lack their teaching' (Kellerman 2010: 1/1). It has very much the feel of a teacher's guide, to those in need of sound catechesis.

Others have seen a liturgical *Sitz im Leben* (or 'setting in life') for this Gospel. G. D. Kilpatrick proposed that it developed as a kind of running commentary and homiletic expansion of Mark's Gospel, and Matthew's other sources, as these were read in the context of community worship (Kilpatrick 1946: 59–71). Michael Goulder has developed this liturgical

explanation into an intricate thesis according to which the evangelist reworks Mark in the light of the cycle of Old Testament readings in the Jewish festival lectionary (Goulder 1974). Whether or not this can account for the Gospel as a whole, Matthew's text certainly betrays some traits of early Christian worship. Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, with its communal 'Our Father' and its similarities to the formal prayer of the synagogue, the Eighteen Benedictions, may well reflect the liturgical practice of the Christian circles to which Matthew belonged. The triadic baptismal formula at 28.19 probably offers a window into how baptism was administered in those same circles (possibly in Syria, given a similar wording found in other Christian texts from that area: *Did*. 7.1; Ignatius, *Magn*. 13.2; *Odes of Solomon* 23.22).

A third reason for Matthew's popularity is the centuries-old belief that Matthew is the earliest of our four canonical Gospels, and one of only two (John being the other) attributed to an apostle and eyewitness of Jesus. The tradition linking this Gospel with someone called Matthew is reflected in the earliest Greek manuscripts, which include the title *Kata Matthaion* ('according to Matthew'). At an early stage, this Matthew was identified with Matthew the converted tax-collector and member of the Twelve (9.9–13; 10.3). 'I have learned by tradition', writes the third-century exegete Origen of Alexandria, 'that the first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ' (quoted in Eusebius, *H. E.* 6.25: Eusebius 1995: 273). This virtually unanimous tradition meant that Matthew's Gospel was viewed as closer to the source than Mark or Luke, both attributed to second-generation followers of apostles (Peter and Paul respectively). This seemed to be confirmed by its Jewish character, apparently unaffected by the reinterpretation of the Christian message as it moved out of its original Palestinian context into the wider Gentile world. Its greater length – covering almost all the content of Mark and much more besides – also made it a more complete and satisfying record than the other Synoptic Gospels.

The breakdown of a consensus

Since the nineteenth century, however, such a consensus has broken down, many scholars rejecting the age-old belief in authorship by an apostolic eyewitness. Rather, Matthew is now viewed as the *second* Gospel, composed by an anonymous author 50 to 60 years after Jesus' death, and dependent upon the work of another (the Gospel according to Mark). That is not to say, as we shall see, that questions of authorship, chronological sequence

and dating have been definitively settled. A minority of eminent scholars have continued to hold to a variation of apostolic authorship, Matthean priority or early dating (e.g. Farmer 1964 on the priority of Matthew; Gundry 1994 and France 2007 on authorship and dating). Nonetheless, the scholarly consensus on these questions is sharply at odds with the testimony of the early centuries.

This shift away from the 'priority of Matthew' has sometimes led modern commentators to a more negative assessment of its merits. In his comparative study of Matthew's and Mark's passion narratives, Leslie Houlden regards Matthew as the 'villain of the piece, inferior and even reprehensible at almost every turn' in his capacity to 'spoil the purity of Mark's teaching' (Houlden 1987: 66). For Houlden, Matthew's almost obsessive tidiness, his desire to tie up loose ends in Mark and his other sources, makes his a less sympathetic Gospel. Yet Houlden also recognizes that there is a realism about Matthew, particularly when it comes to Mark's urgency about the imminence of the End. For good or for ill, he has had to come to terms with the longer term, which results in a toning down of Mark's urgency.

Others regard the realism of this Gospel as its greatest asset. Matthew is in a true sense 'the Gospel of the Church', laying down patterns for structured Christian existence in this world. One of the greatest Matthean scholars of recent times, the Swiss exegete Ulrich Luz, speaks of the 'transparency' of Matthew's Gospel (e.g. Luz 1995a). By this he means the way Matthew's story of Jesus and his disciples offers a window on to the post-Easter situation of the Church. Luz, like many other recent scholars, means specifically the local first-century congregations for whom Matthew wrote (though he is also interested in the ongoing 'transparency' in the life of the Christian Church: e.g. Luz 2005b: 115–42). However, this way of reading the Gospels as 'allegories' of specific Christian communities is by no means undisputed (see Bauckham (ed.) 1998). For other reasons too, readers of Matthew have found his a more compelling account than Mark's. The Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, for instance, thought that Matthew captured the revolutionary spirit of Jesus' ministry more effectively than the rather crude Mark, the sentimental Luke or the overly mystical John. Thus it was the First Gospel that provided the inspiration for his classic 1964 film about Jesus, *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* or *The Gospel according to St Matthew* (Clarke 2003: 113). Pasolini's response is worth pondering (and his film worth viewing), given the common scholarly tendency to denigrate Matthew as an inferior and institutionalized version of Mark's Gospel.

A 'Janus-like book'

The ambivalence towards Matthew reflects tensions within the Gospel itself, leading John Riches to describe it as 'a Janus-like book' (Riches 2000: 228). Like the Roman god Janus, whose two faces enabled him to look both to the past and the future, Matthew's Gospel seems to look in two directions simultaneously. It contains a tension between a universal vision that embraces all the nations within the remit of the kingdom of heaven, and a 'particularist' concern for the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel', presenting Jesus' message as the only authentic Judaism. In many ways it seems to breathe the air of the Jewish world, negatively portraying 'Gentiles' or 'pagans' as outsiders. Although Gentile magi worship the infant Jesus, they come as outsider questers to the heart of the Jewish world, Jerusalem (2.1–4). Followers of Jesus are to behave differently from Gentiles (5.47). When they pray they are not to 'babble' as the Gentiles do (6.7). Christians expelled from the community are to be regarded as 'a Gentile and a tax-collector' (18.17).

Yet Matthew's Gospel can be equally vitriolic in its condemnation of certain Jews (especially the Pharisees, e.g. 9.11; 12.2, 14; 15.12; 19.3; 23.13; 27.62), and possibly even the whole Jewish people (27.25). It presents a Jesus who explicitly denies that he has come to abolish the Law and the prophets (5.17) and yet who appears to sit lightly to fundamental laws about Sabbath observance (12.1–8) or to challenge the Mosaic teaching about divorce (5.31–32; 19.3–9). The disciples are told at one point to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees (along with that of the Sadducees, 16.12); at another to do all that the scribes and Pharisees tell them, as authoritative teachers sitting on Moses' seat (23.2–3). The places where Moses' seat might be found are referred to derogatively as 'their synagogues' (4.23; 9.35; 10.17; 12.9; 13.54; cf. 23.34), where Jesus' followers can expect persecution (10.17, 23; cf. 5.10–12). This tension has led modern readers of Matthew to diametrically opposed assessments. On the one hand, George Nickelsburg can include Matthew's Gospel in his introduction to Jewish writings of the post-biblical period (Nickelsburg 1981). On the other, Dan Cohn-Sherbok draws a very different conclusion: 'In the Gospel of Matthew the belief that the Jews murdered the prophets evoked hatred and vituperation against official Judaism' (Cohn-Sherbok 1992: 19). It is a paradoxical text, often described as simultaneously 'Jewish' and 'anti-Jewish'. F. C. Grant arguably provides a more accurate definition: 'it is at once the most conservatively Jewish of the gospels and the most violently anti-Pharisaic' (Grant 1957: 137).

Precisely why the Pharisees come in for particular criticism will be explored later in this book.

This Janus-like tension extends to the portrayal of the Gospel's main protagonist, Jesus of Nazareth. Its portrayal of Jesus emphasizes his merciful character (on this see Byrne 2004). On several occasions we are told that Jesus looks on the crowds with compassion (9.36; 14.14; 15.32); he is moved with compassion by the two blind men at Jericho (20.34); he utters a blessing on the merciful (5.7), twice cites a passage from the prophet Hosea that prioritizes mercy over sacrifice (Hos. 6.6, quoted at 9.13 and 12.7), and castigates the scribes and Pharisees for their lack of mercy (23.23). On four separate occasions those in need of healing recognize Christ's merciful character by calling on him to 'have mercy' (9.27; 15.22; 17.15; 20.30–31). In Byrne's words:

> In Matthew I discovered a gospel that teaches us to look at humanity through the eyes of Jesus and see it as afflicted and weighed down with all manner of burdens. Far from adding to humanity's burdens, Jesus comes to bear and lift them. (Byrne 2004: vii)

Such a characterization is attractive to modern Western sensibilities. Yet Matthew's Jesus can also appear moralizing and judgemental, sharply dividing humanity into good and bad, wise and foolish, sheep and goats (e.g. 7.24–27; 13.24–30, 47–50; 25.1–13, 31–46). The apocalyptic (revelatory) and eschatological (end-time) interests of the Gospel present a hint of foreboding and cosmic collapse (e.g. 24—25; 27.51–54) that compound this sense of unease among certain contemporary audiences.

How can one reconcile these apparently contradictory elements? Possible answers – and what they reveal about the presuppositions of the interpreters who propose them – will be explored in more detail in the chapters that follow. One solution is to regard the evangelist Matthew as little more than a collator and transmitter of traditions, failing to integrate them into a coherent whole. Thus conservative Jewish-Christian sayings (e.g. 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles', 10.5) sit rather awkwardly alongside more radical traditions derived from Mark and non-Marcan traditions (e.g. the healing of the centurion's servant, in which a Gentile functions as a model of true faith for God's people Israel: 8.5–13). A more nuanced approach acknowledges the creative scribal activity reflected in Matthew's use of Old Testament quotations, but similarly shies away from treating the evangelist as a coherent author with a detectable 'theology'. This point of view is represented by two of the most prominent modern commentators on Matthew, W. D. Davies and Dale Allison: 'Matthew

was more tradent than theologian, more exegete and commentator than innovator' (Davies and Allison 2004: xxv). Others emphasize the evangelist's creativity, viewing him as a rewriter of inherited traditions (e.g. Bornkamm, Barth and Held 1982; most especially Goulder 1974). The 'Janus-like' character of this Gospel means that both positions can claim supporting evidence.

Reading Matthew's story

In order to lay the foundation for a more detailed exploration of Matthew in the remaining chapters, there now follows a brief outline of the Gospel's contents, to accompany a reading – or better reading aloud – of Matthew's Gospel from beginning to end. There is a growing scholarly acknowledgement that all the New Testament writings were intended to be heard, although scholars are divided as to whether a lengthy text like Matthew was designed to be read out in one sitting (in favour of the latter view, see e.g. Luz 2005b: 3–17). The following summary is intended simply as a preliminary guide for a first reading, which readers may wish to modify or reject as they reread Matthew's text (its complexity, use of keywords and repetitions suggests that the evangelist intended his audiences to experience repeated readings: Luz 2005b: 3–4). Precisely how the text is structured remains a matter of considerable debate. A fuller discussion of this and related issues will be offered in Chapter 3.

Origins of Jesus (Matt. 1.1—4.11)

Matthew's Gospel begins with a series of stories exploring Jesus' origins and setting the scene for his public ministry, together forming the Prologue to his book (Krentz 1964). The first two chapters are not found in Mark, but are paralleled – albeit with significant differences – in Luke 1—2. A brief title, identifying Jesus as Christ/Messiah (i.e. 'the anointed one'), 'son of David' and 'son of Abraham' (1.1), introduces a 'family tree' in which both Abraham and David feature. Those who know the Old Testament will detect echoes of Genesis (Gen. 2.4; 5.1) and the opening of 1 Chronicles (which contains a significant number of genealogies). Although readers may be tempted to skip over this long list of Christ's ancestors, close attention to the genealogy – notably its structure and the identity of the women mentioned – is worthwhile (see Chapter 6 below). The second half of Matthew's first chapter (1.18–25) contains a surprise: for the revelation that Jesus' mother Mary was a virgin means that Joseph's genealogy cannot straightforwardly belong to Jesus.

Matthew 2 describes events following Jesus' birth, and is rich in allusions to the Jewish Scriptures (as well as explicit Old Testament quotations). The journey taken by the child and his parents – from Bethlehem (the town of Israel's King David and appropriate birthplace of 'the son of David') to Egypt and back again to 'the land of Israel' – recalls earlier journeys of Jacob/Israel (Gen. 46—47) and Moses (Exod. 2—4; 12—14). Joseph's dreams evoke those of the Old Testament patriarch of the same name (e.g. Gen. 37.5–11), while the star recalls the messianic prophecy uttered by the pagan prophet Balaam (Num. 24.17). Finally, 'the prophets' are invoked in order to explain why the Messiah has come to be associated with the backwater town of Nazareth (2.23). The primary concern seems to be to clarify who Jesus is and what he has come for.

A further sequence of stories in Matt. 3.1—4.11 (paralleled to varying degrees in Mark and Luke) prepares the audience for the public ministry of Jesus: the appearance and preaching of John the Baptist as the 'voice' who prepares the Lord's way; Jesus' baptism by John in the river Jordan, in which he is revealed as God's Son; his 40-day temptation or 'testing' in the Judean wilderness, which recalls both Israel's 40-year wilderness wanderings (Num. 32.13) and the 40-day fast of both Moses (Exod. 34.28) and Elijah (1 Kings 19.8).

Jesus' ministry in 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Matt. 4.12—18.35)

Much of the first half of Matthew's Gospel describes Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching and healing in the northern region of Galilee, which Matthew, following a prophecy from Isaiah, calls 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (4.15; cf. Isa. 9.1). It begins with the 'handing over' of John the Baptist (4.12; cf. 14.1–12), anticipating Jesus' own 'handing over' to crucifixion at the end of the Gospel. A comparison with Mark in this first part of the Gospel – at least until the end of Matthew 13 – reveals a significant divergence in the order of events, Matthew exhibiting a tendency to order stories thematically and to punctuate his narrative with carefully structured speeches or discourses containing Jesus' teaching. Thus after describing the call of the first four disciples (4.18–22), the narrative slows for the magisterial Sermon on the Mount (5.1—7.29). This, the first of five discourses ending with a similar concluding formula (7.28–29; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1; 26.1), sets out Jesus' radical teaching on discipleship. It also emphasizes the motif of continuity that is a feature of Matthew's Gospel: Jesus is adamant that he came not to 'abolish' the Law or the prophets but to 'fulfil' them (5.17–20).

The theme of healing and other deeds of power shapes the narrative as Jesus descends from the mountain at 8.1. Jesus, particularly in his role as