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Matthew as the Foundation for the New Testament Canon

David P. Scaer

I. Bias and the Interpretation of the Scriptures

By regarding the Scriptures as ordinary and not divinely inspired documents, Baruch Spinoza (1631–1677) relieved biblical studies from the burden of proving the veracity of church doctrine and so became a father of historical criticism. By the dawn of the twentieth century, historical critics had come to such diverse and contradictory conclusions about who Jesus was that Albert Schweitzer concluded that historical-critical scholars would never find the real Jesus, though he reserved a few thoughts about Jesus for himself.¹ In spite of their claims to being *wissenschaftlich*, biblical scholars today are no more immune to cultural bias than anyone else, and their claim to use scientific methods with assured results can be a pretense for advancing cultural biases, often with a political agenda. At the root of any historical-critical method is a proposition or philosophical axiom that is assumed to be true but cannot be proven—and of course this, too, is an axiom. The same might be said of any theology.

Markan Priority as Protestant Bias

For the last century, many seminary and college students have been taught the two-source hypothesis, which says that Mark was the first Gospel and that Matthew and Luke used Mark along with the putative Q document, so-named from the first letter of the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source.” No theory has ever been so perfect as to handle every discrepancy in its hypothesis, so scholars proposed Q1, Q2, and Q3, as well as prior forms of Mark. Since it is proposed that Q can be found in Mark, it might be impossible to separate the chaff from the wheat. Markan priority is so set in stone that scholars rarely bother to demonstrate it, and challenging it is comparable to heresy.

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of the Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. F.C. Burkitt (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962).

This, however, is exactly what the late David Laird Dungan did in his book *A History of the Synoptic Problem*. He argues that biblical studies have never been immune to cultural intrusion. He writes, "My experience has taught me that biblical scholars think their work is free of cultural, political, and economic ends. It is one of the main concerns of this entire book . . . to show this has never been true."² His observation should have upset the apple cart of New Testament studies, but, like J. A. T. Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*, it did not. By being ignored, it was consigned to a bloodless assassination. Had either of these scholars been given their day in court, mountains of books would have walked themselves into the fires of the Inquisition.

Culture on the March

From the post-apostolic period up until the last part of the nineteenth century, Matthew was universally held as the first Gospel. Even Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Rationalists were on board with this view, but German cultural winds changed direction in the nineteenth century. Anti-Semitism was popular among the German intelligentsia, and a desire for a unified nation under Prussia was fertile soil for a German Christianity, especially when combined with a dislike for the Jews, a view already proposed by David Friedrich Strauss in his radical book, *Das Leben Jesu*.³ Grounds for this bias had been laid by the German theologian of choice, Schleiermacher, who dismissed the Old Testament as lacking in the God-consciousness that is found in the more highly developed New Testament. For him, the Old Testament was too Jewish, and "whatever is most definitely Jewish has the least value."⁴ Jesus' teachings could, therefore, have been explained by his God-consciousness and not by his Jewish descent.

At the end of the century, Adolf von Harnack, who took Schleiermacher's place of honor, commended Luther's courage in rejecting Roman Catholicism, but he faulted him for not doing the same to the Old Testament. Marcion had come back to life and was now speaking German! The march toward a better Christianity free of everything Jewish fit the Hegelian culture in which Darwin saw the perfection of an amoeba evolving into human life, and Marx laid down the terms for an ideal society. This provided the cultural climate for Heinrich Julius Holtzmann to ad-

² David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 339.

³ Its four editions between 1835 and 1840 had great influence. David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet*, 4 eds. (Tübingen: C.F. Osiander, 1835–1840).

⁴ Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem*, 339.

vance his theory that the shorter Mark was the first Gospel. When comparing pericopes, Mark is arguably more theological than Matthew and surpasses Luke in minute details. These arguments suggest that it was last of the synoptic Gospels and not the first, yet for scholars following Holtzmann, Mark's length trumps its other characteristics.

The Birth of Markan Priority in the German Cultural Milieu

Holtzmann's goal of rescuing Jesus as a historical figure from Strauss's hypothesis resulted in his conclusion that Jesus' miracles were myths. His proposal that Mark was the first Gospel provided support for Prussia's aims to create a Protestant German empire.⁵ By taking the honor of the first Gospel away from Matthew, Holtzmann weakened the value that Matthew 16:18-19 put forth for papal supremacy. Suspect now were the words, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven"—words etched in Latin into the marble dome over the altar in St. Peter's Basilica. If Matthew could no longer be considered the earliest Christian Gospel, the claims of Rome to supremacy would be weakened, and by extension the territorial designs of the Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire would be undermined. By 1860, German universities were caught up in promoting nationalism. Holtzmann's liberal political views were reason enough to deny him a university position, but by agreeing to curtail his activities, the Kaiser allowed his appointment to the University of Strasbourg.

Groundwork for pushing Matthew to the back of the line had been set in motion before Holtzmann. As mentioned, Schleiermacher held that the Jewishness of the Old Testament made it a religiously inferior book. He accepted the widely held view that Matthew was first, but his heart belonged to John. Had he recognized the Jewishness of Matthew, an argument that suggests that it was the first Gospel, he may have disposed of it altogether or at least seen it as a sub-Christian book. Today Markan priority is common coin,⁶ even for conservative scholars who as members of

⁵ For a discussion on how the German imperial government worked to conflate Protestantism with German national identity, see Stan M. Landry, *Ecumenism, Memory, & German Nationalism, 1817-1917* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014). For a discussion of the search for the history of Jesus, see Carl E. Braaten, "Martin Kahler (1835-1912)," *Lutheran Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2014): 401-422.

⁶ For example, see Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 86.

the Evangelical Theological Society annually pledge themselves to biblical inspiration and inerrancy.⁷ Too much scholarship rests on Markan priority to allow its recension. Holtzmann's proposal that Mark was the first Gospel found wings in the culture of his times and was kept aloft among shifting scholarly currents. Should Dungan's proposal that culture influences biblical studies seem out of line, consider that the agenda of the Society of Biblical Literature is more and more devoted to environmental, feminist, and gay causes,⁸ and that courses on these topics are commonly found in seminary curricula. Culture is again calling the tune. Once on the faculty of Strasbourg, Holtzmann worked for a unified Protestant Prussian empire, helped found the Protestant Union that opposed Roman Catholic influences, and even ran for political office. American college and university faculties are no less politically biased than German ones in the nineteenth century.

Did the Prussians Put Their Money on the Wrong Horse?

Foremost in the Prussian political designs was challenging the expansion of the Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire into the German states. Their goal for a Protestant empire could be advanced by showing that Matthew, on which the Catholic claim to the primacy of Peter was based, did not represent the earliest Christianity. Canonicity was an afterthought. But was this argument that Matthew is more favorable to Peter than Mark foolproof? In all of the Gospels, Peter is the most prominent figure in comparison to the other apostles, so counting the number of times he is mentioned is inconclusive. If one considers the percentage of occurrences, Peter dominates the shorter Mark. What is significant is Mark's resurrection account wherein Peter is given a special place in the promulgation of the gospel. He is singled out from the other disciples: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee" (Mark 16:7). Had the German Protestants read Mark more carefully, they might have seen that Mark did not really serve their political designs.⁹

⁷ Michael F. Bird presents the wide field of options on the origins of the Gospels, but in the end he sees Mark as a source for Matthew and Luke. Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 240-243.

⁸ The 2014 Annual Meeting Program lists the following units: Ecological Hermeneutical Section and LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics Section. Among the listed affiliates are the *Journal of Feminist Religious Studies* and four seminars on the Qu'ran.

⁹ Any hint that Peter does not hold first place is removed by John (21:1-23) and Paul (1 Cor 15:5).

Historical Criticism and the Need for "Something"

In spite of the damage inflicted by methods marching under the banner of historical criticism, the approach without the anti-supernatural bias and cultural infection has a valid purpose in reaching into the past. How things really happened, *wie es eigentlich geschehen ist*, may be beyond our grasp, but we do have a stake in showing that certain things really did happen. Fundamental to a religion of the incarnation is that there was a "something" that happened, a *Geschehen*, and that the "something" was Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰ Without this prior historical conviction, we cannot hear his claims to divinity. Remove the tangible "something," and Christianity crumbles into another religion or philosophy. Since historical critics have not agreed among themselves on how things really happened, if indeed they happened at all, they have escaped to source criticism, redaction criticism, narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, and canon criticism. These criticisms are not entirely without value, but they avoid coming to terms with the historical character of the Gospels and the person of Jesus. These methods fit the definition of critical, but they are not historical.¹¹

The goal of historical criticism to determine *wie es eigentlich geschehen ist* might have been the reason for the creation of the Gospel harmonies by Theophilus of Antioch in the second century, then Tatian, and then by John Calvin and Martin Chemnitz in the sixteenth century. All Gospel harmonies are suspect. Consider the claims of one compiler of a harmony, that his "arrangement is designed to make more readily available the material found in the Gospels, and so to make it more interesting and reward the time spent in Bible study."¹² This says it all. Compilers of Gospel harmonies share common ground with historical critics who tried to determine *wie es eigentlich geschehen ist* and in effect created a "fifth Gospel." Creators of Gospel harmonies fail to recognize that each Gospel is not only a historical narrative but is each evangelist's unique theological creation. Not to be left unmentioned is that these harmonies are done in the vernacular and not the Greek, as is the basis for many of the arguments offered

¹⁰ So also Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) says, "The first point is that the historical-critical method—specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith—is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the very essence of biblical event to be about real historical events." Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), xv.

¹¹ For a helpful summary of these criticisms see James D.G. Dunn, *The Oral Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 350–359.

¹² Quoted from Charles E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 109.

for Markan priority. Had Gospels harmonies and the arguments for Markan priority been advanced solely on the basis of the Greek, their practitioners might have discovered that their conclusions were less certain.¹³

Should Mark be found to have been the last of the Synoptic Gospels, he may actually have created the first Gospel harmony—not in the sense of blending differing accounts into one, but by excluding in his Gospel items not found in both Matthew and Luke and by editing the remaining material. Even if he depended on Matthew and Luke, his Gospel was his own literary and theological creation. It was not a Gospel harmony in the modern sense.

II. Was There a First Gospel?

If we agree with Bo Reicke that the Synoptic evangelists accessed oral tradition without any taking note of a previously written Gospel, we do not have to ask who wrote the first Gospel. Oral tradition may not have been as scattered as Bultmann proposes, but claiming that three writers at the same time came up with the same idea of writing a Gospel with the same outline is so coincidental as to be unconvincing. A doctrine of inspiration in which the Spirit alone supplies the words—thus eliminating the historical component—makes the questions of who wrote the Gospels and what their order of composition was extraneous, or at least secondary. Seeing the character of the Gospels determined alone by the Spirit circumvents the *filioque* that the Spirit proceeds from the Son and is given to the church by Jesus through the apostles. The Spirit brings Jesus' words to memory.

Gospels: Personal Testimonies or Corporate Authority?

Each Gospel, including John, resembles the others, and no Gospel could be mistaken for an Epistle. Hebrews is a theological Gospel posing as an Epistle. Revelation takes all the horror stories of the judgment found in Matthew and puts them together into one book. If we are agreed that there was a first Gospel, the next question is whether its writer was aware that he was breaking new ground, writing something no one had written before. This question must now be addressed to each evangelist. Saying that all the books in the world could not contain everything Jesus did, the author of the Fourth Gospel suggests that some existing books may have begun the task (John 21:24–25). This may be a reaction to Matthew's claim

¹³ Mark Goodacre, "A Flaw in McIver and Carroll's Experiments to Determine Written Sources in the Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133 (2014): 793–800.

that the disciples have at their disposal all the things Jesus had taught, and so John wrote a Gospel because there was more to say. If John is the beloved disciple (John 13:23), he claims for himself access to Jesus that even Peter did not have. Hints that he and not Peter was the last surviving witness to what Jesus did and said serve to confirm the value of his Gospel (John 21:21–24). John offers something more than the tradition derived from Peter that provided the substance of the Synoptic Gospels. Like John, Luke is also a solo performance, but unlike John, Luke was not an eyewitness and had to depend on others. Neither John nor Luke give any hint that he speaks with community authority. Mark gives no clear-cut reason for why he composed a document about Jesus, unless one counts his document's first word "Gospel." Defining the word "Gospel" by itself might be circular reasoning, but Mark may have been assuming that his recipients had known Matthew or Luke and were thus acquainted with the literary form that would come to be known as "Gospel." Hence, what Mark had written was not entirely new to those who heard it. Without his hearers having prior knowledge of Jesus' conception, birth, and resurrection from oral tradition or written documents, Mark is inadequate.

Matthew: What Did He Think He Was Doing?

From the earliest post-apostolic sources onward, Matthew was revered as the first evangelist, a view held by most until the middle of the nineteenth century. Now, the canonical task is coming to terms with his self-understanding of what he thought he was doing. Culture played a role in how the New Testament was written, and Matthew's world was little different from what Jesus knew, except that with the inevitability of Jerusalem's destruction, the eschatological climate had become more intense. As Hellenized as Judea had become under the Herods and Pilate, the Pharisees had what they thought was their God-given duty to ensure that the piety of the people was permeated with devotion to Torah. However, Jesus said that he was not only the Old Testament's content but also its author, so he presented himself as the final arbiter of its meaning. He was the incarnate Torah—the Word of God in the flesh. This set up the arena for conflict. All four Gospels show marks of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, but Matthew best presents Jesus within that culture.

After Mark tips his hat to the Old Testament by conflating Malachi and Isaiah in order to introduce John the Baptist, of whom he makes short shrift (Mark 1:2–3), he presents his case that Jesus is the Christ by showing that Isaiah (Isa 6:9–10) had spoken of the unbelief that Jesus confronted (Mark 3:12). Luke's Gospel is thoroughly embedded with Old Testament language and references, perhaps more so than the other three Gospels.

Consider how he begins: Elizabeth's inability to conceive has an uncanny resemblance to Sarah. That said, Luke does not match Matthew as a biblical expositor. Luke's two accounts of how the resurrected Jesus interprets all the Scriptures, first on the way to Emmaus (24:26) and then in Jerusalem (24:44-45), leave the hearers in the dark, not knowing what Scriptures these might have been or what he said about them. Like the Synoptic evangelists, John uses Isaiah 40:3 to introduce the Baptist, but further Old Testament references are meager and, in comparison to Matthew, come up short in citation and interpretation. Even if one does not grasp Matthew's interpretation of the Old Testament, he is its interpreter par excellence.

For example, Matthew concludes from Isaiah 7:14 that Jesus is God and finds in the prophecy of Micah 5:2 the reason for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (Matt 2:6). Jesus' return from exile in Egypt was already set in motion by the Exodus (Hos 11:1; Matt 2:13), and the slaughter of the infants had its roots in Judah's being taken into captivity in Babylonia (Jer 31:15; Matt 2:18). Jesus' ministry in Galilee is the restitution of the Northern Kingdom (Isa 9:2; Matt 4:15-16). Matthew's obsession with the Old Testament strikes the reader through his introduction that is not so much a genealogy, as Luke might have thought, but an abridged recapitulation of Israel's history in which the reader's attention is called to David, God's faithful king, who now appears as Jesus, as well as to the Babylonian captivity, affirming that judgment will come on those who do not take Jesus' words seriously.

Matthew as the Most Catholic of the Gospels

Each evangelist intended his Gospel for the entire church. They were not private documents, but Mark, Luke, and John present their Gospels as the products of one author with little suggestion that they emerged from or were authorized by a community of believers. But Matthew does. At his Gospel's conclusion, the eleven disciples who have been taught by Jesus are authorized by him to share his teachings (Matt 28:16-20). Jesus' teaching is handed over to the community of the apostles without one apostle given precedence over the others. Compare this to John's Gospel, where Peter, John, and Thomas are singled out, or Luke's, where the two Emmaus disciples—and not the Eleven—are the first to see the risen Jesus and be instructed in how the Scriptures are fulfilled in him. In Mark's Gospel, as mentioned earlier, Peter is singled out: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you" (Mark 16:7).

Matthew's concept of shared apostolic authority pervades the entire last chapter, beginning with the angel and then the resurrected Jesus both telling the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. By calling his brothers, Jesus commits to them his own task of preaching. Shared apostolic authority even emerges negatively in the account of the high priests thinking that all the disciples were capable of stealing the body of the Jesus and concocting an account of his resurrection that could serve as a pseudo-Gospel (Matt 28:13). The eleven disciples follow the instructions given to the women first by the angel and then by Jesus that the eleven are to go to Galilee (Matt 28:12), where they, like Jesus, would begin their ministry (Matt 4:12). Recognizing the resurrected Jesus and then worshiping him indicates that the Galilee event was a formal commissioning more sacred than any ordination.

Within the context of Matthew's Gospel, the commission to preach the words they had heard from Jesus and for which they would experience martyrdom also required that these words be written down. "Therefore I send [ἀποστέλλω] you prophets and wise men and scribes [γραμματεῖς], some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town" (Matt 23:34). Any document, even one representing a community, has only one writer to put ink to paper. Unlike Luke and John who put themselves front and center as Gospel writers, Matthew hid himself in his account as the anonymous scribe who has become a disciple of Jesus. "Therefore every scribe who has been made a disciple [πᾶς γραμματεὺς μαθητευθεὶς] for the kingdom of heavens is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt 13:52).¹⁴ In composing his account of Jesus, Matthew married the Old Testament with the new things that Jesus did. In Jesus, God and Moses have become one, and Matthew assumed the task of putting into writing how the old revelation came to its final and intended form in Jesus, who is not only its author but also its content. Moses appears in each Gospel as the most significant person through whom God has given revelation of himself, but in Matthew, Jesus appears as the greater Moses by being persecuted at birth by an evil ruler. The Sermon on the Mount resembles God's covenant with Israel made at Sinai through Moses, and his final commission to the Eleven has strong echoes of Moses sending the tribes into the promised land (Deut 33:2–29).

¹⁴ The word *μαθητευθεὶς* ("being trained for the kingdom of heavens") has one of the twelve disciples as its best possible referent, and the "new and old" that comes from the treasure refers to what God had done in the past with Israel and what he is doing now in Jesus.

Should Matthew have been the first evangelist, as we believe he was, he had to find a place for the Old Testament, but he also had to show that it had been absorbed into the person of Jesus who, as the author, content, and fulfillment of the Torah, had the last word on what it meant. No longer could Torah stand as the autonomous or final revelation of God. By taking the Old Testament into him, Jesus' teaching and hence Matthew's Gospel would take precedence over the law and the prophets. Jesus' commission to the disciples to teach others the things that he had taught them makes no mention of the prophets (Matt 28:19), whose words must now be understood in a totally christological sense. Jesus' words would be determinative for the faith of the community, and accepting or rejecting them would determine the fate or judgment of those who heard them. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, a judgment reminiscent of the Noahic flood comes on those who disregard what he says (Matt 7:21-27). Furthermore, those who reject those entrusted with the message of Jesus, as was Matthew, face the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt 10:14-15). In the final discourse (Matt 25:31-46), Jesus metes out both rewards and punishments.

Matthew as the Conclusion of the Old Testament

Since the individual books of the Old Testament as a collection of the canon have no satisfactory conclusion, they leave their readers unsatisfied. It does not even reach a plateau of realized eschatology. Nothing is realized at the end in Malachi, and the reader is left with a promise and nothing more (Mal 4:5-6). This is just as true of Deuteronomy as it is of Joshua or any Old Testament book. In itself the Old Testament is a perpetual Advent with no Christmas. Matthew took on the task of providing Jesus, rectifying the situation by providing its conclusion. His Gospel is the new Torah into which the old Torah is totally absorbed and to which the community of believers will look to find Jesus. Of all the evangelists, Matthew's task was the most daunting. He was caught between a Scylla and a Charybdis. On the one hand, he could have merely held up Jesus as equal to the other prophets (the Ebionite view), or, on the other hand, he could have disconnected Jesus from the God who chose Israel as his people (Marcion's view). The Ebionite view would have meant that Matthew was writing a book that was not really that different than any other Old Testament book. The Marcionite option would have left the Old Testament as a useless set of Jewish documents. Matthew's great, singular, and unmatched accomplishment is that he drew the entire Old Testament into his Gospel so that on one hand it is forever affirmed as the word of God, but its character

is now forever fundamentally changed. Present in the words of Matthew's Gospel is Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁵ This is a flesh and blood appearance.

III. Conclusion

Going behind a writer's words to determine his thoughts is precarious, but this is what the study of literature is all about—and the Bible is certainly literature. Asking about an author's intentions does have value, and good reasons exist to propose that Matthew thought he was writing the longed-for and much-needed conclusion to the Old Testament. Matthew leaves no hint that other books about Jesus had been written, and his conclusion assumes that no other books would be written—but of course he was proved to have been mistaken. Some people are consciously aware that they are starting something completely new, like the signers of the Declaration of Independence, for example. Arguably Moses was (Exodus 3–4), but what about the awareness of those who are bringing things to an end? Warnings about adding or subtracting from the Book of Revelation indicate that revelation had come to an end (Rev 22:19–20). In providing a more than adequate record of what Jesus had taught, Matthew may have had a similar thought in mind. His Gospel brought the Old Testament to a conclusion. The “all things whatsoever” that the disciples are to teach is hardly hyperbole (Matt 28:20). Matthew's list of Jesus' ancestors is more a recapitulation of God's dealing with Israel than simply a genealogy. In offering his own genealogy, Luke may have failed to recognize what Matthew was doing. Matthew intended to write the final chapter to the Old Testament that was in dire need of a conclusion.

Now comes the question that if Matthew had thought that his Gospel was the conclusion to the Old Testament, that is, everything that the people had to know about Jesus, how, when, and why did the rest of the New Testament come into existence? In writing his Gospel, Luke opened the door to a New Testament canon, and his record of the Lord's Supper has given us the phrase “New Testament” (Luke 22:20) that came to be applied to all the apostolic writings.

One writer is critical of another's writing, one pastor is critical of another's preaching, and so it was with the evangelists. Each wanted to say something in another way. Matthew's catechetical style did not strictly

¹⁵ In his account of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth claiming that he has fulfilled Isaiah, which is then repeated twice in the Easter narrative, Luke affirms this understanding that the entire Old Testament is absorbed into Jesus (Luke 4:16–21). Matthew does the actual exegetical work of showing how this fulfillment is accomplished.

comport with *wie es eigentlich geschehen ist*, or so Luke thought, and he was right. The cards had to be reshuffled. Unless this was done, Theophilus would not have had the historical certainty on which faith is based. With Peter's firsthand knowledge and his own literary and theological acumen, Mark expanded on Matthew and Luke, and so he reshuffled the cards again. That is what preaching is all about—reshuffling the cards.