



The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew 26-28: The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

The final three chapters of Matthew's gospel follow Mark's lead in telling of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. At each stage Matthew adds to Mark's story material that addresses concerns of his community. The overall story will be familiar to most readers. We shall focus on the features that are distinctive of Matthew's version, while keeping the historical situation of Jesus' condemnation in view.

Last Supper, Gethsemane, Arrest and Trial (26:1–75)

The story of Jesus' last day begins with the plot of the priestly leadership to do away with Jesus (26:1–5). As in Mark 14:1-2 they are portrayed as acting with caution, fearing that an execution on the feast of Passover would upset the people (v 5). Like other early Christians, Matthew held the priestly leadership responsible for Jesus' death and makes a special effort to show that Pilate was a reluctant participant. Matthew's apologetic concerns probably color this aspect of the narrative. While there was close collaboration between the Jewish priestly elite and the officials of the empire like Pilate, the punishment meted out to Jesus was a distinctly Roman one. His activity, particularly in the Temple when he arrived in Jerusalem, however he understood it, was no doubt perceived as a threat to the political order and it was for such seditious activity that he was executed.

Mark (14:3–9) and John (12:1–8) as well as Matthew (26:6–13) report a dramatic story of the anointing of Jesus by a repentant sinful woman, which Jesus interprets as a preparation for his burial (v. 12). The story came to serve many purposes. John takes it as an opportunity to cast Judas in a negative light. Matthew does not have that focus, but simply notes that the disciples generally complained about the woman's extravagance. The woman in the Markan and Matthean story is anonymous. John identifies her as Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha. Later tradition will conflate this Mary with Mary Magdalene, who was clearly one of the supporters of Jesus' ministry. That conflation was no doubt aided by the version of the story told by Luke in another context (Luke 7:36–50). The woman in that story is also anonymous, but it is closely followed by a reference to Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:2, which served as the basis for the identification. Mary Magdalene will appear in a cameo role at the resurrection in this gospel (Matt 28:1).

Matthew reports the betrayal of Judas (26:14–16) adding to Mark the reference to the thirty pieces of silver (v 15), an allusion to Zechariah 11:12. As usual, Matthew tries to see the events of Jesus' life as foreshadowed or predicted in Biblical prophecy.

Matthew condenses the next part of the story from what he found in Mark 14:12–26, focusing on the key elements. Jesus gives instructions for the celebration of the Passover meal (16:17–18), suggesting that he has supporters in the city. At dinner Jesus predicts his betrayal (26:21–25) before going on to symbolize his coming death through broken bread and poured wine (26:26–30). There is no command here to continue to do these actions in memory of Jesus, as in Luke 22:19 and 1 Cor 11:25. It is unclear whether the Matthean community celebrated a ritual meal, a “Lord’s Supper” or “Eucharist”; Christian ritual practices remained fluid in the first century of the movement.

After his last supper, Jesus moves to Gethsemane, where he fervently prays for deliverance (Matt 26:36–46, cf. Mark 14:32–42), a story closely following Mark’s. The story of the arrest (26:47–56) also echoes Mark (14:43–50), with the omission of the curious episode of the youth who runs away naked (Mark 14:51–52), which Matthew may have found as mysterious as many modern readers.

The chapter ends with the interwoven stories of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin (26:59–68) and Peter’s betrayal (26:57–58, 69–75), all largely following the Markan account. The climax of the trial scene is the declaration by Jesus that those who accuse him will soon see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven (Matt 26:64), an allusion to Daniel 7:13, which echoes Matt 24:30. For Matthew, as for Mark, the title Son of Man, which was probably used by Jesus in various ways, clearly alludes to the image of the human being installed in royal array and is understood as a prophecy of the role of Jesus as coming judge, an image fully developed at Matt 25:31–46.

As in all the Synoptic accounts of the passion, the denial by Peter “before the cock crowed” (Matt 26:74) contrasts this apostle both with his exalted status among the twelve (Matt 16:13–20) and with the other intimate of Jesus, Judas, whose act of betrayal is not followed by tearful repentance as Peter’s is in v 75.

Pilate’s Judgment, the Crucifixion Death and Burial of Jesus (27:1–66)

For the heart of the passion narrative, the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion, Matthew follows Mark, with some characteristic modifications focusing on the issue of divine justice and judgment manifest in human affairs. The first scene, of Pilate interrogating Jesus (Matt 27:1–2, 11–26), is interrupted by the story of the suicide of Judas (27:3–10). Another story by Luke (Acts 1:18–19) also tells of the end of Judas, but describes his death not as a suicide, but as an accident in which his blood is spilled on the field. For Matthew, Judas, finally remorseful for betraying innocent blood, hangs himself (v 5). With the thirty pieces of silver (cf. 26:15), the priests buy a field to bury foreigners. Both stories show the imagination of the early community at work, providing an etymology for the name of a particular burial place outside of

Jerusalem. Both stories also show a sinner getting his just desserts, a theme very much at home in Matthew.

The rest of the story of Pilate's interrogation of Jesus generally resembles Mark's account (Mark 15:1–15). When asked about his claims, Jesus acknowledges what Pilate says, but then stands silent (v 11-12) and he eventually accedes to the will of the Jerusalem leaders. Matthew strengthens the picture of Pilate as a reluctant participant in the condemnation of Jesus with two details. Pilate receives a warning from his wife (v 19) who had a dream urging her, and by implication, her husband, not to have anything to do with an innocent man. This is not the first time that dreams convey an important message in Matthew (cf. 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19). Perhaps acting on his wife's advice, Pilate takes another famous action, only found in Matthew, and washes his hands, declaring himself innocent of the blood of an innocent man (v 24).

Matthew's portrait of Pilate, which contradicts the picture of Pilate's administrative style found in the Jewish historian Josephus, strongly suggests that Jesus was not executed by Roman authorities as a threat to the political order. Matthew places the responsibility for Jesus' death squarely on the shoulders of the priestly leadership in Jerusalem and the people who supported them. He makes one more serious change to his Markan source that drives the point home. After Pilate washes his hands of the blood of Jesus, "the people as a whole" cry out, "his blood be on us and our children" (v 25). This verse has played a tragic role in the history of relations between Jews and Christians and the history of anti-Semitic rhetoric that has used the verse must be rejected by any thoughtful Christian today. Matthew's goal in creating this dramatic account was probably more limited. Writing after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, Matthew sought an explanation of why God abandoned the place chosen for the Divine Name to dwell. His solution echoed that of the Deuteronomic historians who had to explain the destruction of the first Temple in 586 B.C.E. Their logic was that if Israel suffered; it must have sinned. Matthew applies that logic to his situation, finding Israel's sin in the rejection of the one whom he believed to be the prophesied Messiah.

The mocking, torture, and crucifixion of Jesus (Matt 27:27–53) generally follows the Markan account (Mark 15:16–41). The story echoes verses of key psalms. The wine mixed with gall (v 33) recalls Ps 69:21. Casting lots for Jesus' garments (v 35) evokes Ps 22:18. The taunt of the bystanders, "He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now" was inspired by Ps 22:8. The last word of Jesus on the cross (Matt 27:46), as in Mark, is ambiguous. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" expresses at the same time desolation and a profound sense of abandonment; but it is, nonetheless, a prayer, from the first verse of Psalm 22. For those who know the Psalm, that first verse would also evoke a cry for deliverance (Ps 22:19-20) and the confident declaration that all nations will worship God (Ps 22:27–28). The account of the Passion in both Mark and Matthew blends confident hope with the moment of darkest despair.

After Jesus has breathed his last Matthew adds to the Markan account a brief notice that indicates a momentous event has taken place. Mark had noted that the veil of the Temple, shrouding the Holy of Holies in sacred mystery, was torn from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). Matthew adds that the earth was shaken and graves emptied (Matt 27:52–53). Within the

narrative these events provide a motive for the judgment of the centurion that Jesus was indeed God's Son (Matt 27:54), an assertion that seems somewhat unjustified in Mark 15:39. Matthew's assertion that the dead were raised also signals that the death of Jesus inaugurates the eschaton, the time when God's promised rectification of affairs on earth would commence.

Matthew's account of the crucifixion thus adds to the drama of the moment, but his final addition to this part of the story also serves apologetic ends. To the account of the burial of Jesus (Mark 15:42–47) Matthew adds (27:62–66) an account that guards were placed at the tomb to prevent the theft of Jesus' body. This detail, lacking in all the other accounts of Jesus' burial, was probably a response to claims by opponents of the Christian movement that Jesus was not resurrected; his disciples had just removed his corpse. No, says Matthew, they could not have done so.

The Resurrection (28:1–20)

The version of the Gospel of Mark on which Matthew depended probably ended at Mark 16:8 with an empty tomb and the proclamation that Jesus had arisen from the dead, but no account of appearances to his disciples. The other evangelists, and eventually scribes who copied Mark, remedied that situation and provided accounts of the appearances. Before he tells that story, Matthew recounts the discovery of the empty tomb with some slight variations to the Markan story. Here (Matt 28:1) it is two women, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," who come to the tomb, not the three of Mark's account (Mark 16:1). In Mark the women found that the stone that blocked the entrance to the cave-shaped tomb had already been moved. Here in Matthew an angel appears and does the job (Matt 28:2). In Mark a young man in a white robe greeted the women (Mark 16:5). Here the interlocutor is definitely a heavenly being, shining like lightning with clothing as white as snow (Matt 28:3). In both cases, the messenger brings the same good news. He tells the women that Jesus has been raised and commissions them to bring the glad tidings to his other disciples, who are to meet him in Galilee (Matt 28:7).

There were apparently different traditions in the early community about where Jesus first appeared to his disciples. Luke and John both report appearances in Jerusalem, although John 21 also reports an appearance in Galilee. Mark and Matthew focus on Galilee, but Matthew adds a touch that probably gestures toward the tradition about Jerusalem. In case the women missed the angel's message, Jesus himself appears to them and tells them the same thing as the angel had. Jesus, raised from the dead, was going to meet his disciples in Galilee. Matthew's version acknowledges the priority of women in the chain of appearances, and allows for at least one appearance in Jerusalem, but the decisive appearance will be in Galilee.

Before the account of that appearance, Matthew concludes the story of the guards at the tomb (Matt 28:11–15), providing an explanation for the opponents' story that Jesus' body had been stolen.

The story of the appearance of Jesus in Galilee concludes the Gospel. Like most stories of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, he commissions the disciples to do something. Here the content, often referred to as the “Great Commission,” is to “make disciples of all nations,” to “baptize them,” “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matt 28:19–20). The commission neatly summarizes the whole of Matthew’s gospel. It rounds out the promise of a universal mission that was suggested by the appearance of the Magi in chapter 1. It also insists that being a disciple is about doing what Jesus commanded, including the admonitions of the various sermons throughout the gospel as the way Torah is now to be understood.

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