

Interactive Rhetoric in Matthew: An Exploration of Audience Knowledge Competency

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In one sense most scholars today will agree on one aspect of Matthew's relationship with Mark: the author of the First Gospel has relied on the Second Gospel for large portions and indeed the structure of his subsequent account of Jesus' life.¹ But functionally how does he utilize his primary source? Simply as raw material for a new account? Or might the author of the First Gospel have written a more rhetorically focused story of Jesus, one which interacts with Mark to help shape the response of his readers? My interest in this paper is to explore whether, and how, a rhetorical view of Matthew might help one better understand the gospel and its relationship with the gospel of Mark.

That Matthew was written with a definite purpose has frequently been argued.² Granted, the author is presenting a story of Jesus, but that story is not told simply as a dispassionate relating of events and teachings for the sake of historical accuracy. Many students of Matthew have noted that the way themes are rehearsed and the way the gospel is structured provide indications about the particular picture the evangelist wants to present about the subject of the

¹ I am assuming here, without argument, a common element in many solutions to the Synoptic problem. The Two-Source theory has long held that Mark is the key source for the gospels of Matthew and Luke for many sound reasons (see for instance Robert Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001], 49–96, on the priority of Mark). The Farrer Theory also argues for Matthew's use of Mark (see also Goodacre's arguments for Markan priority, *The Case Against Q* [Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002], 19–45). The Griesbach Theory, of course, rejects Markan priority. This particular discussion on Matthew's use of Mark does not require maintaining or rejecting any approach to Q.

² This is, of course, the main result of redaction-critical studies of Matthew which began with Bornkamm's article "Die Sturmstillung im Mattäusevangelium" in 1948. The rich production of Matthew studies in the last half century has worked on this basis, and is I think a secure result of modern studies of Matthew.

first gospel – Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. Thus the anti-Jewish polemic, the attention to Jesus’ teaching on the Law, and even the structure of the gospel clustered around discourses, have been understood as indicators of Matthew’s theological and perhaps polemical concern.³ Such a purposeful writing is clearly rhetorical in that a primary aim is to engage an audience to move toward a new understanding of Jesus or to strengthen an existing understanding.

Redaction critical approaches to Matthew have certainly understood the purposeful nature of the gospel. They have tried to assemble a picture of how the First Evangelist has used sources to construct a new story of Jesus. Thus modifications of individual pericopae, the way these materials have been ordered and framed, the addition of new material, especially that which might be credited to the evangelist, all help to construct an idea of the purpose of the First Gospel. But redaction critics often only deal with the intention and purpose of the author. While helpful, indeed even essential, this leaves out part of the communication process: the audience. A rhetorical approach, in contrast, sees the gospel as a vehicle for influencing an audience, and thus must attend more intentionally with the implied audience’s perspective.

To fully embrace such a rhetorical perspective, however, one must construct some idea of the intended audience of the gospel: either Jewish or Christian, either in conflict with Jewish authorities or divorced from relationships with Judaism, either a closed community or a more general audience.⁴ One must also imagine the audience’s knowledge of the story of Jesus – as

³ It is not possible to develop the main lines of Matthean research here. Excellent surveys of these approaches can be found in Graham Stanton’s introductory article in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, second edition (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 1–26, and Donald Senior, *What are they Saying About Matthew*, revised and expanded edition (NY: Paulist, 1996).

⁴ These questions, of course, have long been a part of gospel criticism. But frequently they have been posed as if they were part of the author’s background. That is, the characteristics

either well-informed or relatively uninformed about the details of Jesus' life. An assessment of what the gospel was intended to "do" as a rhetorical document depends to a great extent on who the audience was imagined to be.⁵ For instance, if the audience was a specific community or church with specific problems (e.g. a recent conflict with the local synagogue), then we might interpret the function of the gospel differently than if it were intended for a larger audience. This attention to the audience, often carried out under the heading of "place and time of writing," is crucial to interpreting the gospel as a whole and specific passages within it. A rhetorical understanding of Matthew will need to accommodate both a purposeful author and an audience (real or ideal) to which the author is directing the narrative.

In many reconstructions of the origination and provenance of Matthew's gospel there is an assumption that the evangelist is writing to a small community, the author's own community. There are corollaries to this view. The first is that such a community is often viewed as unique, distinct, and cut off from other churches in the Jesus movement. The second is that Matthew's gospel is often seen as presenting "the" story of Jesus to this community – that is, that while the author is aware of the sources for his gospel (Mark, Q, or other oral material), the community to

of the "community" which has influenced the author, and thus colors the perspective of the author. But the audience does not necessarily fully agree with an author, so there is a very important distinction that needs to be made here.

⁵ The idea of narratives as being rhetorical is not new. Perhaps this has best been explored by Wayne Booth, the *Rhetoric of Fiction*, and Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. What is an important part of this view of rhetoric is the way narratives function to persuade audiences. Thus Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest that important feature of rhetoric is always the "social aspect of language, which is an instrument of communication and influence on others." (*New Rhetoric*, 513). A rhetorical analysis of narratives, then, turns on what the narrative does as a form of persuasive communication. Or, as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza put it, "the evaluative criterion for rhetoric is not aesthetics, but praxis." ("Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 33:387).

which it is addressed is not aware of them.

When the audience is perceived as a unique and distinct community, then many of the issues addressed in the gospel are taken to be markers of the specific issues or problems taking place within the community – a kind of “mirror reading,” as is often done with Paul’s letters. There are, however, real problems with this approach. First of all, we have virtually no external data with which to specifically identify a particular church, nor even a geographical locale, to which the gospel was directed. And narratives themselves do not lend themselves as easily to this “mirror reading” approaches as do epistles.⁶ The very genre of the gospel, and the way it delivers as its primary purpose the story of Jesus rather than an explicit interaction with the concerns of the audience, would seem to make a rhetorical approach – certainly a “mirror reading” – virtually impossible.⁷ At the very least such a conception of the audience, as a unique and distinct community, must be approached with extreme caution.

Traditionally the dynamics of the author/audience relationship with Matthew assumes a naivety on the part of the audience about the story of Jesus. In this view, Matthew writes a version of the gospel which “uses” previous material, but presents it as entirely new to his audience. This, of course, is very compatible with a view that the gospels were written to hermetically sealed communities with little interaction with the larger Christian movement. But is that likely or necessary? What if the churches to which Matthew writes are not sealed off

⁶ A point Graham Stanton makes, see *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 45. See also his article “Revisiting Matthew’s Communities” in *SBL 1994 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 9-23.

⁷ And example, though, of careful rhetorical analysis of the gospels is seen in C. Clifton Black, *The Rhetoric of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). Black explores a number of ways the gospels can be fruitfully explored using rhetorical analysis.

from the writings circulating among the churches? What if Mark had circulated broadly among the churches before Matthew was written?⁸ What if Matthew was written with a knowledge of Mark's story of Jesus already in mind? Would this make difference in the way that we read Matthew?⁹

This paper is an exploration of how such a conception, that the audience already knows the story of Jesus told by Mark, might influence the way one understands Matthew's rhetorical force. If one begins by imagining Mark as a literary presence that Matthew needed to contend with rhetorically, not simply use as raw material for his gospel, how might we differently interpret Matthew's narrative?

Who is Matthew's Audience?

As already implied in the opening paragraphs, specific definition of the "real" audience of Matthew is not possible. We simply have no specific information about the actual historical situation in which Matthew was written. What we can inquire about is the implied audience of the text. Who does Matthew seem to be writing to? What indications might there be that would help us understand the mental image of the audience as Matthew wrote? We can at least draw

⁹ The thrust of these rhetorical questions is based in great part on the implications of Richard Bauckham's book *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1998). The central thesis of this book is that the gospels were written for broad distribution. A corollary to this thesis is that if the early books (e.g. Mark) were written to be distributed broadly, then they must have been in existence within a wide variety of the churches, and thus would have been known, perhaps well-known, by audiences of subsequent books.

A similar anticipation of this viewpoint that the gospels, especially Matthew, were perhaps written to more universal audiences is found in Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 50-51,

some conclusions about the implied audience of the text, Matthew's imagined audience.

In the first place, Matthew imagines that his audience would have both an appreciation for and competence in the Old Testament as scripture.¹⁰ One of the real markers of Matthew's gospel is his reliance on the citation of, or allusion to, Old Testament scriptures as rhetorical support for certain aspects of the Jesus story. This is particularly striking in the opening chapters. What is important here is the way that Matthew uses such citations. He assumes an authority for such citations without explanation. And he assumes that his audience will understand that such scriptures can function as warrant for current events.

Secondly, Matthew imagines that his audience is concerned with a proper relationship with the Law, and that this issue is of some concern to them. Matthew's comments that Jesus did not come to abrogate the Law, that his teachings often are actually more true to the Law than understood by some, all bespeak a rhetorical situation in which adherence to the Law *per se* need not be defended; rather, they address whether the Jesus traditions and teachings actually do comport with adherence to the Law. Thus Matthew's argument presumes an audience that is already sympathetic to the Law and needs clarification about whether following Jesus's teachings, indeed, can be seen to agree with this viewpoint.¹¹

¹⁰ Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), 14, makes the point that the First Evangelist must have been a Jewish Christian because of his extensive use of the Old Testament. What is interesting is that he makes no point that Matthew must also have presumed a similar identification on the part of his audience. After all, the quotation of scripture as proof of fulfillment would be meaningless to an audience that did not share a similar evaluation of the Old Testament. Thus the very use of scripture that gives us some idea of Matthew's perspective also gives us an idea of the audience's competence.

¹¹ This is essentially Anthony J. Saldarini's perspective, see *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5-9.

Thirdly, Matthew imagines an audience that has some separation from the synagogues – at least some of them. Thus the use of “your synagogue” and “their synagogue” suggests that the audience is already comfortable with such distinctions. If not, then such distinctions would need to be clarified.

Fourthly, Matthew imagines an audience which knows of some conflict between the Jesus movement and Jewish authorities in the synagogue. Thus there are polemical statements which imply that clarification of the motives of certain leaders is still a crucial issue. Of course some of this could be explained by the simple use of historical accounts of Jesus’ own conflicts with Jewish leaders, but at certain points it appears to carry over into the present and to imply the need to continue to clarify such positions.¹²

What all this suggests is that Matthew has imagined an audience of Christians who are still closely related to Judaism, but who are experiencing some tension with Judaism. Perhaps much of the impetus of the gospel is to reframe the story of Jesus to justify him and his role within a perspective of Judaism. Such a view of the Jesus movement, and the particular individuals in this movement being addressed, would fit quite well with what we know about the emerging nature of the church in the early decades of the church. While there was undoubtedly a strong emergence of a Gentile church, there was also a strain of Christianity that remained closely linked to Judaism. It would appear that Matthew addresses this particular element of Christians (or Jews?).

But notwithstanding this sketch of Matthew’s audience, does the First Evangelist presume a specific church or a specific geographical locale for his writing? Here Bauckham and

¹² Cf. especially Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community*, 44–67..

his colleagues' critiques about the perspective of gospel criticism should certainly raise questions about the degree to which we should speak of the gospel as oriented to a specific community.¹³ Matthew's audience, as deduced from the rhetorical strategies of the gospel, do not demand the move toward such a restrictive audience. Instead, it is just as likely that Matthew was writing to a number of communities, perhaps not all known but only imagined, that shared the identity of being a movement within Judaism.

Matthew's Audience and the Gospel of Mark

With this somewhat guarded understanding of the nature of Matthew's implied audience, and the strong possibility that Matthew was not writing to a specific distinct community, one must then raise the question of the audience's knowledge of Mark. If Matthew is indeed writing to a non-specific audience, perhaps in various geographical locales, then it is also harder to maintain that Matthew would presume ignorance of Mark on the part of this audience. If Mark was known to the author, the Evangelist of Matthew, then it is also very likely that the gospel has also circulated among other groups of Christians. And in that case Matthew might well have presumed that his audience had some knowledge of that gospel. I do not want to state this categorically, since we have no direct knowledge of Matthew's actual audience. But it is certainly an interesting extension of our construction of the implied audience. And if that is the case, then a rhetorical reading of the First Gospel must account for the possible knowledge of Mark by the implied audience. It is this possibility, that Matthew writes interactively with an audience that knows Mark, that is the tentative thesis which this paper seeks to explore.

¹³ In particular see Stephen C. Barton, "Can We Identify the Gospel Audiences?" in *Gospels for All Christians*, 180–182, and Richard Bauckham, "For Whom were Gospels Written?" in *Gospels for All Christians*, 22–26.

But how might we test the idea of prior competence or knowledge of Mark's gospel by Matthew's implied audience? An initial test of this thesis would be to see if Matthew seems to engage Mark's gospel in ways that fruitfully explain Matthew's final construction. Does Matthew use Mark intertextually or dialogically – that is, does he utilize Mark in such a way that the audience might interact with the previously known material (i.e. Mark) in its new context so that it either further explains or answers objections that might have been raised by Mark? If we see Matthew as quoting, augmenting, and arranging Mark's gospel in such a way that some interaction with Mark's gospel by the implied audience is likely, perhaps even suggested, then this perspective is worth further examination.

Matthew's extensive use of Mark serves as the foundation for any analysis of the rhetorical interaction between these gospels. Matthew for the most part uses Mark as a generally reliable source for the basic story of Jesus; Matthew does not substantially disagree with Mark's account of the ministry of Jesus. But Matthew does add additional material at a number of points, frames certain material, and arranges the gospel so that a slightly different perspective of Jesus is offered. I would suggest that the additions and alterations to Mark by Matthew often respond to questions or concerns that arise from Mark's version, or more specifically often seem to respond to possible questions that a presumed member of Matthew's implied audience might ask about the Second Evangelist's presentation of the Jesus story.

To explore this thesis more explicitly I will examine three segments from the early chapters of Matthew as a test, to see whether some possible intertextual engagement with Mark takes place – that is, to see whether Matthew seems to be inviting his audience to reconceptualize the story of Jesus they know from Mark by means of his retelling of the Markan

story. The three initial test cases I will explore are:

The Genealogy and Birth of Jesus (chapters 1-2)

John the Baptist story

The Temptation Narrative.

The Genealogy and Birth of Jesus

Raymond Brown, in studying the first two chapters of Matthew, has helpfully suggested that these chapters function to answer the questions of Who?, How?, Where?, and Whence? with regard to the person of Jesus.¹⁴ He suggests an outline of the development of these questions as follows:

Matt 1:1–17: The question of who Jesus is in terms of his identity as Son of David, son of Abraham. Thus an initial question which the text answers is “who, really, is this Jesus who is the subject of this gospel.” The answer to this question is developed by detailing Jesus’ relation to a series of biblical ancestors, of which Abraham and David stand as critical linchpins.

Matt 1:18–25: The question of how Jesus came to be the son of David is described in terms of a special conception through the agency of the Holy Spirit, but adopted into the lineage of David through his (step) father. Jesus is explicitly the son of Mary, and the son of Joseph through marriage, not conception. Matthew’s account seems to take Mary as a starting point, and adds fulfillment of scripture and the testimony of angels to support two features that need explaining: the virgin birth, and how Jesus could be related to the Davidic lineage.

¹⁴ Raymond Brown, *Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 53. This is an expansion of Krister Stendahl’s previous suggestion that the chapters answer the question of Who and Whence? (“Quis et Unde: An Analysis of Matthew 1–2,” in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. Graham Stanton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 69–80.

Matt 2:1–12: The question of where Jesus came from is answered by the narrative of his birth in the town of Bethlehem – a location which is intimately tied to David. The provenance of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem is apparently crucial for Matthew’s conception of who Jesus is. The focus on Bethlehem as a place of birth, supported by the Scripture citation, is apparently important in affirming the Davidic lineage of Jesus.

Matt 2:13–23: The question of whence, a description of Jesus’ background before the beginning of his ministry, is answered by the flight narrative, and the final return to Nazareth. Clearly Jesus’ linkage to Nazareth is a critical element which must be addressed.

Not only does Matthew focus attention on answering these questions, but there seems to be a special attention paid to the importance of these questions, especially by means of the characteristically Matthean method of showing that each of these elements is in some way a fulfillment of Old Testament themes or prophecies.¹⁵ In other words, Matthew uses Old Testament scriptures the fulfillment schema to highlight special concerns in his gospel. That Matthew is going to great lengths to give special emphasis in the infancy section to some key concepts, supported by these emphatic linkages to the Old Testament and by angelic testimony, can be seen as follows:

1. Matthew is very concerned to connect Jesus directly to David. Jesus’ genealogy

¹⁵ The almost uniquely Matthean emphasis on “fulfillment” of Scripture hardly needs explanation. Brown notes, for instance, that when compared with the other Synoptic gospels, Matthew’s “formula citations are almost a Matthean peculiarity (*Birth of the Messiah*, 97).” See, among others, the discussions in Krister Stendahl, *The School of Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1967) for a discussion of Matthew’s special method of citation; Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 96–104; Wilhelm Rotfuchs, *Die Erfüllungszitate des Matthäus-Evangelium* (Stuttgart: Kollhamer, 1969); F. van Segbroeck “Les Citations de l’Accomplissement des l’Évangile selon Matthieu d’après trois ouvrages récents” in *L’Évangile selon Matthieu. Rédaction et Théologie* (BETL, Gembloux, 1971); Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 156–163.

linking him to David and Abraham, both crucial individuals in terms of God's choice of a particular people Israel, is emphasized by the final schematic summary: there are 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the deportation to Babylon, and 14 from the deportation to Jesus the Messiah. The importance of Jesus' lineage from David and Abraham is developed in part by the extensive genealogy, but is underlined even more emphatically by the summary at the end of the genealogy. The numerical schema employed, with all its difficulty, suggests at least a rhetorical pattern which implies fulfillment or linkage to the Old Testament, similar to the subsequent explicit fulfillment citations.¹⁶

2. Matthew very deliberately explains that Jesus is born directly by God's action, which explains the unique nature of the birth. Jesus' birth to a virgin by means of the Holy Spirit is first of all attested by the witness of an angel of the Lord to Joseph, which serves as rhetorically powerful evidence. This witness both reveals that the Holy Spirit is the agent of pregnancy, and that the child's name has been decided by God and is significant (Jesus = savior). But the theophany is underlined by the fulfillment citation from Isaiah 7:14. The use of *παρθένο*s in the Isaiah passage is clearly meant to imply a virgin, as the surrounding narrative makes clear. The choice of the Isaiah passage emphasizes both fulfillment, virgin birth, and the fact that Jesus is "God with us," all of which support the import features of the narrative unit 1:18–25. Jesus' birth is extraordinary, and yet is still linked to God's overarching plan as anticipated in the Old Testament.

3. Matthew emphasizes the role of Bethlehem as the location of Jesus' birth as a further

¹⁶ Brown (*Birth of the Messiah*, 74) suggests that the numerical schema is "artificial" versus strictly "historical." I would probably choose the word "rhetorical."

linkage to David. Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem is highlighted in part by the visit of the wise men from the East, and then underscored as well with a scripture citation attested by the chief priests and scribes, Micah 5:2. The miraculous witnesses and the scriptures provide additional support for Jesus' special (miraculous?) relationship to David.

4. Matthew specifically ties Jesus' relationship to his hometown, Nazareth, by means of a series of connections to the fulfillment of scripture. Thus the almost unknown locale of Nazareth is "redeemed" by virtue of a narrative which links angelic witness and scripture. The story of Jesus' flight from Judea, and the proleptic anticipation of his return from Egypt, in Matt 2:13–18 begins again with an angel's command to leave. But this angelic witness is supported, again, by the Old Testament fulfillment citations: Hosea 11:1 and Jeremiah 40:1. These underscore the necessity of Jesus' absence from Judea. Jesus' return from Egypt and final settlement in Nazareth in Galilee is again supported by direct testimony of an angel, and supported by another fulfillment citation. In this case Jesus' final settlement in Nazareth makes him a "Nazorean" which fulfills Isaiah 11:1. In the final analysis, Jesus' growing up in Nazareth, which might well have been an embarrassment, is thus explained by a cluster of Old Testament passages woven together into a miraculous narrative. The very contrived nature of this narrative gives some indication of the concern Matthew has in attempting to explain Nazareth as Jesus' hometown.

What is apparent and significant is that Matthew has such a concentrated number of fulfillment citations in the infancy section of the gospel. Brown suggests that this concentration may be because this section of Jesus' life was relatively unexplored in reference to the Old

Testament.¹⁷ This, however, seems unlikely. Instead, Matthew in each case uses the formula citations to make a particular rhetorical point, and the infancy narrative is a crucial element in the construction of Matthew's rhetorical program.

It is fairly clear that Matthew's construction of the infancy narrative and the use of the formula citations is part of a deliberate theological and rhetorical strategy. Luz makes the point, for instance, that the formula quotations are far more significant than simply affirming some historical points:

“... the formula quotations have no unique content but point to basic themes of the Matthean understanding of the Christ. The “way” of Jesus in Matt. 1:18–4:16 is told by Matthew not for the sake of historical facticity but because in it the progress of the gospel from Israel to the Gentiles is indicated proleptically.”¹⁸

It is possible that Matthew used preexisting traditions for the infancy narrative; it is also highly possible that some of the narrative units have been creatively shaped around the fulfillment citations. But in either case, the thrust is rhetorical and links up with themes which recur in the rest of the gospel of Matthew.

But why does Matthew go to such a great length to develop these initial themes of Jesus' lineage, the complicated relationship with Joseph and Mary, the location of his birthplace, and the return to Galilee and especially Nazareth? One possible explanation is that the already known account of Jesus, the gospel of Mark, has opened up significant questions to which Matthew feels compelled to answer. Mark's gospel told a story of a Jesus who is called Messiah,

¹⁷ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 99.

¹⁸ Luz, *Matthew 1–8*, 162.

yet barely meets the minimal expectations: he does not rule with power, is captured and crucified, and his followers all flee upon his death. This is not problematic if Mark merely serves as “source material” for Matthew. But if Mark was already well known, especially if it already circulated broadly among Jews and Christian Jews who would undoubtedly have pre-existing expectations about who the Christ is and where he should come from, then a number of questions do arise which might beg for a fuller explanation.

The opening verses of the Gospel of Mark drop the reader almost immediately into the midst of the story of Jesus. With only the barest of introductions and a short citation from Isaiah, the narrator brings John the Baptist on stage, and very shortly afterwards Jesus himself is baptized by John and begins his preaching ministry. In thirteen brief verses the reader is introduced to John the Baptist and Jesus, Jesus is baptized and is subsequently tempted in the wilderness, all of which seem only to be in preparation for Jesus’ ministry of preaching and healing that begins in verse 14. The central character of the story, the one who is both the subject and object of the gospel (and shouldn’t the genitive in verse 1 be taken in both ways, given the subsequent narrative), is only barely introduced as one who is “from Nazareth of Galilee” (Mark 1:9). Apart from that information, Mark only tells the reader that Jesus is the son of Mary who also has brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3), and is called the “son of David” by the blind beggar (Mark 10:47) — an identification that Jesus seems to invite, at least speculatively, by means of his own question about whether the Messiah is the Son of David (Mark 12:35). Mark leaves the identity, origination, and descent of Jesus as cryptic questions that invite speculation. Indeed one might see this as one more aspect of Mark’s “secrecy motif” — even the reader is left mystified about who Jesus is. Granted, he is the Messiah and the Son of God;

but what is his heritage, who are his parents? Surely no Messiah comes from Nazareth of Galilee, does he?¹⁹

The Gospel of Mark begins with a short and suggestive introduction: “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). This introductory phrase, either implicitly or explicitly, seems to refer the reader back—especially the Jewish reader—to the opening of the LXX version of Genesis 1:1, Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. This intertextual linkage seems to open a host of questions about Jesus’ own relationship to the Jewish understanding of God’s interaction with humanity through the history of Israel. Is the ministry of Jesus linked integrally with God’s relationship with Israel as seen in the narratives of the Old Testament? If so, how is one to understand this person Jesus in terms of the Old Testament story and the anticipations for future action understood from these narratives? These questions are almost begged to be answered by the terse opening.

From the perspective that Mark has opened up questions which invite speculation and perhaps misinterpretation, then, one can reasonably imagine Matthew composing the first two chapters of his gospel in order to answer the pregnant questions which Mark’s suggestive opening verses seem to beg. If Jesus is the Messiah and Son of David, in what way is Jesus’ lineage and birth consonant with the narrative traditions and expectations that have served as the foundation for Judaism’s self-identity? Matthew’s explicit description of the genealogy, the birth in Bethlehem, the flight to Egypt and return to Nazareth, all are critical elements needed to

¹⁹ The Gospel of John explicitly cites this question, which suggests that there was an implicit concern in the early church about the linkage of the Messiah with Nazareth. Mark frequently links Jesus to Nazareth, “Jesus of Nazareth” (cf. 1:24, 10:47, 14:67, 16:6) with little explanation.

respond to unanswered questions posed by Mark's narrative.

The need to respond to these questions could have been particularly compelling if Matthew was writing to an audience that already had Mark's gospel. Especially if that audience was predominantly Jewish in makeup, and perhaps responding to pressures from Jewish community, these questions about how Jesus can be fit within the master narrative of Israel would be pressing. It is therefore reasonable to see Matthew expanding the opening section of the gospel in dialogue with Mark, given that the opening verses of Mark are cryptic in their terseness and brevity.

Responding to the need to place Jesus within the framework of Jewish traditions and expectations, then, Matthew explicitly links Jesus in the genealogy to Abraham and David and a host of other characters drawn from the Old Testament narratives. But Matthew also goes further by drawing on oral traditions and scriptural interpretation to link Jesus directly to God in a special way by means of the conception of the Holy Spirit, a birth in Bethlehem that necessitates a flight to Egypt, and finally a secretive return to Nazareth. Jesus is thus located and identified as God's unique agent, answering the questions "who is this Jesus?" and "where does he come from?" Undoubtedly there are extensive oral traditions that are being incorporated by Matthew, but it seems just as likely that these traditions were included by Matthew because they responded rhetorically to lacunae in Mark's story.

John the Baptist

Mark's opening verses are somewhat cryptic in the way that Jesus is introduced by means of John the Baptist's proclamation and baptism. After a composite quote from Isaiah and Malachi that evokes anticipation of one who will prepare the way for God's activity by crying

out in the wilderness, John the baptizer is presented as one who practices a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the wilderness. The connection that John is that forerunner, the one who prepares the way of the Lord, is implied, but it is not explicitly stated.

Mark's account makes it clear that John is a charismatic figure and that the people of Judea and all those from Jerusalem come to submit to this baptism, confessing their sins. One of those people who came to John to be baptized was Jesus. At his baptism Jesus has a personal vision of the Spirit descending on him, and a call from God announcing that he is God's son. The focus does shift to Jesus, with ratification by God, but the rather brief and terse account leave a number of questions about Jesus' relationship to John in doubt.

Mark's John does make it clear in his preaching that his baptism is anticipatory, that "one more powerful than I" will come after him who will baptize in the Holy Spirit rather than water. Both the fact that the only other main character in view is Jesus, that he is the only one whose baptism is specifically described, together with the parallel between Jesus' preaching (Mark 1:15) and John's preaching makes it fairly clear in the narrative context that this person who is to be more powerful than John is Jesus. That Jesus then receives the Holy Spirit, which John has predicted will be the medium of this "more powerful one's" baptism, makes the narrative link quite strong. But there are inevitable questions in Mark's account which might well beg for clarification and even correction.

1. First, Mark introduces John with a composite quote from Malachi 3 and Isaiah 40, but attributes the whole to Isaiah. This "error" might well raise questions by those knowledgeable about the scriptures.
2. Mark has John preaching simply a baptism of repentance, but there is no clear

anticipation of the coming kingdom of God.

3. Mark has “all” of those from both the Judean countryside and from Jerusalem coming to be baptized, suggesting that there was a near universal response by all segments of the Jewish populace to the preaching of repentance.
4. The baptism of repentance is clearly linked to receiving forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins is thus implied as the result of the baptism by John.
5. Jesus is simply baptized by John. This suggests that Jesus, like the other people, confessed his sins and was baptized for the purpose of receiving a forgiveness of sins.

Mark’s account of the baptism of Jesus, then, presents Jesus and John on fairly similar ways. Jesus would seem to be the greater one, as predicted by John. But Mark has not drawn a clear distinction between the two. Even the transition from John the Baptist to Jesus is simply described as one which is primarily temporal in nature: when John the Baptist is no longer active because he was arrested, then Jesus steps in to begin his ministry. Especially for Matthew’s audience that was Jewish and might well have been acquainted with John the Baptist or his disciples, this account would seem to require some explanation and clarification.

Matthew’s retelling of the John the Baptist story seems to deliberately engage these issues. The question, of course, is whether it makes sense that Matthew might be “correcting” Mark’s account in rhetorical dialogue with Mark, or whether this is simply authorial correction without reference to an audience’s prior knowledge.

But before engaging the rhetorical question, what is the effect of Matthew’s modification of Mark’s account?

Matthew’s John becomes a more clearly defined figure, if only because Matthew takes

the time to explicitly link John to the prophetic activity anticipated by Isaiah. John is first introduced as one who proclaims the need for repentance because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Thus John's preaching is more typically linked to the prophetic role of announcing the coming of God's kingdom, and at the same time is more closely linked to Jesus' own preaching.²⁰ His cry of "Repent" is indeed the sound of a voice in the wilderness, which is exactly what Isaiah is depicting. The simple parallelism, though, is not sufficient. Matthew specifically refers to John's preaching of repentance as being explained by the Isaiah passage: "this is one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke..." Not only is John, then, explicitly identified as this one predicted in Isaiah, but he also speaks directly in the fashion of a prophet himself. This, then, sets the scene for the description of his clothing and diet, which seems more clearly to evoke images of Elijah. John preaches like a prophet, he cries out just like Isaiah predicted, and he dresses like a prophet.

At the same time, John's activity of baptism in Matthew is far more circumscribed. John preaches and practices a baptism of repentance only, rather than repentance and forgiveness. This seems to be a fairly intentional shift. In effect the deletion of "for forgiveness" accomplishes a number of things for Matthew. First, it reserves forgiveness of sins for Jesus and the church.²¹ But perhaps just as importantly it removes one of the difficulties of Jesus' own baptism: since baptism is not for forgiveness of sins, Jesus' baptism was not for his sins. But it is apparent that this issue of Jesus' baptism is a significant issue for Matthew. Contrasting with

²⁰ As Luz, *Matthew* 167, notes, "It corresponds literally to that of Jesus... John and Jesus thus belong together."

²¹ It is interesting that the term εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, used by John in Mark does occur in Matthew, only at 26:28 when Jesus is talking about his death at the Lord's Supper.

Mark's terse announcement that Jesus was baptized, Matthew reports a dialogue between John and Jesus in which John resists baptizing Jesus, and Jesus presses for it "in order to fulfill righteousness" instead of either repentance or forgiveness.

As is seen in the depiction of Jesus' baptism, Matthew has clearly characterized John in ways that are more explicitly subordinate to Jesus. In Mark this subordinate status is alluded to but not emphasized. John anticipates one coming who is greater, and the narrative structure makes it clear this is Jesus. But in Matthew, John makes this subordinate status far more clear: he resists baptizing Jesus because it would be more appropriate for John to be baptized by Jesus. John anticipates not only that the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit, as found in Mark, but also with fire. This is then expanded with a prediction of Jesus' coming function as a judge who will separate wheat from chaff, and will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. The fire that is linked with the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit is interpreted in terms of Jesus' function as an eschatological judge. Matthew is at great pains to clarify the relationship between John and Jesus, lest any confusion remain as to who the greater figure is.

Finally, Matthew seems to have been somewhat uncomfortable with the image of all of Judea and Jerusalem coming to repent and be baptized. Rather than report that all of Jerusalem came out, the evangelist only reports that Jerusalem did come out, contrasting that response with all of Judea and all of the countryside around the Jordan. This might be simply a stylistic anomaly, but the added pericope about John's response to certain Pharisees and Sadducees would suggest otherwise. Matthew takes pains to suggest that some who might have come out, particularly of the Jewish leadership, were disingenuous and not truly repentant. "Produce fruit

worthy of repentance, and do not say think to say ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor.’” Matthew seems more concerned to distinguish, even at this early scene in the gospel, that there must be significant differences in response to Jesus.

Matthew, then, has chosen by rearrangement and addition of material to augment the portrait of John the Baptist, giving this character a stronger sense identification especially in relationship to Jesus. These features in which Matthew has strengthened and clarified the picture of John the Baptist can be summarized as follows:

1. First, John the Baptist is portrayed as a more prophetic figure in Matthew than in Mark. In Matthew the citation from Isaiah prefigures the person, and Matthew specifically notes that this passage from Isaiah was speaking of John.

2. John the Baptist then prophecies himself about the coming role of Jesus, including the future role of judgment. John’s own prophetic speech, then, functions much like the many Old Testament quotations in Matthew that point to the Jesus’ fulfillment of prophecy.

3. John the Baptist’s baptism is specifically linked only to repentance, not forgiveness, which clearly presents him in a more “anticipatory” perspective.

4. John the Baptist and Jesus both preach repentance in parallel ways. Thus John prefigures the initial preaching of Jesus.

5. The expansion of John the Baptist’s comments anticipates the rejection of the leaders of Israel and the growing tension that will be seen in the subsequent narrative of the gospel. Thus his comments function prophetically within the narrative context of the gospel.

6. John the Baptist very explicitly indicates his subordinate status relative to Jesus. Matthew has thus taken pains to use the opening narrative to clarify in John’s own words the

relationship between the two figures.

The question, of course, is whether Matthew has made a deliberate effort to clear up confusion about the role of John the Baptist in dialogue with Mark, or simply used Mark as a source. One can certainly imagine a situation where John the Baptist's followers were still a discernible group that was potentially either a challenge to the early Christian movement, or was confused with it in some way. Clarifications about the role of John could well have served a real situation within the early church. A reasonable case can be made for a dialogical interaction with Mark if we imagine an audience which is still quite Jewish and which has conflicts with Jewish leaders, as suggested previously. In this case Mark's presentation of John the Baptist and Jesus in ways that does not clearly demonstrate John's subordinate status might well be a problem among Jewish Christians that also know of Baptist traditions. Moreover, the fact that Mark presents all of Jerusalem as repenting and being baptized suggests that the Jewish leadership did respond to the message of repentance, a feature Matthew may well have wanted to avoid given hints that his audience was aware of ongoing debate from Jewish leaders about the person of Jesus. Thus, Matthew's audience might well be seen as misinterpreting Mark's message as it stands, and thus requiring the expansion of the narrative as seen in Matthew.

Yet even if the implied audience for Matthew's efforts is correctly identified, the need to clarify the role of John the Baptist in relationship to either Jesus or the Jewish leaders would not require that the text of Mark be known by and available among his intended audience. If Matthew did think that Mark's presentation was available, however, the various modifications and clarifications would make significant sense as a dialogue with that previous gospel, and would explain in great part the nature and form of the modifications Matthew made to the core

Markan story. Imagining Matthew as rebutting misconceptions that might have arisen from Mark's brief description of John the Baptist's role certainly makes sense, though is not required by the text.

The Temptation Narrative

Mark's version of the temptation is notably terse. Jesus is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, and he lives there in the wilderness for forty days being tested by Satan and living with the wild beasts. During this time the angels ministered to him (note the imperfect *διηκόνουν*), not just at the close of the period. The focus of Mark's account seems to be on spending some time in the wilderness, not on the specific nature of the temptations.²² Indeed Mark does not make it clear what the result of the testing by Satan was, though presumably Jesus was successful in resisting any serious difficulties. Was the testing the danger Jesus encountered with the wild beasts? In what way does this reflect on the nature of Jesus? Mark's account leaves significant room to question what actually did take place before he began his preaching ministry.

Matthew seems to take as his departure for the temptation narrative the Markan account, though with notable modifications. Instead of being driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit, Jesus is led out (*ἠνῆχθη* instead of *ἐκβάλλει*), which at least implies a less adversarial relationship between Jesus and the Spirit.²³ Since Jesus is led out into the wilderness, he is

²² I think France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 83, is clearly correct here, in that the focus throughout Mark's account is not on the testing, which is only mentioned obliquely, but rather the wilderness sojourn itself.

²³ Davies and Allison, 354, suggest that Matthew's use of the *ἀνάγω* is suggestive of God's leading out of Egypt, per Numbers 20:5)

presumed to be cooperating in the wilderness sojourn. The role of Jesus as participating in this test is made more clear when Matthew reports that Jesus fasted for the forty days and nights, rather than simply living in the wilderness. Thus Jesus seems to have chosen to make this a spiritual test, and to have participated in the test by fasting.²⁴ Just in these two modifications Matthew has transformed the setting of the temptation into one which Jesus has voluntarily chosen. For Matthew the period of 40 days, together with the fasting, simply sets the scene for the real temptation which takes place at the conclusion of this period of fasting. The concluding comment of the opening story, which notes that Jesus hungered at the completion of the 40 days of fasting, establishes the narrative buildup and context for the real temptation.

What is particularly noteworthy about Matthew's temptation narrative, though, is the addition of the threefold question and response between Jesus and the devil, a dialogue which is found in substantially the same form in Luke. This exchange between Jesus and the devil becomes the real focus of the temptation story. The devil first tempts Jesus with food, which makes sense given the fasting for 40 days. Jesus rejects this temptation with a quotation from Deut. 8:3. This is followed by the temptation to force the angels to protect him, which Jesus rejects as well with a quotation from Deut. 6:16. And finally the devil offers Jesus power if only he will serve the devil instead of God. And, as before, Jesus rejects this temptation, quoting Deut. 6:13. Only at the conclusion of this exchange between Jesus and the devil does Matthew report that the angels come to minister to Jesus.

²⁴ Of course the 40 days of fasting also recalls Moses, Elijah and Abraham (see Luz, *Matthew*, 186), but no specific tie to them is made by Matthew. Indeed this aspect is itself an expansion of Mark's account which lists 40 days in the wilderness. While it remains as part of the larger frame of the passage, read intertextually, I do not think a specific allusion to Moses or others is the main focus as Matthew presents it.

Clearly, Matthew has taken the kernel from Mark (as seen in the opening and closing of the unit) and either expanded it with his own explanation of what happened, or added some additional material either from Q or oral tradition.²⁵ The addition of the dialogue is very important to the way Matthew interprets the central focus of the temptation narrative, providing the substance of the temptation itself – temptation coming in the form of food, protection and power at a period of physical and emotional weakness – which could be accepted from the tempter only at the expense of trusting God. Jesus in this extreme situation shows himself to be spiritually strong and dependent totally on God alone. The expansion of the testing story into a temptation story significantly alters, or at least clarifies, the story in such a way that Jesus' spiritual attributes become the central focus.

Matthew's retelling of the testing story into a temptation story, with the expansion of a dialogue between Jesus and the devil, strengthens and expands the characterization of Jesus.²⁶ Mark's characterization of Jesus is one of passively responding to the pressures of a test. Instead of simply reacting to forces imposed upon him, even though in Mark that force is the Holy Spirit, Matthew has transformed Jesus into an active and willing participant: Jesus is led willingly, and he chooses to undergo a fast. And by adding the additional pressure of the hunger

²⁵ So, for instance, Wilhelm Wilkens "Die Versuchung Jesu Nach Mattheus" (*NTS* 28: 479–89) suggests that Matthew has constructed the Temptation Narrative based on Mark, and with an eye to his opponents in the Jewish leadership. This view comports well with Matthew revising Mark with an eye to his audience's knowledge of Mark, although certainly Wilkens does not proceed that far in his study.

²⁶ I would agree here with Luz's conclusion (*Matthew 1-7*, 184–5) that the main focus of Matthew's section is christological, not representative, paraenetic, or a reaction against opponents. While Luz sees this as coming essentially unchanged from Q, which I might question, the point is how Matthew uses it in his narrative. Its purpose would appear to be to portray Jesus as obedient to God as known through the Scriptures.

which results from the fast, Matthew's Jesus is brought to an emotional and physical low point that amplifies the nature of the temptation. Moreover, by removing the angels' ministrations from one of continually present during the test to only available at the very conclusion of the test, Matthew has removed any support, thus again amplifying the superhuman nature of Jesus' resistance to the threefold temptation.

Now we must return to the central question of this study: is this compatible with Matthew writing to an audience that would already know Mark, and thus be a modification, expansion, or commentary on the extant Markan account? If Matthew thought his audience had Mark, it would seem very reasonable that he might be concerned about the rather terse description of the testing. Jesus is portrayed in Mark as passively being tested, with little clear indication of the nature of the testing or the success of that. The active agents in Mark are the Spirit, which drives Jesus into the wilderness, and the angels who minister to him continually. While Mark's account certainly demonstrates God's providential direction of Jesus's ministry, there is little to indicate Jesus' own character or strength in the story. Matthew, who throughout his gospel has a much higher view of Jesus' role as a teacher and of his spiritual strength than Mark, could easily be seen to want to expand on this description and launch him into the beginning of his preaching ministry with a far stronger characterization as a spiritual leader. Thus, Matthew could well have expanded the testing narrative precisely to rebut false impressions Mark's account may have produced. Moreover, the quotation of the Old Testament at each temptation would link up nicely with Matthew's view of the important role that Scriptures play in foreshadowing Jesus' life, showing indeed that Jesus' life and ministry are inextricably linked to the Old Testament Scriptures.

Again as with previous pericopes, Matthew's account of the temptation story could well fit with a dialogical interaction with Mark. While there is nothing that demands that Matthew imagines his audience knows Mark, nonetheless Matthew's expansions and modifications of Mark's account fit with such a view. Matthew's rewriting of Mark is complementary to a knowledgeable audience, but does not require one.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to look at Matthew's relationship to Mark from a slightly different perspective. Most scholars agree that Matthew used Mark as a primary source, one which has been augmented to be sure with other material. But such a view of Matthew's authorial task usually conceives of Matthew as independently connected with his audience and with his sources. That is to say, there is no necessary relationship between his source (Mark) and his audience. My task has been to explore Matthew's composition from the perspective that both source and audience are related. Specifically my question has been, is it reasonable to imagine Matthew writing to an audience that knew Mark? If such a perspective is true, then Matthew's use of Mark is no longer simply that of incorporating source material, but instead must be one of engaging in an intertextual dialogue with that source. Intertextuality functions where an audience will engage both the text at hand and the referenced texts (referenced either by citation or allusion) so that a richer reading is developed. Without the knowledge of the referenced text (as in simple use of a source), this rich dialogue is lost. While the author might be seen as engaging with a source, if the audience has no knowledge of it, the dialogical situation is not present.

In the first example, the birth narrative, the various birth and flight narratives can easily

be seen as a response to the absence of clear identification in Mark about who Jesus is, where he came from, and how he could be the son of David. Assuming an audience that is Jewish, or very closely aligned with a Jewish perspective, these questions might have been particularly important.

In the second example, the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, the various expansions by Matthew all fit well with rhetorical responses to weaknesses in Mark's account. Mark's description of John the Baptist, the purpose of his baptism, and the lack of clear descriptions of subordination leave the possibility of misinterpretation by its readers. If Matthew's audience had Mark, then one can easily imagine Matthew writing his account to "correct" the deficiencies in Mark's rather sparse account. But while this is certainly feasible, it is not necessary that Matthew is writing in relationship to an audience that had Mark

In the final example, the temptation narrative, Matthew once again expands the story to both respond to Mark's cryptic brevity, and does it by means of extensive citation from the Old Testament. Jesus' temptation is the spiritual battle with the devil, waged after Jesus' physical resources are lowered from fasting. Jesus is thus prepared for the ministry because he has first proven himself to be loyal to God's law, and to be able to withstand the battle of God's opponent. While the particular story may well have been drawn from tradition, its insertion could well be a response to Mark's elliptical narrative that implies that Jesus was tested, but never describing the nature of the test or its outcome. Such a response could well be an attempt to correct misapprehensions on the part of Matthew's audience who might be presumed to have Mark, but such a dialogical scenario is not required of the text.

In examining the opening verses of Matthew (chapters 1–4), Matthew seems to be

interacting with Mark to fill in gaps and correct possible misapprehensions. Matthew could have decided to fill in the gaps simply for his own authorial purpose. But viewed rhetorically, Matthew might well have been anticipating problems his implied audience would have with Mark, and thus corrections might well be made with such an audience in mind. This “rewriting” of Mark is thus very compatible with Matthew imagining his audience already had Mark, and the new gospel was written to correct or prevent misreading of the gospel in a way that is contrary to Matthew’s own perspective of Jesus.

Some additional support for the scenario envisaged here might also come from Werner Kelber’s view of the rhetorical moment of Mark’s gospel.²⁷ In Kelber’s view, the first written gospel, Mark, was an attempt to assert some control over the use of oral stories about Jesus. Thus Mark itself functions as an attempt to limit interpretations and channel them toward the evangelist’s view of the situation. But just such a attempt at interpretational hegemony creates a problem. The force of a written gospel demands that counter voices be textually inscribed as well. In this case, Matthew can be seen as a response to Mark’s interpretation – not just various stories or sources, but now the one textually defined story. If Matthew imagined Mark’s story as opening up misreading, or if Mark’s story creates some interpretations of Jesus’ life that are at variance with other existing interpretations, then a textual response – a “setting in order” – would be required. But this scenario almost demands an intertextual dialogue which engages knowledgeable readers who have been influenced by this now-defined story.

The idea that Matthew’s audience had, or Matthew imagined that they had, Mark is certainly not proven. Perhaps there are specific examples in Matthew’s gospel which might

²⁷ Werner Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

confirm just such an intertextual dialogue. But the trial examinations of Matthew's use of Mark are all compatible with such a view, and reading Matthew as responding rhetorically adds an additional dimension to Matthew's use and expansion/modification of Mark. As a thought experiment, this paper hopes to open up the reading of Matthew in light of Mark from a rhetorical perspective, and perhaps subsequent efforts can confirm or disprove this view of Matthew's thrust.