

MATTHEW

(2)

Rejection at Nazareth (13:53-58)

When Jesus returns home to Nazareth the townsfolk react with the skepticism that is typical of a small village. In Mark 6:1-6, the people say, **“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.”**

Since it was Jewish custom to refer to a man as the son of his *father*, the reference to Jesus as the “son of Mary” may have been to suggest illegitimacy. In Matthew the criticism continues: **“Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? And they took offense at him”** (Matthew 13:54-57). That “they took offense at him” is likely because a village carpenter would never consider himself also a teacher of the law unless he had formal training. (**“How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?”** John 7:15) The locals who grew up with Jesus in Nazareth knew that Jesus had no formal training; therefore they took issue with His sudden new status as a miracle-working “man of God.”



St. Matthew

Did Jesus have brothers and sisters?

The Church has always taught that Mary was a perpetual virgin, and that Jesus had no biological brothers or sisters. In Matthew, the Greek term for “brother,” *adelphos*, refers not only to blood relatives but also to distant cousins or to others who share some kind of bond. For example, in 1 Corinthians, “brothers” are those who saw Jesus after the Resurrection: **“Then, he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at the same time, many of whom are with us still, but some have fallen asleep”** (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Multiplication of loaves and fishes – Jesus walks on water (14:13-33)

Whereas Mark’s gospel seems to expect readers to recognize Jesus’ identity, Matthew would rather make sure; for again, Matthew wants to assure Jewish Christians that Jesus is indeed the Messiah of God. For example, in Mark after feeding the five thousand, Jesus walks on water toward the disciples in the boat. After Jesus enters the boat the disciples **“were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened”** (Mark 6:47-52). But in Matthew, after Jesus enters the boat the disciples **“worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’”** (Matthew 14:33).

Afterwards the Pharisees and scribes debate with Jesus over what defiles a man (Matthew 15:1-20). The difficulty for Matthew is that while Jesus says, **“Think not that I have come to abolish the law and prophets; . . . not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished”** (Matthew 5:17-18), He also says **“. . . to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man”** (Matthew 15:20). For Matthew’s Jewish Christian audience—in fact, throughout the New Testament—this is an ongoing tension: between faithfulness to the Mosaic tradition and the acceptance of Jesus’ radical new perspective. Are the traditional legal observances to be set aside? No wonder Matthew omits Mark 7:19—**“Thus he declared all foods clean”**—which might have only further offended his readers to see the law they had cherished as Jews so readily abolished.

Handwashing and ritual purity

Frequent ritual handwashing was not an everyday legal requirement for ordinary Jews. Whatever was the regular daily hygiene, the only ritual handwashing required in the Old Testament law was for priests when performing their official duties (Exodus 30:18-21; 40:30-32), or before they ate the sacrificial food (Leviticus 22:7). The many laws written after Moses sought to extend this requirement of the priests to everyone. The principle invoked was that Israel was a “Priestly nation.” (“. . . **you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**” Hebrews 19:6) In time, therefore, frequent ritual handwashing became expected of *all* Jews.

The faith of the Canaanite woman (15:21-28).

In Mark, Jesus’ attitude toward the woman certainly seems harsh. This would have concerned Matthew’s readers, that Jesus appears insensitive or even rude. However to her credit the woman refuses to accept the traditional Jewish exclusion of Gentiles from the grace of God, thereby giving a new perspective of the kingdom of heaven now open to **“people from the East and West”** (Matthew 8:11-12).

Matthew also omits Mark’s account of Jesus healing the deaf mute with spittle, likely because he feared it would have been misunderstood as magic (Mark 7:31-37).

The Messiah recognized by his disciples – Simon becomes Peter and receives keys (16:13-20)

The Old Testament background of Peter’s declaration—**“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”**—is the prophecy of 2 Samuel 7:13, that King David’s descendent will reign after him and that God will treat him like a son. In response to his confession, Jesus gives Simon a new name, “Peter” (*Kepha*, Aramaic, “stone” or “rock”), which was otherwise unknown as a personal name in the ancient world. Peter is also given the “keys of the kingdom,” that is, the power to bind or loose on earth (forgive or withhold forgiveness).

The Messiah is to suffer and die and rise again – Peter rebukes Jesus (16:21-22) .

This is the first of three predictions Jesus makes of His Passion, Death and Resurrection. **“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that it was necessary for him to go away to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and to be killed, and on the third day to be raised”** (16:21). However Peter rebukes Jesus, **“God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you”** (16:22). Peter protests because he does not understand the meaning of “messiah” and the true nature of Jesus’ mission to offer Himself in sacrifice.

The Transfiguration (17:1-13)

The Transfiguration is a glimpse of the coming of the Son of Man **“in his Father’s glory with his angels”** (Matthew 16:27). Further evidence of such end-time glory is the appearance of Moses and Elijah, who become known in Jewish tradition as the “deathless ones.”

Peter’s remark, **“Lord, it is well that we are here”** (Matthew 17:4) is not, *“we are glad to witness this marvelous scene,”* but rather, *“it is a good thing that we are here because we can do what needs to be done!”* That is, since a mountaintop is no place to entertain such distinguished visitors, Peter—a practical man—will provide them with fitting accommodation. The “booths” or shelters Peter wants to erect would presumably have been made with branches and leaves, such as those fashioned every July for the Jewish Feast of Booths or Tabernacles.

The humility of children - Sermon on the Church (18:1-19:2)

Jesus holds up a little child because humility is an essential virtue for a follower of Christ.

In the *Parable of the Lost Sheep* (18:10-14), the “Caiaphas principle” of John 11:49-50, is invoked: that it’s better that one man die than for the state to be destroyed. In contemporary terms,

political leaders usually focus on the 99% percent of their constituents to ensure the highest poll numbers. However Jesus came to save even the 1% that are lost (Matthew 10:6; 15:24). In fact, as an outcast himself, Matthew the tax collector was an early beneficiary of Jesus' concern for the 1%. **Teaching and judgment parables, entry to Jerusalem, cleansing of the Temple, and clashes with authorities** (19:1-23:39).

In this section the contrast is between traditional Jewish customs and values, and the new and demanding teaching of Jesus. For example, a man could essentially divorce his wife at will: **“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, . . .”** (Deuteronomy 24:1-2) Would Jesus limit a man's “right” to divorce his wife? In fact, Jesus says that God gave the Jews laws to enable them to make the best of a bad situation. But the Moses “permission” in Deuteronomy is not the way God intended things to be. Rather the principle of unbroken marriage remains, with the one exception of unchastity. Otherwise Jesus is saying there is no basis for divorce; that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was only a divine concession to fallen human nature. Nevertheless the absolute principle that Jesus cites in Genesis 2:24—that marriage is indissoluble—is what provokes the objection of the Pharisees in verse 7.

Third prediction of the Passion, Death and Resurrection (20:17-19).

Jesus' last prediction includes the Gentiles and their role in His Passion and Death. Especially humiliating was that the Jewish Messiah would be subject to Gentile mockery.

Jesus confronts the religious authorities in Jerusalem (21:1-25:46).

Arriving at the Jewish capital, the question is still about Jesus' authority. The drama takes place not in the Temple itself but in the vast courtyard. Normally the population of Jerusalem was about 30,000, but during Passover it grew to over 180,000. With its thirty-three acres the Temple courtyard was the natural gathering place during the festival for pilgrims coming from all over the Mediterranean world.

Jesus enters the capital in deliberate fashion; for having just walked over a hundred miles from Caesarea Philippi, only now does Jesus choose to ride a donkey for the last mile or two. The “hosannas” that people shout—*hosi a-na*—“save us now!” certainly was not what Rome wanted to hear. Jerusalem was no longer ruled by an Herodian king but by a Prefect (governor) who reported to Rome. *Hosannas* for a Jewish “king” from Galilee only increased the volatility of the scene, because Galilee was the only province at the time still under Herodian rule (**“When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.”** Luke 23:6-7)

Cleansing of the Temple (21:12-13). Jesus' cleansing of the Temple was directed not so much against the Temple traders themselves, but against the priestly establishment responsible for permitting the practice in the first place.

Parables of vigilance for the kingdom (21:28-22:14)

The Parable of the Two Sons (21:28-32) is an indictment of the Jewish leaders in that prostitutes and sinners would be entering the kingdom before them.

The Parable of the Wedding Feast (22:1-14) warns that one's initial response to the invitation of the word of God must yet be proven. The “wedding garment” was decent, clean white clothes that anyone would have owned. To accept the invitation to the kingdom and yet not dress appropriately (i.e., with holiness) presumes on the free offer of salvation (faith without works).

The Separation of the Sheep and the Goats (25:31-46) is particular to Matthew's gospel. The separation itself does not suggest differences in value between similar species. In biblical times both lambs and goats were highly valued for their meat, milk, wool and skins. Both served as equally acceptable sacrifices. Only because the Jews are the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" whom Jesus came to save were they likely placed on the Jesus' right side (Matthew 15:24).

The Messiah rejected, killed and vindicated (26:1-28:15)

The Passover and its rituals are yearly reminders to Israel of what it means to be the Chosen People of God. During Passover the Jews identify four nights which Israel must recall, of which the third is the "night of redemption" from Egypt. The fourth night looks forward to the messiah to come. In Matthew this is the first time Jesus' death is directly linked with Passover.

Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:36-46)

Until now Jesus has appeared in control of situations and of Himself. Now Jesus shows His deep distress—His agony—and the seriousness of God's will for Him. Yet the Father's will is not imposed on an unsuspecting victim, but is deliberately faced and accepted by the Son.

Arrest and trial of Jesus (26:47-27:26)

The final basis for the Jews' condemnation of Jesus are His words before the High Priest: "**You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.**" For this "blasphemy" Caiaphas tears his robes, which was the traditional gesture of mourning (Genesis 37:29), or a way to disassociate oneself from what was just heard (Numbers 14:6).

Jesus before Pilate

Blasphemy itself carried no weight in Roman law, so the Jewish leaders needed a charge that was sufficiently political to ensure a capital sentence from Pontius Pilate. That Jesus was being hailed "king of the Jews" was something the Roman governor could not ignore.

Mockery, Death, burial and Resurrection of Jesus (27:27-66)

By now Matthew expects his Jewish audience to grasp the truth that Jesus really is the king of the Jews, the Savior of the world. Hence the drama that follows Jesus' death—the earthquake, the tearing of the temple curtain, the opening of the tombs of the dead—was a kind of "broadcast" to all the world to know the truth of what had just happened.

Only Matthew records the sealing of the tomb and the placing of an armed guard. And in a society where women were not generally regarded as credible witnesses, women were the first to meet the risen Christ and convey the news to Jesus' disciples.

Galilee: the mission begins (28:16-20)

The preparation of The Twelve resumes as the disciples are restored to a position of trust and responsibility and given final instructions for their mission. Now the Good News is no longer for Israel alone, but for all the nations as Jesus said it would be (Matthew 24:14). And at the heart of this new community of faith is the risen Jesus, Who issues the unprecedented formula for the baptism of new disciples, joining the Son with the Father and the Holy Spirit in a single, holy "Name." (18:20)