

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).

Therefore, those who grew up with Jesus took issue with his sudden new status as a teacher and a worker of miracles.



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 they do. Matthew assures his Jewish Christian audience 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 their 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), but that he also seems to ignore the law by saying **“. . . 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 once cherished as Jews so readily abolished now that they are Christians.

Handwashing and ritual purity

Frequent ritual handwashing was not always an everyday legal requirement. Apart from 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). However, it was not long before the many laws and ritual obligations (“mitzvot,” Hebrew, *commandments*) collected from the first five books of the Bible (Torah) became standard for everyone. The principle invoked was that Israel was a “Priestly nation.” (“. . . **you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**” Exodus 19:6). Therefore, over time frequent ritual handwashing was expected of *all* Jews.

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

In Mark, Jesus’ attitude toward the desperate woman certainly appears insensitive or even rude. However, Jesus says plainly: **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** (15:24). Yet as a result of her back-and-forth exchange with Jesus, the woman, a non-Jew whose people worshipped the god Baal, pleads **“Lord, son of David.”** And Jesus rewards her: **“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done to you as you desire”** (15:28). 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 (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 descendant 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” (*cephas*, 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, to forgive or to 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 for sins.

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 on Mt. Tabor 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 to say “*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 mountain top 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 for the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles to celebrate the annual harvest.

The humility of children; teaching and judgment parables, entry into Jerusalem, cleansing of the Temple, and clashes with authorities (18:1 - 19:1-23:39).

After he holds up a young child as an example of humility, Jesus gives the *Parable of the Lost Sheep* (18:10-14). Continuing, 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 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).

Before the Exodus and the giving of the Ten Commandments, the Jews lived in Egypt for four hundred years. During that time they had accommodated themselves to Egypt’s rather relaxed view of marriage, which allowed either party to divorce at will. Moses “permitted” this concession, but the principle of unbroken marriage as God intended remained (with the exception of unchastity). By citing Genesis 2:24, Jesus is upholding the indissolubility of marriage, which 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. What was especially humiliating was that the Jewish Messiah would be mocked by Gentiles.

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. The Temple courtyard of thirty-three acres was the natural gathering place 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!” were especially provocative. Jerusalem was no longer ruled by a Herodian king but by a prefect or governor who reported to Rome. However, *hosannas* for a Jewish “king” from Galilee was an entirely different matter, in that 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 desecration of the sacred environs.

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 leadership, in that prostitutes and sinners would be entering the kingdom before them because the Jewish elders saw no need for themselves to repent.

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 clothing that anyone would have owned for special occasions. 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 animal species. In biblical times both lambs and goats were highly valued for their meat, milk, wool, and skins. Both served as

equally acceptable sacrifices. It is only because the Jews are the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” whom Jesus came to save, that they were placed on 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, but now he shows his deep distress—his agony—as the gravity of God’s will begins to unfold. Yet the Father’s will is not merely imposed but is accepted by Jesus.

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

The Jews finally condemn Jesus for his words before the High Priest: “**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), and a way for Caiaphas to disassociate himself from what was just said (Numbers 14:6).

Jesus before Pilate

Blasphemy itself as charged by the Jews had no bearing in Roman law, so the Jewish leaders needed a charge that was sufficiently political to ensure a capital sentence from Pontius Pilate. Ultimately, to prevent a riot (27:24), Pilate “**delivered him to be crucified**” (27:26).

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, in fact women were the first to meet the risen Christ and convey the news of his Resurrection 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.**” (Matthew 18:20)