

Chapter 1

Understanding Matthew's Gospel

Understanding can be expressed in two ways: (1) by restating, paraphrasing, or describing; and (2) by acting in a particular way or doing something. My aim in this book is to restate the story and concerns of Matthew's gospel, to describe its contents, and to express what I think its author is saying. While understanding as restatement predictably dominates this book, the question of appropriate action is never far off. I address this aspect at appropriate places throughout the book and discuss it briefly in the final chapter.

Determining how to restate the message of the author of Matthew's gospel is by no means self-evident. A number of options exist. No doubt the reading strategy or strategies we adopt for this task will determine to a great extent what we see. Choosing a strategy and explaining why I have chosen it are the tasks of this chapter.

Perhaps a personal story will help. Reading the Bible and hearing it read were important aspects of my upbringing. I was taught to read it not just because it was another interesting book but because in a special way it would guide me in living my life. My parents read it with me as a young child. This reading formed part of my bedtime ritual. When I was a little older, they provided me with devotional booklets that designated a short Bible reading and then offered some thoughts about the passage.

With my parents' help I was learning a particular reading strategy. I was learning to read the Bible devotionally, personally, with an eye focused on my daily life and circumstances. This strategy assumed that the Bible was a contemporary book and provided guidance for daily living. It assumed that reading the Bible was profitable and that I had a responsibility to act on what I read.

So a specific practice of reading developed in my life. This involved asking certain questions about each Bible passage: What did I learn about God or Jesus in relation to my life? What did I learn about people and myself? Was there an example to follow, an action to avoid, a warning to heed, a comforting or encouraging word to hear? This made the Bible accessible and contemporary for me.

Then it occurred to me that reading the Bible in this way meant there were parts of it that did not connect with my world. I noticed geographical and historical references that made no sense to me. There were allusions to strange customs or figures of speech that were quite foreign to my experience. There were instructions that baffled me. I remember being puzzled about the instruction to carry the soldier's pack an extra mile. I was not sure what to do with the command to pray in one's room with the door shut, because that seemed to limit where and when I could pray.

This meant two things. First, the Bible reflected a world different from my own. It bore the marks of a different time, place, and culture. Second, I was realizing that while my reading strategy served me well in some regards, there were aspects of the biblical material that were inaccessible to that particular approach.

I could have decided that, at this point, these other aspects didn't matter. After all, in any reading we cannot absorb everything an author sets before us. We ignore or filter out material. Sometimes, depending on circumstances, such as preparing for a test, writing a paper, or searching for information, we reread in an effort to discover more useful material.

Two things, however, prevented me from continuing with business as usual. First, my reading strategy had taught me to so value biblical material that it was difficult to ignore parts of it. Second, the reading strategy that had helped me to make sense out of biblical passages was also explicitly excluding parts of them. I realized that reading the Bible was more complex and required more questions than my strategy allowed.

Then I began studying the New Testament in a seminary. There I encountered a different set of questions and assumptions: a new reading strategy. This strategy is called historical criticism. It includes particular subsets called form, source, and redaction criticisms.¹ This strategy treats biblical writings not as bite-size pieces, but as individual documents. Historical criticism asks seven questions about each document in the New Testament:

- Who was the author?
- What sort of writing did he write? (It was always assumed to be a "he.")

- Who read it?
- How did he write it? Did he use sources?
- Where did the writer and the readers live?
- When did he and they live?
- What purpose did the author have?

In other words the historical conditions of the New Testament texts and their authors are of foremost importance. The focus is on an author's intentions and theological agenda. This strategy also assumes that the biblical texts are church texts written for communities of faith. The gospels and letters address the actual circumstances of communities of believers.

In this strategy information is the name of the game. This information is used to answer the seven questions. Competing theories also create overwhelming complexity and detail. It was exciting, complicated, and stimulating stuff.

It was also frustrating. On the one hand, historical criticism opened up all sorts of new issues for me. It articulated many new questions and insights. On the other hand, it ignored much. While it took the texts apart and broke them down into sources, it often did not put them together again as whole units. It concentrated on authors, on how biblical texts were produced, where and how they originated, and for what purposes. But it said little about the audience, about how the texts were received, and about their impact. Moreover, it seemed to say nothing about the present or about me, as had my other reading strategy. Historical criticism dug a huge ditch between the past and the present without offering a bridge across the ditch.

These two different reading strategies presented a puzzle. Could they be put together? Was it important to have different reading strategies for different purposes and situations? Was there a third strategy that embraced the respective strengths of the first two but overcame their weaknesses?

Joining the Authorial Audience

In this study I employ the notion of an authorial audience as a reading strategy.² This strategy invites us to read Matthew's gospel "as the author intended." This does not mean the author's inner intentions. These are lost to us forever. We could speculate on them, but since

Matthew is not among us to adjudicate on our varied guesses, our efforts are futile.³ Moreover, we know from conversation and other forms of communication that what we intend does not and cannot control the response of others. An innocent remark, for instance, can be interpreted as mean or critical. A serious comment can be treated as a joke.

Rather, to read “as the author intended” is to try and identify with and read along with the readers that the author has “in mind” in writing the gospel. Any author forms an image of those for whom he or she writes. This “authorial audience” is an ideal audience although it approximates an actual audience. The author images an audience that is able to respond appropriately to and understand everything in the text. The writing itself reveals an author’s assumptions about or image of this audience. The choice of words, the simple or complex style adopted, the inclusion or omission of difficult concepts, the level of familiarity with the subject matter, the choice of figures of speech, allusions to places or events or figures, explanations of material, items that are ridiculed or held to be sacred, and the advocacy of certain beliefs and values, indicate assumptions an author is making about the audience. By narrating actions, for instance, that display certain personal characteristics, the author will expect the audience to adopt certain attitudes toward these values. To read “as the author intended” is to identify with and read along with this audience envisioned by the author.

This audience exists, of course, only in the author’s mind. Its relationship to real or actual audiences can vary. If I agree with everything in a particular book of the Bible, then considerable overlap exists between the actual and authorial audiences. I have adopted the roles and responses expected of the book’s audience. This overlap is evident, for example, when I readily admire a character that the author expects me to admire. Likewise, if I read three pages and close the book declaring, “this is terrible,” there is little overlap. I have decided that I will not play the author’s game. In this case the gap between the role the author wants me to play as the authorial audience and my values, beliefs, or experiences is too large. So I refuse to read further.

A third option exists. Sometimes, even though there is a gap between the role, identity, and lifestyle required of the authorial audience and the actual audience, I decide to adopt the expected role. As the reader I can maintain my own identity yet still go along with the author. I enjoy a musical stage show, for instance, knowing that “in real life” a group of people does not suddenly burst forth into song. I consent to go along with the reality presented by the author because it offers other benefits.

In these circumstances the authorial audience goes along with its understanding of the roles, beliefs, commitments, knowledge, and so on

advocated by the text. It adopts for a while the identity and perspective that the text puts forward. To be an authorial audience is to join a “particular social/interpretive community . . . [and] to accept an author’s invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers.”⁴

Joining Matthew’s Authorial Audience

Three major obstacles present themselves as we consider joining Matthew’s authorial audience. These three obstacles can be generally identified with the three temporal stages in the reading process.⁵ These three stages provide the focus of this book’s three parts: Part One, Before Reading; Part Two, Reading Matthew; Part Three, After Reading.

Part One: Before Reading

Matthew’s gospel comes from a time and culture that differ greatly from our own. It bears the constraints of its historical location. It is written in Koiné Greek, and it assumes its audience is familiar with this language. It refers to daily life, customs, social patterns, cultural values, and religious experience of the first-century world. Its metaphors sound strange to modern ears. Certain conventions of storytelling are utilized. The author assumes the reader is familiar with all this knowledge and experience. If we are to join the authorial audience, we must educate ourselves to gain as much of this knowledge and experience as possible. Some can be accumulated as we read; some we need to identify before reading.

Accordingly, Part One, Before Reading, addresses some of the knowledge needed to read Matthew’s gospel. The main methods employed to identify and gather this knowledge are historical criticism and redaction criticism. Historical criticism investigates the historical circumstances, social patterns, and cultural values of Matthew’s world. Redaction criticism (featured in chs. 3–7), a subset of historical criticism, investigates the author’s theological point of view as indicated by changes made to his sources and in relation to the community or audience being addressed. Both methods help to fill in the knowledge and experiences assumed of the authorial audience.

In the next six chapters, the reader takes five steps toward joining the authorial audience by examining five key aspects of Matthew’s knowledge and experience. I am not claiming to convey *all* the knowledge assumed by the audience, only important elements of it.

A Cross-Cultural Step

Chapter 2 discusses the author implied by the Gospel of Matthew. It considers his possible relation to his subject matter, his ethnicity, the time and place of writing, and a sense of what is important to the author. This starting point helps to register the distance between the present and the world of Matthew's gospel. It provides a point of introduction to the world encountered in this text. This information has important implications for determining the genre of the gospel and the roles of the authorial audience.

Genre

The genre or form of any text imposes restrictions on an author and shapes the expectations of an audience. This is the topic of Chapter 3. For example, the genre of comedy restricts the author to providing humor. That choice creates expectations for an audience. The authorial audience expects and is expected to laugh. An audience that refuses to laugh (for whatever reasons) does not carry out the roles expected of the authorial audience. Determining the genre of the gospel, and hence the expectations of the audience, has caused much debate among scholars of the Gospel of Matthew.

The Audience's Religious Traditions

Matthew's gospel is a religious text belonging to the genre of ancient biography. It stands within a tradition of reflection about Jesus and the proclamation of his significance. The audience is assumed to have the identity and lifestyle of disciples of Jesus. It is familiar with traditions about Jesus. Chapter 4 examines some of the ways in which the author transmits and shapes these traditions, conserving and reconfiguring the identity and lifestyle of the audience. This alerts the reader to important emphases in the text.

The Audience's Social and Religious Experiences

The gospel's origin and text offer clues about social and religious experiences assumed of the authorial audience. Chapters 5 and 6 investigate four aspects of the social and religious knowledge and experience assumed of the gospel's authorial audience.

Narrative Conventions

An author employs various narrative conventions to guide the audience in its reading. The author assumes the audience is competent to recognize and utilize these conventions as it reads. Chapter 7 examines some of the conventions employed in Matthew's gospel.

By investigating these five areas in the next six chapters we will gain some familiarity with the world that the author and authorial audience share. In this way we can gain some of the knowledge assumed of the authorial audience. Part One provides these five steps toward joining the authorial audience.

Part Two: Reading Matthew

Joining the authorial audience requires the interpretation of extensive amounts of data. Different readers can understand a text in different ways. Sometimes this is because of diverse information in the text, and sometimes it is because readers lack the knowledge assumed by the text or mistake a work's genre. So, to join the authorial audience, one cannot be passive. The audience is always actively involved in making meaning. This active role is assumed throughout chapters 8–16. These chapters discuss four very important aspects of the audience's work: constructing the gospel's point of view (8–9), plot (10–11), settings (12), and characters (13–16).

Reading is like making a jigsaw puzzle. The authorial audience seeks to unify the various pieces of the gospel into a coherent whole. This task depends upon the knowledge gained before reading as well as that acquired through reading. It recognizes the limits and guidelines provided by the gospel's author, genre, and narrative conventions, and involves taking into account the audience's assumed experiences and knowledge. It requires reading and rereading, reevaluating, and redescribing the relationships among various aspects of the text. Such a process cannot eliminate differences of opinion about the work, but it will establish that some interpretations are inadequate in terms of joining the authorial audience.

Part Three: After Reading

A third obstacle to joining the authorial audience is the gap between the role of the authorial audience and the values or experiences of

actual readers. I have discussed this gap above in our general consideration of the authorial audience. Part Three provides a brief look at this in terms of Matthew's gospel.

Some readers of this gospel find the roles, identity, and lifestyle required of the authorial audience familiar and easy to assume. Others find them very difficult. Four brief examples identify some problematic areas: (1) Throughout the gospel, the authorial audience is asked to recognize God's presence among human beings. If readers do not think God exists or do not experience God in daily life, this is difficult if not impossible; (2) The authorial audience understands that Jesus' death is a sacrifice. For some readers with strong antipathies to any taking of life, this is a difficult notion to accept; (3) The authorial audience, in siding with Jesus and the disciples, goes along with Jesus' strong condemnations of the Jewish religious leaders. For readers with knowledge of the church's tragic history of collusion with anti-Semitism, such condemnation is most problematic; and (4) The authorial audience encounters many more male than female characters. For some the male-dominated world of the gospel may be difficult to connect with, and even offensive.⁶

I advocate reading the gospel as the authorial audience. I am not claiming, however, that this is the definitive reading of the gospel. It is not a privileged reading exempt from reflection and critique. Rather, to read as the authorial audience forms a basis for further reflection on the gospel. To find out what Matthew is saying is a step toward considering the implications and adequacy of this understanding of reality. The dual roles of *authorial* and *actual* audience provide the means for debate between the two. By joining the authorial audience the reader builds the bridge between Matthew's gospel and the world of the present. Some readers may find that no traffic can pass over this bridge. Others will find that there is much two-way traffic as they contemplate how this gospel shapes their identity and lifestyle as disciples of Jesus in a world very different from that of Matthew. This final part, titled *After Reading*, will briefly consider Matthew's gospel in relation to several aspects of contemporary religious experience. It invites the reader to explore these issues further.

To summarize, Part One, *Before Reading* (chs. 2–7), examines five aspects of the knowledge and experience assumed of the authorial audience:

- A sense of the gospel's author, time, and place of origin
- The gospel's genre and the expectations that its genre creates

- The audience's religious traditions, its knowledge about and experience of Jesus
- The audience's social and religious experiences as disciples of Jesus
- The audience's reading skills

Part Two, Reading Matthew (chs. 8–16), investigates how the authorial audience recognizes and constructs the gospel's point of view, plot, settings, and characters. Part Three, After Reading (ch. 17), considers the identity and lifestyle of the authorial audience in relation to actual audiences and some aspects of contemporary religious experience.

Notes

1. I should note that the word "criticism" does not indicate an attack on the Bible. Rather it is used to designate a set of questions, a particular way of reading the Bible.

2. This approach is outlined in P. J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 15–46.

3. It is, after all, interpreters who formulate analyses and then claim that their interpretation realizes the authorial intention. Claiming one's interpretation as the author's intention has been identified as the "intentional fallacy." A plethora of claims about the author's purposes prompted a redaction critic to comment, "Perhaps it is an embarrassment that a method which purports to be especially suited for unearthing an author's purpose has produced so many purposes for Matthew." So D. Garland, review of J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew, RevExp* 74 (1977): 567–78. We will recognize below that even if authorial intention in this sense can be established, it may not be as central to the interpretive process as some have thought. So N. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (GBS; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 28.

4. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading*, 22.

5. I readily concede that what is ascribed here to these three linear stages probably happens in a much more integrated and simultaneous way; however, this structure enables various dimensions of this complex process to be identified and considered separately.

6. See, for example, the discussion of Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew* (BZBW 60; New York: de Gruyter, 1991).