

Cross and Kingdom in Matthew's theology

Prof. Aguirre first analyzes the little "apocalypse" of Mt 27:51-53 for its theology of Jesus' death. Against this backdrop he asks whether we can speak of a Matthean theology of history.

"El Reino de Dios y la muerte de Jesús en el evangelio de Mateo," *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 54:210 (July-Sept. 1979) 363-82.

At the very moment of Jesus' death Matthew inserts an "apocalypse" into his passion account:

... and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. [27:51b-53]

The importance this text has for Matthew prompts the questions: How does it interpret Jesus' death? What does it tell us about the advent of God's reign?

Though this study is redactional and will set Mt 27:51-53 within the whole of Matthew's theology, some preliminary notes on the text itself are in order:

1. *Tradition history.* Vocabulary indicates a pre-Matthean text to which Matthew has added redactional details.

2. *Genre.* Here, as often, Matthew inserts a brief apocalypse and wishes thereby to set forth the theological and eschatological meaning of Jesus' death. Historicizing would enmesh us in a host of pseudo-problems and cause us to lose the true meaning.

3. *Death/Resurrection linkage.*
[a] Literary ties: the signs accompanying both events (cf Mt 28:2-4) are introduced with the Matthean *kai idou*, indicating special importance. Each pericope emphasizes an earthquake—a divine (revelatory) intervention. The two passages encompass a delicate play on *fear*: the "positive" fear of the *Roman* guards (leading to a confession of faith) is contrasted with the "negative" fear of the *Jewish* guards (leaving them like dead).
[b] Redactional-theological ties: Matthew's passion account adds redactional touches that highlight Jesus' glory, his divine sonship. By contrast, Mark portrays a drama of scandal. Matthew's theology thus permits the light of the Resurrection to shine with greater clarity on Jesus' passion and death. In Matthew, we see "the glorious passion of the Son of God" (Léon-Dufour).

4. *Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones.* The clear allusion in Mt 27:51b-53 to Ezekiel's prophetic vision is clear from the following:

Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves. . . . And you

shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves. . . . And I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live. . . ; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, says the Lord. [Ezek 37:12-14]

In the Judaism of Matthew's day, this vision was interpreted as a type of messianic salvation, of God's eschatological in-breaking.

The allusion to Ezekiel existed in the pre-Matthean text, but Matthew has heightened it by redactional details inserted in the immediate context. In Mt 27:50 we meet the unusual expression *aphēken to pneuma* (delivered the spirit): the eschatological life-giving Spirit promised in Ezekiel's vision is actually conferred in Jesus' death. Again, Ezek 37:12-14 twice emphasizes the vision's revelatory nature; and Mt 27:54 stresses the revelatory nature of Jesus' death:

When the centurion and those who were with him . . . saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe, and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

MEANING OF MT 27:51-53

God's confirmation of Jesus. The charges leveled against Jesus centered on (a) his word about the Temple and (b) his claim to be God's Son. The portents following his death are God's ("divine passive") answer to both accusations. With Jesus' death, the Temple is rejected (27:51a), and Jesus' divine sonship is revealed and confessed (27:54).

Judgment on Israel and prolepsis of the Parousia. God's intervention in Jesus' death is his rejection of Israel for rejecting his Son (cf Mt 21:28-22:14; 23:37-24:2; 27:24f). *Emphanizō* (appear, v 53b) often has

the meaning of testifying, indeed, testifying against. Matthew's meaning is that these risen saints are God's witnesses against a faithless people and city. Further, convulsions of nature suggest God's anger (cf Joel 3:15f). Thus the "signs" in Mt 27:51b-52 (esp. when joined to the rent Temple curtain) suggest God's anger with Israel.

Mt 27:51b-53 must be seen in conjunction with Jesus' reply to the high priest (26:64). The Matthean expression, "But I say to you," is elsewhere used to introduce words of judgment. And the Matthean special material often represents the coming Son of man as *judge* (cf 13:41ff; 16:27; 24:30; 25:31ff). Above all, Jesus' prophetic appeal to a future vision contains clear references to Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13. Both OT contexts speak of the Messiah's (Son of man's) triumph over his enemies.

When will this take place? The definitive realization will come with the Parousia; but Matthean theology envisions a process that begins with Jesus' passion—"From this moment on. . . ." (*ap' arti*, 26:64)—and climaxes in his death-and-resurrection. Hence Matthew sees the "signs" of 27:51-53 as the proleptic fulfilment of Jesus' prophetic appeal (26:64), as anticipating the Parousia and Jesus' coming in judgment.

In a word, Matthean theology, in anticipating the events of the Parousia, is stating that the one who dies on the Cross is the future judge of the world.

God's eschatological intervention. In Jesus' day, Ezek 37:1-14 was read as describing the events of the messianic and eschatological era. Thus Mt 27:51b-53 means to say that

Jesus' death is the moment of God's eschatological intervention, that these signs show "the eschatological power of that death" (E. Lohmeyer). As J. Jeremias paraphrases:

the earth quakes . . . the dead rise, the shift in the ages has arrived. . . . the dawn of the new age.

In late Judaism, the definitive resurrection in glory was no merely historical happening, but the beginning of God's new creation, with its source in the Spirit of Yahweh. Hence the clear reference to Ezek 37 is meant to portray Jesus' death (and resurrection) as the key moment in salvation history, as the end of the old economy (27:51a)—amid the signs announcing Yahweh's mighty works (27:51b-53)—and the beginning of the final resurrection.

Mt 27:51-53 proclaims the in-breaking of eschatology into *history*. Matthean theology of Jesus' death-and-resurrection thus poses the problem of whether there is a definable theology of history in Matthew.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Can we speak of a true "historical perspective" in the First Gospel? Scholars differ widely.

G. Strecker asserts that like 2nd-generation Christians generally, the delay of the Parousia forced Matthew to rethink the problem of historical time—past and future. We find in Matthew a true conception of a history with three stages. Central is the age of Jesus (including John the Baptist and the disciples)—the time of exclusive mission to Israel. This age, ending with the death of Jesus, is preceded by the period of the OT (ending with the rejection of Israel)

and is followed by the period of the church (extending to the Parousia)—the opening of the gospel to the Gentiles. The destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD) is no more than the visible manifestation of a rejection already realized. Matthew's gospel thus explicitly regards the past (Jesus' life) *as past* and so should be read christologically, not ecclesiologically.

H. Frankemölle's position is radically different. Matthew's gospel betrays no truly historical interest in past events. What looks like history is actually narrative fiction designed solely to speak to the situation of his own day and his readers' interests. Matthew has "de-historicized" his tradition and speaks not of the Jesus of the past but of the Christian community and the Lord of the present. The interpretive key is rather ecclesiology than christology (though both are inseparable). Matthew sees salvation history undifferentiatedly as a qualitative whole.

J. D. Kingsbury takes an intermediate position. Salvation history for Matthew consists of two epochs: promise (OT) and fulfilment. Though the latter contains various stages (ministry of John the Baptist, that of Jesus himself, and the post-Easter missions up to the Parousia), they should not be regarded (as does Strecker) as qualitatively different, may not be ranged along a scale of increasing eschatological intensity. Frankemölle, however, is wrong in contending that Matthew dissolves past history into present concerns. Matthew does distinguish historical stages within the epoch of Jesus, but these do not differ in eschatological intensity.

I will present my own thoughts under three headings:

1. *Two levels of meaning.* Matthew contains a level of narration, grounded in tradition and embodying an historical perspective on the past—though seen through faith and hence idealized. But there is also a second level that makes this past narrative relevant to the present needs of Matthew's community. Though neither level of discourse is ever totally absent, in some contexts one level may take precedence over the other, and the Gospel will slip imperceptibly from one to the other. To canonize relevancy—to read Matthew from an exclusively ecclesiological viewpoint—is to fall into Frankemölle's exaggerated assessment of Matthew as "narrative fiction" with no interest in past as past. On the other hand, those for whom the Gospel's overriding function is giving the reader a theological perspective on history can easily stress the christological to the neglect of the ecclesiological. Strecker says, for instance, that Matthew presents no explicit understanding of the church.

2. *Jesus' death and theology of history.* Even Kingsbury does not fully reckon with Matthew's historical perspective. Keying on christology, he can say that with Jesus there are no longer, strictly speaking, periods within salvation history, for God's kingdom becomes present with equal, unchanging intensity. But if we bear in mind Matthew's concern with ecclesiology, we see how the radical shift from Israel to the Christian community represents a new, more intense presence of the Kingdom. Kingsbury's myopia is seen in his mishandling of R. Kratz. Though

both Mt 11:5 and 27:52 speak of "raising the dead" and though the former is related to the latter as pre-figurative sign to definitive sign (what Jesus announced from the beginning is brought to be in his death-and-resurrection), nevertheless we cannot equate their eschatological value: the former is mere resuscitation and entails dying again!

We often hear that there is a vagueness in Matthew's gospel as to the exact moment or event that brings about the shift in God's economy. O. H. Steck locates this imprecision in Matthew's attempt to effect a join between two disparate strains: a Palestinian tradition (Israel's exclusion is due to its opposition to Christian preachers) and a Hellenist tradition (exclusion results from opposition to the Son, sent by God). Matthew, however, is no naive copyist of disparate elements. True, Matthew sees Israel's "obduracy" as a totality: John the Baptist, Jesus himself, the disciples—all preach the same Kingdom and all meet the same opposition. The three parables of Mt 21:28-22:14 bring out this unrelenting obstinacy quite well. Yet even here the accent falls on the central parable (the wicked tenants) and the killing of the son!

In assessing Matthew's theology we must reckon with the central importance of Jesus' death-and-resurrection. The same death (and resurrection) that climaxes the chosen people's rejection effects as well God's decisive in-breaking.

3. *Jesus' death and the advent of the Kingdom.* For Matthew—and for him alone—"God's kingdom" is central to Jesus' preaching. This complex

idea is further complicated by a two-fold internal tension: [1] above/below and [2] now/some day.

[1] God's sovereignty must be realized on earth as it has always been in heaven. —Here, Matthew aligns himself with rabbinic theology.

[2] In union with synoptic tradition, Matthew looked forward to the future (completely new and unforeseeable) in-breaking of God's kingdom. That Kingdom—always somehow present throughout salvation history and unifying both Testaments—yet

admits to "more intense degrees of realization" (W. Trilling). And through his redaction (adding his apocalypse) Matthew takes the theological position that the climactic moment in this in-breaking is Jesus' death-and-resurrection. This was grasped by the Roman soldiers in their confession: "Truly this was the Son of God!" To believe in Jesus is, for Matthew, to believe that with Him there has taken place God's definitive intervention in the course of human events.

The Magnificat as God-talk

Jacques Dupont, O.S.B., "Le Magnificat comme discours sur Dieu," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 102:3 (May-June, 1980) 321-43.

In this article, Jacques Dupont studies the Magnificat from an intriguing perspective—to see what it has to tell us about God.

Dupont first makes some preliminary remarks: [1] Though the poem seems to have been inserted into its present context, it yet gives clear indications of having been carefully adapted to that context. [2] A study of the composition of the Magnificat shows its overall literary unity.

Coming to the content itself, Dupont reads the Magnificat as a poem-commentary on the salvific import of a specific event: the conception of the Infant whom Mary carries in her womb. At the same time, it gives us a picture of the God who intervenes in that event.

If, says Dupont, a legitimate thematic of the Magnificat is God's intervention (action) in history (revealed in the Annunciation to Mary),

then we must pay close attention to the canticle's complex usage of action words (verbs) and their tenses. Such analysis shows that the Magnificat bears a manifest temporal reference, unifying past, present, and future. In the Annunciation to Mary (present event), the whole of the future is somehow included and realized; and, in that same event, the promise made to the "fathers" (in the past) achieves its fulfillment.

On whose behalf does God intervene? Who are the objects of his divine action?

1. We see in the Magnificat the religious antithesis between "those who fear him" and "the proud in the imagination of their hearts." The antithesis is quite sharp, for, biblically, man can become important in his own eyes only to the extent that he rids himself of the fear of God. This religious vocabulary occurs as