

Matthew as Literature:
A Close Reading of the Passion and Resurrection

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Students of the Christian Bible seem to fall off the horse in one of two directions. Some, nervous that the apparent strength of reason might demolish the Bible's credibility, fight (as if their faith depended on it) to defend the canon as a collection of factually correct, non-contradictory writings. To the extent that this group views the Bible as an infallible science book, history book, and a fruit-laden tree from which rational theologies might be plucked, an honest look at what may well be a highly conscious and artful presentation on the author's behalf is more or less taboo. Other students of the Bible dissect it, analyzing each work's particular historical context and confined meaning¹, limiting it to a piecemeal analysis able to fill a book, but unable to move the heart. What these views have in common is this: reason is, admitted or not, *king*: one subjects the text to reason; the other uses the text as his starting point to begin reasoning (or even his excuse to refuse to reason). A literary consideration of the Scriptures is, at the least, a helpful way of extending the possible significance of actual events, and, at best, is arguably a middle—or perhaps *higher*—ground. Studying the Scriptures in general and the Gospel of Matthew in particular as, primarily, works of literature is perhaps an effective way both to convert the soul and to deepen the spiritual senses of the converted.

Background: *purpose, mode, and "accuracy"*

“I should like balls infinitely better if they were carried on in a different manner...It would certainly be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day.”

“Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I dare say, but it would not be near so much like a ball.”

(Austen 37).

Like a ball, encounter with God is not to be characterized solely by reason. A fresh look the Bible at reveals a book of, primarily, *stories*, strikingly different from what might be called “ratiocinative” systematic theology. A fresh look also unveils the truth about such modern systematic theological doctrines: they are derivative of the stories themselves. Seen in this literary way of theologizing are the *purpose*: not to inform, but to persuade; and the *mode*: not ratiocinative, but imaginative. Persuasion is at the heart of the writings in the Bible. The Scriptures in general seek to move the heart either from unbelief

¹ This is called the historical-critical method.

to belief or from belief to the deeper spiritual senses (Catechism 38-39). The heart, however, is not moved by ratiocinative doctrines; the imagination must be activated.

In order to activate the imagination, the redactors of the Bible use narrative, which points to how God himself is to be known: over time and through experience. Reason follows particular rules of logic, rules of inference, which express how reason itself operates; the result is something like a rational doctrine (e.g. “Man’s will is bound”). The Bible, however, is not nearly so rationally explicit. The Scriptures use tropes and other forms of figurative language to reach the imagination, expressing how the imagination itself operates. The result is the comprehension of a rich, deep, irreducible image instead of a flat proposition. To illustrate, when analyzing a musical work, one does not extract notes like C and D to “know” their “meaning”. Their meaning is known in context and in relation to surrounding notes, including the work’s beginning and end. A piece of music, like God, is known over time and through experience. Perhaps doctrines are not meant to be dislodged from a story as one would extract and evaluate yellow from a palette of colors. A question arises: if imagination lies or can lie dormant when reason is employed, is reason necessarily useless during imaginative comprehension? Perhaps it is best to think of reason as a tool. Reason cannot posit something of itself; it can only work with materials already available. Imagination, however, conceives of ends and can utilize reason to help achieve or thwart those ends.²

In using narrative, the Scriptures thus use literary techniques rather than assertions of reason as their main method of representing Yahweh and his interaction with mankind. The careful construction of the texts, the dramatic irony, the word choices, the interior monologues and detailed gestures all point to a redactor with a concern for fictional technique. Moreover, attention to plot, characterization, theme, style, and setting constitute the very mode of the Bible’s theologizing. The works of the Christian canon were composed before today’s methods of science and notions of history and were largely free of ancient Greco-Roman dialectical philosophy. The purpose of the redactors, therefore, was not to document cold facts but to fictionalize their history, or historicize their fiction, in a way that brought to light their God.

The Master Narrative of the Canon

God reveals himself, as previously asserted, narratively. By stepping back from the Old Testament, a certain vision of God and a certain vision of man are made clear. Viewed as a unified work,

the Old Testament plots Yahweh's tragic attempts to call Israel into faithful relationship. The grossness of the heart is evident in (1)man's rebellion against the Law, (2)short memory of and greedy attitude toward wondrous deeds, (3)deaf ears toward prophets, and (4)hearts impenetrable by wisdom, (5)unmoved by apocalyptic cries. The New Testament features a comedic upturn, where the failures of the Old Testament are remedied. Matthew features this comedic upturn in a unique way.

Matthew: an Overview

Matthew is an ideal example of the richness that may be accessed only through a literary reading. A *toledot*, or genealogy, opens the book and also gives it a structure. Christ is said to be “son of David, son of Abraham,” and the genealogy is traced from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian exile, and from the Babylonian exile to Jesus. Each of the three sections lists fourteen generations, the same number as the total value of the Hebrew letters in the name “David.” The *toledot*, with the generations manipulated to serve a purpose, effectively alerts the reader of a key purpose of this gospel: to identify Christ as the son of Abraham and son of David. Furthermore, David is primary. The kingdom, with which David is so closely associated, will thus be a key theme in this book.

The gospel is structured around five discourses of Christ, each ending with some version of the phrase, “And after he finished saying these words.” For the sake of simplicity, this paper will use the structure found in the *New American Bible's* introduction to Matthew, which divides the book up in this way:

	The Infancy Narrative (1.1 – 2.23)
1st section	Narrative, Discourse (3.1 – 7.29) Christ issues the new law in the Sermon on the Mount. <i>ending with, “When Jesus finished these words...”</i>
2nd section	Narrative, Discourse (8.1 – 11.1) Christ works miraculous wonders in healing (he conquers the ills of existence, paralleling the conquest of Joshua). <i>ending with, “When Jesus finished giving these commands...”</i>
3rd section	Narrative, Discourse (11.2 – 13.53) Christ gives the new wisdom—“something greater than Solomon” (Matt. 12.42)— in the parable discourse. <i>ending with, “When Jesus finished these parables...”</i>
4th section	Narrative, Discourse (13.54 – 18.35) Christ is the rejected prophet. <i>ending with, “When Jesus finished these words...”</i>

5th section Narrative, Discourse (19.1 – 25.46)

Christ grows apocalyptic in light of the grossness of heart, as did the prophets of Israel.

ending with, “When Jesus finished all these words...”

The Passion and Resurrection (26.1 – 28.20) (*New Testament 7*)

The writer of the New Testament’s opening gospel uses textual allusions, a technique also employed by writers of fiction, to link Christ with Israel. Matthew reveals Jesus in a rhetorically persuasive way as the Messiah by intertextual allusions and quotations that link Christ with the Jewish Scriptures. He tells the story of Christ in such a way as to recapitulate the master narrative of the Old Testament in the life of Christ, with the master narrative of the Old Testament floating above, subtly linked to the Matthean text. By reinterpreting prophecies from Isaiah in a higher prophetic register, this writer is rethinking these seeming failed prophecies as pointing to the man Jesus. One must remember that the whole story is known while the redactor Matthew writes, as the approximate date of this gospel is post A.D. 70 (*New Testament 6*). Thus this is not a journal written contemporary with Christ’s life and work; rather it is a reflection on Christ in hindsight, imaginatively representing him as a fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. Matthew’s work is a reach of the Jewish imagination in identifying the man Jesus Christ with the fulfillment of the Isaian prophecies.

Matthew has structured his gospel around the five pairs of narrative and discourse texts outlined above, which emphasize the words and deeds of Christ (in discourse and narrative), bringing to mind the Old Testament words and deeds of Yahweh and the responses of his people. Christ relives the history of Israel, showing the faithfulness and intimacy Yahweh has always desired of men, and ironizing his audience of Jews. The structures of existence have been shown to be powerless in the face of Yahweh’s power, but the human heart is still hard. And so Christ must go even further.

Matthew: Passion and Resurrection***Poetics***

The intertextuality rife within the Scriptures points to self-conscious borrowing and allusions that bring meaning to the imaginative work. Certain texts in particular loom in the background in this last section of Matthew, the climax of the gospel (France 359), and very often emerge quite plainly:

1. Wisdom 2 – 3 [the suffering “just one”]

2. Psalms 88, 89, 69, 22 [betrayal by friends; death is final and the ultimate evil; “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”]
3. Isaiah 53 [silent, suffering lamb]
4. Daniel 12.1-3 [resurrection]
5. II Maccabees 7.1-9; 12.42-46 [resurrection]

These texts include themes and images that are teased out in Matthew and serve as links from the Old Testament writings to Jesus the man.

Christ’s position and claims to connection with divinity bring to light treachery of at least three different natures. First, the complaining of the disciples at the anointing at Bethany, the betrayal by Judas, and the sleepy disciples in Gethsemane all stem from wrongly viewing their relationship with Christ. Secondly, Peter’s denial stems from fear of power: he fears governmental oppression. The Jewish leaders themselves share the flip-side of this same fear: they fear the loss of their authority, which would follow from a reinterpretation of the law and an altered understanding of man’s relationship to Yahweh. The crucifixion brings to light a third cause of betrayal: the seeming ultimacy of the physical world. Death seems final. (The disciples despair and later doubt.) Women in this section, perhaps signifying a right posture toward truth itself, are not seen to fall into any of these three treacheries.

With the history of Israel recapitulated in the five structural sections, Matthew moves beyond the parallel by adding something new. Teaching from Jesus is conspicuously absent here (France 359), and this last section of the book serves as an extension, introducing differences that are able to target the problem of the heart. After the phrase “When Jesus finished all these words,”³ which signals the conclusion of each of the five discourse passages in the gospel, Matthew immediately introduces in 26.2 the theme of this last section: betrayal. The chief priests and the elders of the people, plainly representing the official rejection of the Messiah by Israel (France 360-61), consult to arrest Christ and put him to death. The next moment of betrayal comes a few lines later, when Judas Iscariot exchanges his personal loyalty to Christ for thirty pieces of silver, bringing to mind the same contemptuous sum given for the service of the good shepherd in Zechariah 11.12 and also the required payment for a gored slave (Exodus 21.32).

³ Used five times in Matthew, this phrase provides internal structure for the book by marking the move from one narrative/discourse pair to the next. See verses 7.28; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1; 26.1.

Sandwiched between these two betrayals by men is an encounter with a woman, recollective of the characterization of women Matthew presented at the outset of the gospel, even in the *toledot*.⁴ France confirms the placement of this scene as important in interpreting the surrounding material (361). Women become terribly important in this last section of Matthew, beginning with the anointing of Christ by a woman in Bethany. Spilling out costly perfume over his head as he reclined at the table, this woman receives “indignant” reactions from Christ’s own disciples, those who should have best known the worthiness (or lovability) of Christ. Judas’ betrayal, juxtaposed with this anointing, arguably implies a disgust at this type of devotion and a resistance to move away from an ethic of good deeds and keeping the law. The woman’s “waste” is highly exalted. This woman (unnamed in this gospel, and perhaps significantly so, in order to represent a more general what we might call *feminine* response seen throughout the Old Testament,) wastes costly materials on her lord; in the next scene Judas sells out his lord for the price of a gored slave. In this, Matthew seems to set up a grand disparity between the feminine and the masculine concerns, embodied here as male and female characters. Here the feminine concern of personal devotion and attention to Christ wins praise. In the Greek dramas, one might paint with a broad brush and note that men tend to be concerned with the *polis*, politically unifying policies or abstract principles, while women’s concerns are usually focused more on the home and people with whom they share relationship.⁵ At this point, Jews, it seems, err on the side of the masculine. Legalism and prudence abound, but devotion and trust are absent. In the relationship with their creator, men are perhaps called to assume a feminine role: more *personal* than *political*. Yahweh has attempted to woo Israel as a bride, but Israel as a whole has been a masculine bride, ever more concerned with political dominion and legal obligation than with a loving relationship. In this last section of Matthew, women honor the bridegroom; men betray him. Matthew will continue to develop this theme throughout this last section of Matthew: the masculine seems to epitomize the problem of the heart.

Betrayal rears its head again as Christ eats the Passover with the Twelve, the next move of the text. The rich meaning of the Passover table, and certainly the meaning of Christ as the Passover lamb, indeed warrants lengthy treatment, but for the purpose of this paper one might simply note that “the

⁴ Women assume a striking role in the *toledot*, and Mary continues the theme of the unlikely woman through whom comes blessing.

commemoration of Israel's rescue from Egypt is the appropriate time for the ultimate act of redemption to occur (France 360). Matthew associates Christ with the fulfillment of Psalm 41.10, where the betrayer is one "who is eating with me." Immediately Matthew moves to the eating not *with* Christ but eating *of* Christ in this first Eucharist meal. The meal is at least twofold: redemptive sacrifice and spiritual food. Christ offers his body and blood as the Passover lamb to the same men who will all prove his betrayers in a short time. This food and drink are also offered as nourishment, spiritual stay against the temptation to doubt. This nourishment will be continual: Christ brings a new community into being as he institutes this meal for his beloved. The Church will gather and offer this grace of Christ's eternal presence to the spiritually weak. The hardness of heart is known more and more fully as betrayal is pictured evermore as the break of a *personal relationship*, the nature of which was unknown by Israel when they believed wisdom to be the keeping of the law. Knowing the grossness of the human heart, Christ offers a way for familiarity with himself in order to build the faith of those he leaves behind and of his future disciples: they will participate in his human presence. In this way only can the heart be moved to love; deliverance from temptation and oppression does not strengthen the flesh. The kingdom that Christ is announcing is more and more removed from any socio-political purpose. Rather, Christ will fulfill the Scriptures in a twofold way: he will demonstrate the relationship desired by Yahweh, and he will demonstrate the way to overcome grossness of heart.

Zechariah 13.7 is imaginatively recalled by Christ and fulfilled in the scattering of his disciples, scandalized in him. Peter protests his faith to be solid, but Christ prophesies that he, too, shall be a betrayer three times over that very night. In the garden of Gethsemane, Christ brings his disciples to pray. Witnesses of the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John, are taken even further in order to keep watch with Christ. "Sorrowful even to death," Christ leaves and returns three times to sleeping men, inconstant in devotion. Christ remembers again that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (26.41). Judas, his "betrayer," approaches to beguile him. This second Adam does not hide in a bush to avoid death, but he comes forth to endure it. Christ falls into captivity as Israel did and as Christ's followers will. The garden of Gethsemane "shares something important with the original Paradise: it is a sacred space within which a radical decision is made that reverses the course of human history" ("Garden" 317). Christ's attitude in Gethsemane exemplifies what each man must face and how he ought face it.

Betrayal, more personal and fully realized in the following section, here also points to right relationship. Judas has planned the treachery with the religious leaders, Christ has foretold Judas' and the disciples' betrayal, and now the first active betrayal is upon Christ with a kiss. Jesus, addressed as "Rabbi" by Judas, greets him with a word used but once in the gospel: "Friend." The many instances of treachery in this section of Matthew have been pointing, by contrast, to their opposite. In the same moment of active and personal betrayal, Matthew articulates the very relationship Yahweh has sought with his people: friendship. Fear, obedience, and glory are to *stem from* this relationship, not to be sought of their own accord. Israel was much isolated from contemporary philosophies of the day, from classical philosophy and Roman dialectical methods. The friendship Christ names therefore must not be overlaid with the Aristotelian qualifications for friendship (specifically, friendship as existing only between equals). This friendship is of another kind, glimpsed perhaps in two instances earlier in Matthew: the Canaanite woman's faith (15.21-28) and children in chapter 18. In these two pictures of right attitude, a dog and children, one sees the quality of friendship: real loyalty that stretches beyond the benefits received. The Old Testament scriptures had called for obedience based on God's wondrous deeds; Christ will have a firmer foundation: friendship on the grounds of a benevolence previously unknown. One critic notes that this sacrifice of Christ "is the theological foundation for the theme, which has emerged throughout this Gospel, of a new basis of membership of the people of God" (France 369). Christ liberates man by his own initiative. He feeds him with his continual presence. He shows man how to undergo what he must undergo. He calls man, his betrayer, into a relationship of love. A relationship with God built on friendship, which is unique to Christianity among religions, can transform the heart.

Ironizing the reader, Matthew here reveals and later emphasizes the egoistic heart of all men and the tremendous surprise of a friendship with the one whom they betray. Christ's power over the physical moment is made clear ("twelve legions of angels"), but the expected political Messiah does not come forth. What Isaiah prophesied had not happened; five hundred years later and Israel is still awaiting liberation from oppressors, the return to glory. Matthew will imaginatively demonstrate these Scriptures to be fulfilled but in a surprising way, the prophecies of Isaiah understood in a higher prophetic register. This last section of the gospel ties together the three possible sources of the Messiah (Jewish expectations from

the book of Isaiah⁶) in the man of Jesus: offspring of the line of David, a suffering servant, and connection with divinity. Israel has an appetite for that which benefits them, namely miracles, but Christ is often reluctant to do miracles as they feed the Jews' egoism but often does them from compassion. Perfect lack of egoism is time and again pictured in Christ as he endures and sacrifices without benefit. Christ is demonstrating the way to overcome the weaknesses of the flesh: submission to the structures of existence, for they themselves are not final. Christ will more clearly posit and reveal a truer reality. Christ's behavior under suffering will serve as an example for the New Israel, who will also suffer. After Christ is seized, Matthew again punches the theme of disloyalty: "Then all the disciples left him and fled."

Fearful of the loss of authority which would accompany the primacy of "friendship" with Yahweh over obedience to the law, Caiaphas, the scribes, elders, chief priests, and the entire Sanhedrin question Christ. He is accused of blasphemy when he quotes in answer Psalm 110.1 and Daniel 7.13. The book of Isaiah is in mind at this point as the "silent" one who gave his "back to those who beat [him]" (53.7; 50.6). Also in mind is the book of Wisdom, chapter two, which involves the "just one" who "sets himself against [the] doings" of those with strength as their "norm of justice." The "just one" is to be condemned to a shameful death, torture and revilement by these who decry, "Let us enjoy the good things that are real...let us crown ourselves with rosebuds ere they wither." By calling to mind an attitude seen in Wisdom, Matthew identifies Christ with the "just one" and the current Jewish mentality with the folly of mistaking the fundamentally "real."

As Christ endures shame and torture, Peter avoids them by deception. After having walked on water with Christ, confessed him as the Messiah, and witnessed his transfiguration, Peter denies association with Christ three times. Peter's denial is followed by the despair of Judas, despair that points not to belief in Christ's redefinition of reality, but despair that misses the mark again. Judas embraces the very misery he ought to redefine in light of Christ. He does not seek forgiveness and friendship, the foundations of the new covenant; rather he reemphasizes his notion of the highest reality as the here and now.

Striking in Matthew's association of Christ with the suffering servant of Isaiah (and Wisdom) are the responses of the questioners. The governor is greatly amazed at Christ's silence, bringing to mind the

⁶ Isaiah can be broken into three different "books" based on different authorship and the time in which they were written. First Isaiah (chapters 1-12) anticipates messianic deliverance through an offspring from the

response Israel could have elicited from oppressive nations had she rightly endured her oppression. But this suffering son whose attitude is efficaciously evangelistic is contrasted immediately with a revolutionary son. Following Pilate's amazement is the story of two sons of the father: Barabbas (the name meaning "son of the father") and Christ (the Son of the Father). Ironically, the revolutionary son, exemplifying Israel's hope, is released. Here woman is again pictured positively, as a Gentile sees what eludes the Messiah's own people. A Gentile woman, Pilate's wife, declares Christ's righteousness (27.19), and, immediately following, Christ's crucifixion is demanded by the Jewish crowds and leaders. Before handing him over, Pilate washes his hands of the guilt. The Jewish crowds reply, "His blood be upon us and upon our children" (27.24).

A rather clear example of imaginatively connecting Christ's story to the scriptures of the Old Testament is seen in the executioners and the division of his garments by the casting of lots. It was customary that "the clothing of an executed criminal went to the executioners" (*New Testament* 62n27.35), but Matthew takes this occasion to imaginatively represent Christ as "fulfilling" Psalm 22.19: "they divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots." The crucifixion scene is rife with connections to the suffering servant prophecies of Second Isaiah and the suffering "Just One" of Wisdom 2, including clear parallels not only in action but also in word.⁷ Intertextuality is a key method of building this writer's *logos* and persuading the reader to see Christ as the manifest end to which the movement of Yahweh has been pointing. (Compare Matthew 27.47 with Psalm 22.2).

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (27.46). Finally, betrayal is seen at its ultimate height: the Son is abandoned by his Father. What Abraham was not called to do, Yahweh does and sacrifices his beloved son, demonstrating the ultimate basis for a new relationship. The rampant instances of betrayal in this last section serve as a foil to Christ's utter faithfulness to the will of Yahweh in the face of death itself. Matthew immediately puts the previous confession of Peter into the mouths of Gentiles, the centurion with his guards—"Truly, this was the Son of God!"—suggesting the Gentiles may later be more receptive of this Messiah than the Jews. Women again occupy a favorable place in this narrative,

house of David; Second Isaiah pictures a suffering servant (chapters 40-55), and Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66) looks to immediate divine intervention and perhaps connection to Yahweh himself. (RG 299)

⁷ Matthew places Old Testament words of revilement in the mouths of the Jews persecuting Jesus. For instance, compare Wisdom 2. 16-18 "He...boasts that God is his Father...For if the just one be the son of

“ministering to him” and “looking on from a distance,” and later remaining by the tomb. The women are further portrayed favorably in verses 59-61.

Taking the body, Joseph⁸ wrapped it in clean linen and laid it in his new tomb that he had hewn in the rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance to the tomb and departed. *But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb.* (emphasis added)

The disciples are nowhere to be found, but two women, again representing a desirable kind of personal devotion, sit in front of a tomb with a huge rock across the entrance. Perhaps this attitude of possible expectation foreshadows a readiness to believe in the resurrected Christ, the same that the eleven disciples “worshiped, but they doubted.”

Matthew gains credibility as he takes into account the Jewish stories circulating about the resurrection as a hoax. He is thus careful to give details that build his case and even acknowledge the counter-arguments of his opponents. Matthew rhetorically grounds his story in visually realistic details: Christ is wrapped in clean linen and placed in the new tomb of a specific historical man, Joseph of Arimathea, and looked on by the two Marys. A seal is fixed on the stone, the guard is set, and Pilate and the Pharisees have a conversation about ensuring watch over the tomb. And when Christ is risen, Matthew includes the reaction: the guards, chief priests, and elders conspire and devise a story to explain the miraculous. Senior notes that Matthew’s indictment of the Jewish leaders continues to the very end of the Matthew (RG 404). The earth itself, though, has testified to the “final and glorious age” with marvelous events of earthquakes and tombs opened (Senior RG 404). The angel at the tomb has an appearance like lightning, symbolizing “at once both the untamable power and unapproachable presence of God (“Lightning” 512). Christ has risen; the connection with Yahweh (thus fulfilling another of Isaiah’s expectations the Messiah, connection with the divine/immediate divine intervention) is made more mysteriously direct as Christ has conquered not only disease but now death itself.

The women are seen again, this time coming to the tomb after the Sabbath to give personal attention. Egoistic benefit is apparently absent, as Jesus was certainly dead.⁹ Significantly, they are first to

God, he will defend him.” with Matthew 27.43 “He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him. For he said, “I am the Son of God.”

⁸ Joseph of Arimathea is the first example of a loyal man mentioned in this last section of Matthew, notably a man outside of the Eleven.

receive the news of Christ: "...[H]e has been raised from the dead." The passive construction further emphasizes a mysterious connection to the divine. The women's reaction to the angel is "fearful yet overjoyed," and their reaction to Christ is to *approach, embrace, and do homage*. The eleven disciples' reaction is to *worship and doubt*. Then to the men Christ is the one who *approaches*. Lack of friendship is again seen, this time because the disciples cannot relinquish the idea of powerlessness against death. They cannot disbelieve the ultimacy of the physical world. Still building the case for Jesus as the Messiah, Matthew places a direct allusion to the prophetic book of Daniel in the mouth of Jesus: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (7.14). Previous indications of the universality of Yahweh here become explicit. All nations are now under the breadth of the good news, and the eleven disciples are to make further disciples, baptize them, and teach them. Under what strength might they do this? Immanuel is with them in the Eucharist of the church, the vehicle through which the disciples are to carry out their commission. "*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*" (28.20).

The previous five sections of narrative linked with discourse parallel the master narrative of the Old Testament story of Israel, but this last section of the passion and resurrection extends beyond that narrative. Christ has relived the history of Israel, and has done something new, something powerful enough to overcome even the gross heart of man. The structures of existence are what haunt the people of God. Israel wants either these structures to be overthrown or to be spared them. What Christ has done is utterly new: he does not avoid the defining boundary of man's life, i.e. mortality itself, but he faces it, and by enduring it reveals there is something beyond it. The paradox of knowing God through suffering (Matthew 16.25: "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life *for my sake* will find it"), figured in the Old Testament in such characters as Job, Jonah, and even Israel, is now perfectly displayed in Christ. How is the heart to resist treachery since the flesh is weak? It must love Yahweh more than life itself—and value Immanuel, Christ's last assurance, as highest blessing. Matthew's rhetorical success is in answering the fundamental human questions about existence. The story of the Jews, the God-man, makes sense of the disappointing reality of their human experience, and it does more; the truths of the Gospel resonate with the soul of all men, making sense of mankind's experience under the structures of existence as a whole.

⁹ Jews did not have a certain belief in an afterlife, nor were resurrections from the dead normal human

The tragedy of the Old Testament, namely, the fall from the best imaginable situation, in the Garden in perfect relationship with God, has been transformed into a comedy. The new status of man is the best imaginable situation, even better than the prelapsarian period: man is united to Yahweh, his God whose name he knows, in friendship and in sonship, and the structures of existence which weigh on him so heavily can now be recognized as not ends but as means to a higher reality.

experience, and thus physical death was generally regarded as final.

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