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Welcome to the New Testament! You probably are a student at a college, university, or seminary. Perhaps you are taking this course because you are really interested in learning more about these Christian writings, or perhaps you just need the class to meet a requirement. Either way, my intent in writing this book is to help you have an interesting, enjoyable, and intellectually rewarding experience.

The New Testament is a fascinating book. And, whatever your experience with it has been up to now, an academic encounter in an educational setting is sure to open your eyes to ideas and concepts that you have not considered previously. Some will be provocative, some might be inspiring, a few could be exasperating, but not many will be boring. Bottom line: this should be a good class.

Let’s take a quick overview of this book. There are a few chapters that deal with general topics (e.g., the world of the New Testament, the life and thought of Paul), but most of the book deals directly with the New Testament writings themselves. A typical chapter takes one of the New Testament books and offers you three things:

• a brief overview of the book’s contents
• a discussion of historical background questions: Who wrote the book? Where? When? Why?
• a presentation of major themes: What is the message of the book? What topics in this book have interested people the most over the years?

Now let me note a few things that are distinctive about this particular New Testament introduction, things that might set it apart from other textbooks that you have used (and from other New Testament introductions).

The Chapters Can Be Read in Almost Any Order

Personally, I think that the book works quite nicely if it is simply read in the manner in which it has been written, taking up each part of the New Testament in its canonical order (i.e., the order in which the writings appear in modern editions of the New Testament). But many professors will want to introduce the chapters in a different order, and they may have good reasons for doing so. Here are a few ideas:

• Some may want to read the chapter on Mark before the chapter on Matthew because Mark almost certainly was the first Gospel to be written. It is also the shortest of the four Gospels and, for that reason, can make a good “starter Gospel” for beginning students.
• Some may want to read the chapters on Luke and Acts back to back because those two New Testament books were written by the same person.
• Some may want to read the chapters on Ephesians and Colossians or on Jude and 2 Peter back to back. In both of these pairs, the two books appear to be related to each other and often are treated as “literary siblings.”
• Some may want to read the chapters on Paul’s letters before they read the chapters on the Gospels because, chronologically, Paul’s letters were written before any of the Gospels.

There are other possible variations. The point is, don’t freak out if your professor scrambles the book and directs you to read chapters out of order. The book was designed to work that way, and your professor (probably) knows what she or he is doing.

The Book Urges Engagement of Ideas but Does Not Attempt to Resolve Disputes

The book is somewhat unique in this regard. The standard practice for a New Testament textbook is for the author to (1) present questions and controversies
that have arisen concerning the New Testament documents, (2) describe various positions that have been taken regarding these issues, and (3) tell the student which ideas and positions ought to be accepted (i.e., which views are correct in the mind of the author). I have omitted this third step, not because I have no opinions about such matters, but because as a teacher I don’t usually find it helpful for the textbook to make such determinations for me (or for my students). I assume that your professor will offer you some guidance with regard to evaluating the different ideas and will do so in a manner appropriate to the particular academic environment in which you are utilizing this book. Such assessments are made differently in different contexts (a Protestant Bible college, a Roman Catholic seminary, a state university): different principles, priorities, and presuppositions come into play, and what counts as convincing evidence in one setting might commend less attention in another. In any case, the goal of this book is engagement, not indoctrination. On the other hand, if we should ever meet, I will be happy to tell you what I think you should believe about all sorts of things!

The Book Draws on the Rich Resources of Christian Art

You probably have already noticed this—assuming that you were not so intrigued by this preface that you took to reading it before looking at anything else. This book contains the usual maps and historical photos that characterize conventional New Testament introductions, but it also offers over seventy-five reproductions of Christian artwork from many lands and many centuries. Why?

- I hope that these illustrations have aesthetic appeal and make your use of the textbook more pleasant. I think that life should be pleasant—or at least as pleasant as it can be—and studying is not always the most pleasurable of pursuits. Perhaps the art will help. There’s not much in the art that you will have to learn for tests, at any rate, so be grateful for that.

- The individual works illustrate key themes or points that are made in the book or in the New Testament writings themselves. They have not been chosen haphazardly; each work corresponds to a motif or concept or illustrates some particular point that is discussed. Sometimes, this is obvious; other times, you might not get it at first (“What’s this in here for?”). Think about it, ask someone else, let the art inspire reflection and conversation.

- Most importantly, I hope that the art will convey something of the influence of these writings—the importance of the New Testament to history and to culture. Many of the artworks look very old; some look very new. Some are representational; others are abstract. Some are Western; others,
Eastern. Some you may like; others, not so much. Taken together, they illustrate the range of the New Testament’s spatial, temporal, cultural, and aesthetic impact on our world. They depict its appeal.

The Book Is Filled with “Hyperlinks” to a Web Site

The Web site (www.IntroducingNT.com) accompanying this book is filled with materials that you may find useful in this course and beyond. You can print and reproduce many of these materials for use in teaching the New Testament to others.

Some of these items are indicated by Hyperlink references printed in the margin of the text—those references alert you that something is available at the Web site that pertains to the topic under discussion. In addition, lists of Hyperlink items are provided in blue boxes near the end of each chapter. But you really want to go to the Web site to see everything that is available. The materials are of different sorts:

- All of the various boxes found in the book itself are also on the Web site. Thus, if you want to use one of those items as a handout in some context, you may simply print the item from the Web site (rather than trying to photocopy from the book).
- Many additional items that could have been boxes in the book are also found here. I had too many to put in the book itself, and I thought that readers might like to have some of these materials as extras.
- Several long pieces presenting short essays or in-depth discussion of matters are included on the Web site. These provide further content regarding matters that are touched on only briefly in the book.
- Bibliographies for the various books of the New Testament and related topics discussed in the text are also found here. These will help the student who wants to do advanced study or write a term paper.
- Other instructor resources include PowerPoint chapter outlines, discussion prompts, pedagogical suggestions, and a test/quiz bank.
- Additional student resources include chapter summaries, chapter objectives, study questions, flash cards, and self quizzes.

Acknowledgments

Those who appreciate this book and find it of value in their study of the New Testament owe a debt of gratitude to Trinity Lutheran Seminary, the fine insti-
tution where I teach. Trinity provided me with time and resources to complete this project—and they did so for no other reason than that they are committed to furthering theological and biblical education. Likewise, those who appreciate this book should be grateful to many good people at Baker Academic: James Kinney and James Ernest, who had the vision for this project; Brian Bolger, who was the project manager; Rachel Klompmaker, who secured most of the artwork; and Jeremy Wells, who developed the Web site. We also thank Craig Koester for allowing us to use a number of his personal photographs, many more of which can be found at his own intriguing Web site (www.luthersem.edu/ckoester). Join me in offering thanks to all these people.

I think that’s it for now. Why are you reading a preface? Shouldn’t you be studying?
Here is a fun piece of Bible trivia: in Psalm 46 in the King James version of the Bible, the forty-sixth word from the beginning (not counting the psalm’s superscription) is *shakes*, and the forty-sixth word from the ending (not counting the “Selah”) is *spear*. The King James Bible was completed in 1610, the year that William Shakespeare celebrated his forty-sixth birthday. Many literature scholars think that the translators of this Bible, who were big fans of the Bard’s work, snuck a birthday tribute to Shakespeare into the Word of God itself.

One does not have to read very far in the Gospel of Matthew to see that the author of our first Gospel can also play number games. When he relates the genealogy of Jesus he arranges the names so that they fall into three sets of fourteen generations: there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile, and fourteen from the exile to Jesus. Three fourteens! Many modern readers might respond, “So what?” But Matthew thinks that Jesus is the Messiah, and the Messiah is the son of David, and the name “David” can be written with Hebrew letters (*dwd*) that also served as numerals, and those numerals are 4, 6, 4, and $4 + 6 + 4 = 14$!

Matthew’s Gospel is often called “the teacher’s Gospel” because it focuses so heavily on the teaching ministry of Jesus and emphasizes so strongly the need for Christian leaders to understand the word (13:23) and to teach it to others (5:19; 28:19–20). But Matthew might just as easily be called “the ac-
countant’s Gospel,” for its author is very interested in keeping track of things. People familiar with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator would identify Matthew as “a high J” —that is, as a person who craves order and structure. Matthew loves triads, presenting examples or points in groups of three (e.g., three acts of piety in 6:1–18). He also likes doublets and dualism: two masters (6:24–25), two ways (7:13–14), two builders (7:24–27).

There are things that we just don’t get. Sometimes Matthew includes what appears to be the same material twice at different points in his Gospel: Jesus’ words on divorce are included twice (5:31–32; 19:9), as are stories of the religious leaders seeking a sign from him (12:38–42; 16:1–4) or accusing him of operating with the power of Beelzebul (9:32–34; 12:22–24). Why would Matthew do that? Even more puzzling, characters sometimes get doubled: Mark’s Gospel reports that Jesus healed a blind man at Jericho (10:46–52) and cast a legion of demons out of another man and into a herd of pigs (5:1–14)—a tale that biblical comedians like to call “the story of deviled ham”—but when Matthew tells those same stories, Jesus heals two blind men (20:29–34) and casts the legion of demons out of two men (8:28–33). And in Matthew’s version of the Palm Sunday story, Jesus sits on two animals as he rides into the city (21:6–7). Is this some overly literal fulfillment of prophecy (21:5; cf. Zech. 9:9)? Did Matthew know something that Mark didn’t? Or is there something special about the number “two”?

One thing is certain: Matthew is not a sloppy writer. He has a clear plan for his Gospel, and he is attentive to details. We just don’t always know how far to press that. Jesus tells seven parables about the kingdom of heaven—is that because “seven” is a sacred number, or did that just happen to be the number of kingdom parables that Matthew knew? Matthew tells us twelve times that prophecy has been fulfilled—is that because “twelve” is a number for Israel, or is it just a coincidence? Matthew presents eight Beatitudes in two groups of four, each group containing exactly thirty-six words in Greek and . . . well, actually, that one probably is just a coincidence, but with Matthew, one never knows for sure!

Overview

Matthew’s Gospel opens with a genealogy that traces Jesus’ descent from Abraham (1:1–17), followed by an account of Jesus’ virgin birth and related events such as the visit of the magi (1:18–2:23). Then the narrative shifts to recount the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as an adult: he is baptized by John (3:1–17) and tempted by Satan in the wilderness (4:1–11); then he begins to call disciples and go throughout Galilee preaching, teaching, and healing (4:12–25).
He preaches the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:28), which focuses primarily on discipleship (i.e., the life expected of those who are faithful to God).

Matthew continues the story of Jesus’ ministry by relating a series of healing stories (a leper, a centurion’s servant, Peter’s mother-in-law, two demoniacs, a paralytic). These are interspersed with anecdotes in which Jesus responds to questions that clarify or challenge the nature of his ministry (8:1–9:38). Jesus then appoints twelve of his followers to be apostles and sends them out on a mission similar to his, instructing them with regard to persecution and the need for radical faithfulness (10:1–11:1). Opposition to Jesus begins to mount as he encounters doubt, apathy, and outright hostility from diverse parties: John the Baptist, the crowds, the Pharisees, and even his own family (11:2–12:50). He tells seven parables about the kingdom of heaven (13:1–53), and then he meets rejection in his own hometown (13:54–58). His ministry also attracts the attention of Herod, who has had John the Baptist put to death (14:1–12).

The story continues with an accent on miraculous deeds (multiplication of food, walking on water, the exorcism of a Canaanite’s daughter). This time, these are interspersed with accounts that reveal the Pharisees to be blind guides who stand under God’s judgment, and with accounts that show Jesus’ own disciples to be people of little faith (14:13–16:12). But then Peter receives Jesus’ blessing when he confesses Jesus to be the Messiah and Son of God (16:13–20). After that, the narrative shifts into a long section that emphasizes Jesus’ instruction of his disciples (16:21–20:34): he repeatedly tells them that he is going to suffer and die, a revelation that they find distressing; he teaches them about humility and self-denial; he allows three disciples a glimpse of his divine glory when he is transfigured before them on a mountain; and he instructs them on...
community life and other matters pertinent for those being prepared to live in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus enters Jerusalem and challenges the religious leaders there (21:1–23:39): he overturns tables in the temple, questions the leaders’ authority, tells parables against them, responds to a series of tests that they put before him, and lambastes them as fools and hypocrites destined for hell. Then, Jesus retires to the Mount of Olives with his disciples and offers them private teaching regarding the last days, including information about his own return and a series of parables regarding the final judgment (24:1–25:46).

Matthew’s Gospel concludes with an account of Jesus’ passion and resurrection (26:1–28:20): he is anointed by an unnamed woman and shares a last meal with his disciples, who will betray, deny, and desert him; he is arrested, tried before Jewish and Gentile leaders, crucified, and laid in a tomb; on the
third day, he rises from the dead, appears to a group of women, and then com-
missions his disciples to baptize and teach people from all nations.

**Historical Background**

Although it comes first in our New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew probably was not the first Gospel to be written. Most scholars think that it was written after the Gospel of Mark. Since about 90 percent of the material in Mark’s Gospel is also found in Matthew, it is possible to view Matthew as an expanded, second edition of Mark. But Matthew’s book would not ultimately replace Mark’s Gospel the way that a second edition of a work usually replaces earlier versions. Rather, Christians would read Matthew alongside Mark, excusing the redundancy and appreciating both books as offering compatible accounts of Jesus.

The book is anonymous, and its attribution to Matthew may owe in part to a mistaken or misunderstood comment from an early Christian leader. Around the middle of the second century, the church leader Papias said that Matthew the tax collector, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, “collected the sayings in the Hebrew (or Aramaic) language and each one interpreted (or translated) them as he was able” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39). Subsequent church leaders took this comment as an indication that Matthew the tax collector wrote the book that now bears his name; and indeed, this is probably what Papias meant. But the book that we know as the Gospel of Matthew is more than a collection of sayings. Furthermore, it is written in Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic, and we do not think that any of the other Gospel authors had copies of it to interpret or translate. Accordingly, many scholars simply dismiss the comment by Papias out of hand, claiming that clearly he did not know what he was talking about. It is possible, however, that Matthew the tax collector did have something to do with this Gospel. Perhaps he was the person responsible for compiling the now lost collection of sayings that scholars refer to as the Q source (see pp. 95–98), and maybe that is what got Papias confused. But this remains speculative. Perhaps Matthew collected some of the sayings that ended up in Q, or maybe he collected some completely different sayings. Lots of scenarios are possible, and we simply cannot know for sure what Matthew the tax collector’s ultimate contribution to this Gospel might have been. Very few scholars, at any rate, think that he was the author of the entire book. Nevertheless, scholars refer to the unknown author of this book as “Matthew” anyway; it is traditional and convenient to do so, and no one knows what else to call him.

What we can know about this author must be surmised from the work itself. He obviously is a devout and educated Christian. He knows the Jew-
ish scriptures well and uses them in ways that might suggest some scribal training. Thus, he is almost certainly a Jewish Christian, and perhaps he is a converted rabbi or synagogue ruler. Among all of our Gospel authors, Matthew alone is adamant about reporting that the original ministry of Jesus was directed solely to Israel (10:5–6; 15:24; cf. 28:17–20).

As for date, his use of the phrase “to this day” (27:8; 28:15) implies that he is writing a generation or more after the time of Jesus (cf. Gen. 26:33; 2 Sam. 6:8), and his use of the Gospel of Mark indicates that he is writing after the publication and distribution of that book (usually thought to have been written ca. 65–73). A number of matters in Matthew’s Gospel reflect the sort of concerns that Jewish people were dealing with in the decades after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE (cf. 24:1–2): How is God present with us? What is the continuing value of the Torah? How and when will God’s promises to Israel be fulfilled?

The author of Matthew also seems to favor material that would appeal to people who lived in a more urban and prosperous setting than that of Jesus and his original disciples. It is often suggested that this Gospel might have been written in the city of Antioch, an important site in early Christianity (see Acts 11:25–26). Numerous details regarding the interpretation of this Gospel can be elucidated by the hypothesis that the book was written for believers in that setting, but it is not a sure thing, as other cities, similar to Antioch, fit the bill as well.

Our best guess, then, is as follows: the book that we know as the Gospel of Matthew was written by an unknown Jewish Christian in Antioch or some similar Roman city some time after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

**Box 5.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Unique to Matthew’s Gospel</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genealogy of Jesus (from Abraham)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth of Jesus (with focus on Joseph)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visit of the magi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flight to Egypt</td>
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<tr>
<td>On fulfilling the law</td>
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<tr>
<td>The antitheses</td>
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<tr>
<td>On practicing piety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pearls before swine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limit mission to Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parables: weeds, treasure, pearl, net</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter tries to walk on water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blessing of Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter pays the temple tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovering the sinful member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter asks about forgiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parable of unforgiving servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parable of laborers in vineyard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parable of two sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibition of titles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denunciations of Pharisees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parable of bridesmaids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of last judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of Judas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilate washes his hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resuscitation of saints</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guard at the tomb</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Great Commission</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The author appears to have had a copy of the Gospel of Mark as well as another work that contained mostly sayings of Jesus, a work that scholars commonly call the “Q source” (see fig. 4.6 on p. 97). He also had a variety of other oral and possibly written traditions about Jesus, which scholars refer to collectively as the “M material.” He wove these traditions together to create an effective narrative of Jesus’ life that would have been meaningful to urban Christians (especially Jewish Christians) in the mid-80s.

**What Is Distinctive about the Gospel of Matthew?**

Perhaps the first step in understanding the Gospel of Matthew consists of recognizing how it is different from the other three Gospels. To get a good start on this, we should familiarize ourselves with what is unique to this Gospel. Box 5.1 lists stories and passages from Matthew that are not found anywhere else in the New Testament.

A review of this material provides a quick and easy guide to what is distinctive about Matthew. For example, the only two instances in the New Testament where Jesus talks about “the church” occur in passages on this list (16:17–19; 18:15–20): Jesus says that he intends to build a church, and he offers advice for how that church should make decisions and regulate its membership. Likewise, we may note that a number of stories on the “only in Matthew” list are ones in which Peter figures prominently (14:28–31; 16:17–19; 17:24–27; 18:21–22). If, in fact, Matthew’s Gospel was written in Antioch, then it was produced in a community where Peter had actually lived (see Gal. 2:11–14).
Matthew preserves about 90 percent of the stories and passages that are found in Mark’s Gospel, but he edits this material in accord with certain principles.

Organization
Some Markan material is moved about.
Examples:
• Five miracle stories moved to Matthew 8–9, where other miracle stories occur.
• The mission charge to the disciples is related immediately after they are selected (Matt. 10:1–42; cf. Mark 3:14–19; 6:7–13).

Abbreviation
Details or characters that are not immediately relevant are pruned away.
Examples:
• the demoniac’s chains and behavior (Matt. 8:28; cf. Mark 5:2–5)
• unroofing the tiles for the paralytic (Matt. 9:2; cf. Mark 2:2–5)
• the crowd and the disciples in story of woman’s healing (Matt. 9:20–22; Mark 5:24b–34)

Sophistication
Casual or colloquial expressions are rewritten in the more polished Greek of the educated class.
Examples:
• Many instances of “historical present” tense are changed (130 out of 151).
• Mark’s repetitious use of words such as and and immediately is reduced.
• Clear antecedents are provided to pronouns that lack them.

Accuracy
Instances of questionable accuracy are corrected.
Examples:
• “King Herod” (Mark 6:14) becomes “Herod the tetrarch” (Matt. 14:1).
• Reference to Abiathar as high priest in Mark 2:26 is omitted (Matt. 12:4 [cf. 1 Sam. 21:1–6]).

Contextual Relevance
Some changes make things more relevant to Matthew’s community.
Examples:
• Matthew omits Mark’s explanation of Jewish customs (Matt. 15:1–2; cf. Mark 7:3–4) because he is writing for Christians who are either ethnically Jewish or well-acquainted with matters of Jewish tradition.
• Matthew often replaces the phrase “kingdom of God” with “kingdom of heaven” (e.g., Matt. 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15) because some Jews tried to avoid saying “God” out of respect for the sanctity of God’s name.
• Where Mark uses the word village (kōmē), Matthew frequently uses the word city (polis) because he is writing for an urban community removed from rural settings.
• Matthew adds “silver” and “gold” to Jesus’ injunction for the disciples to take no “copper” with them on their travels (Matt. 10:9; cf. Mark 6:8) because he is writing for a more prosperous community for which renunciation of “copper” might seem insignificant.

Character Portrayal
Matthew changes the way major characters are portrayed in the Gospel story, including Jesus, his disciples, and the religious leaders of Israel.

Jesus
• Questions that might imply a lack of knowledge on Jesus’ part are omitted (Mark 5:9, 30; 6:38; 8:23; 9:12, 16, 21, 33; 10:3; 14:14).
• Statements that might imply a lack of ability or authority on Jesus’ part are modified (cf. Matt. 13:58 with Mark 6:5).
What Is Distinctive about the Gospel of Matthew?

There is another way to determine what is distinctive about Matthew: by noticing how Matthew uses material that he takes from his Markan source. When the Gospels of Matthew and Mark are set side by side, it becomes evident that Matthew did not just copy sections of Mark’s Gospel word for word; rather, he made changes in what Mark had written, and these changes reveal what is distinctive about Matthew’s version of the Gospel story. Many of the changes are simply stylistic, but still they serve to point up Matthew’s priorities and approach to storytelling. For example, it is often said that Matthew takes more of a “just the facts” approach to narrative than Mark does; he is less concerned with telling stories in a lively or colorful manner than he is in simplifying material and organizing its presentation in a way that will establish certain key points. Other changes that Matthew makes may reflect the audience that he envisions for his Gospel: he makes numerous changes that would make his Gospel more appealing to Jewish (or Jewish-Christian) readers or meaningful to readers who live in a fairly prosperous urban environment. The most interesting changes that Matthew makes in Mark, however, may be those that affect the way main characters in the story are presented. Jesus exhibits less human frailty in Matthew’s Gospel than he does in Mark—for example, statements that might imply a lack of knowledge or ability on his part are dropped or changed (cf. Mark 6:5 with Matt. 13:58). Likewise, the disciples of Jesus exhibit more potential for growth and leadership. Matthew’s portrayal of the religious leaders of Israel, however, exhibits the opposite tendency: inevitably they come off even worse in Matthew than they do in Mark.

The Religious Leaders of Israel

- A scribe whom Jesus praises in Mark (12:28–34) is depicted as an opponent who puts Jesus to the test in Matthew (22:34–40).
- Friendly religious leaders such as Jairus and Joseph of Arimathea are no longer identified as religious leaders in Matthew (cf. Matt. 9:18 with Mark 5:22; Matt. 27:57 with Mark 15:43).

The Disciples of Jesus

- “No faith” is changed to “little faith” (cf. Matt. 8:26 with Mark 4:40).
- The theme of not understanding Jesus is adjusted so that the disciples are merely slow to understand (cf. Matt 16:12 with Mark 8:21; Matt 17:9–13 with Mark 9:9–13).
- Unseemly ambition is ascribed to the mother of James and John rather than to the disciples themselves (cf. Matt. 20:20 with Mark 10:35).

References to the disciples “worshiping” Jesus and calling him “Lord” or “Son of God” are added to stories taken from Mark (cf. Matt. 14:32–33 with Mark 6:51–52).


Stories that might seem to portray Jesus as a magician are omitted (Mark 7:31–37; 8:22–26).