

THE SUBVERSIVE GOSPEL

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A NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY
OF LIBERATION

TOM HANKS

Translated from the Spanish
by John P. Doner

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The Subversive Gospel
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The paradigm of the incarnation is now more meaningful to me and to others in Latin America than that of the Exodus. The Christology "from below" that helped theologians rediscover the historical dimensions of faith and the life of Jesus Christ is continually revitalized by a Christology "from above" that understands that it really is the Triune God who chooses to walk on our paths in order to change them and us.

— NANCY E. BEDFORD

John's critique of Rome...did more than voice the protest of groups exploited, oppressed and persecuted by Rome. It also required those who could share in her profits to side with her victims and become victims themselves. But those who from the perspective of the earth and sea were Rome's victims John saw from the perspective of heaven to be the real victors.

— RICHARD BAUCKHAM

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Preface

As originally conceived and developed in Spanish, this work has aimed to encourage and promote the reading and study of the New Testament book by book. The Bible continues to be honored as the privileged source for divine wisdom for many throughout the world who have never read it. However, even for those who “read it daily” (in devotional booklet excerpts) and hear it expounded weekly from the pulpit (in excerpts following the ecumenical lectionary), comprehension remains minimal. Commonly we blame the Bible for being so “difficult.” However, were Shakespeare similarly studied (a paragraph from *Hamlet* one week, a page from *Macbeth* the next, then a brief selection from *Romeo and Juliet* accompanied by a censured sonnet), a century of reading would only produce similar befuddlement. As someone introduced to inductive Bible study in my undergraduate days in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Northwestern University (1952–56), I have a lifelong antipathy to the dominant methodologies involving devotional excerpts and sermonic hopscotching in the Bible. Everyone acknowledges that the first principle of sound interpretation (of any literature) is to study a text in its context, but singularly in the case of the Bible, very few apply the principle.

In the academic world of biblical scholarship, of course, the Bible is studied fervently book by book, but alas, the questions dominating such study commonly reflect the agendas of the Renaissance (authorship, authenticity, date, historicity, traditional theological puzzles), which privileged white males in privileged academic centers seem infinitely competent in perpetuating until everyone is bored with the Bible and convinced that whenever the books were written by whomever, they are largely irrelevant to contemporary church and society. In the present work above all I have sought to *change the fundamental questions* that should concern us if we read the books of the New Testament. For each book I indicate in an introductory paragraph what I understand to be the scholarly consensus regarding date, authorship, and historical context. For those who disagree or want more detail, the bibliographies offer more-than-adequate data for my own and alternative positions. Despite my evangelical background, after forty years’ struggle with the data, I have come to accept the common scholarly consensus regarding dates and authorship, perhaps still leaning a bit to the early side of the spectrum on dates and allowing for maximum input from the traditional authors. However, such questions are not my area of expertise, and the conclusions of this work would not basically be affected should someone opt for the even earlier dates often advocated by evangelical and fundamentalist scholars, or for the somewhat later dates often

advocated by those on the far side of the scholarly consensus (for instance, the majority in the Jesus Seminar).

Especially if you just picked up this book expecting to find what your favorite Hollywood movie star thinks about religion, I would emphasize that in the Spanish original and in my own teaching I recommend what I call the “didactic order” for reading both the New Testament and this introductory companion. My translator and my publisher finally convinced me that this kind of reference book on the New Testament is best presented in the traditional canonical order, so my preferred didactic order appears in an appendix. I would not be so naïve as to try to tell biblical scholars where to start reading (being humble types, we all look first in the bibliography to see if any of our works are included). But if you have never read the New Testament, I would urge you to experiment—creatively if you insist—with the didactic order. It is designed to start with things short, simple, and basic and to save the postdoctoral graduate stuff for when you are ready for it. That means starting with 3 John, the shortest book in the New Testament, and focusing on the theme of friendship in biblical theology. If you insist on starting your reading of the New Testament with Romans 9–11 and Paul’s mature views on predestination, but then find it dull or shocking, discouraging and difficult, don’t say I didn’t warn you!

If your tradition obliges you to begin your study with Matthew’s genealogy and persevere in canonical order until Revelation, you should at least realize that Matthew was in no way responsible for the problems your tradition got you into. Matthew was well aware that Mark wrote his Gospel first, and thus used Mark as a major source (along with Q). And Paul knew perfectly well that Romans was the last of his letters, not first, as in our canonical disorder. If you find my didactic order patronizing, insulting, or confusing, but recognize that the canonical disorder is seriously misleading, you might opt for the chronological order (see appendix A). However, my own preference for earlier dating of James and Jude, increasingly accepted by scholars, probably does not yet represent the consensus view. And the wide range of dates assigned for any one book by consensus scholarship makes it impossible to achieve precision regarding chronological order.

Authorial linguistic quirks that some Spanish readers have found frustrating include the following:

- I don’t believe in defining terms, since I consider human words unique and dynamic (like human persons), and “definitions” a hoary white male control mechanism. Descriptions (not definitions) of a few words that may prove especially perplexing are included at the beginning, but generally I have sought to use synonyms in the context when introducing a new term.
- Since in Spanish we have no equivalent to the muddle in English represented by the word “right/eous(ness),” I avoid it like the plague and prefer to translate the Spanish literally as “justice” or “liberating justice.” Why allow proper seating arrangements in the eighteenth-century French Parliament (monarchists on the

right) to provide incessant linguistic advantage to wealthy oppressors today? Part of my personal linguistic asceticism is a kind of subversive fasting from the entire semantic field of “right” in English. I except inevitable references to the literal “right” hand, but even there I would insist on the danger of common metaphorical uses in theology. Why should Jesus, the friend of the poor, always be portrayed as sitting at the “right hand” of a god who incessantly tells us to heed the deluge of TV political ads paid for by millionaires and do the “right” thing: vote for a millionaire who has the “right” stuff, nominated in great part by other millionaires for whom anything remotely associated with the “liberal/left” is anathema?

- Since evangelicals and traditionalists commonly react allergically to the whole set of terms common in biblical study since the Renaissance (criticism, lower/higher criticism, authenticity, pseudonymity, etc.), I have sought to avoid them in this work. While no longer bothered by that particular allergy, I still sympathize with related concerns to treat the Bible with respect, even reverently, and see no advantage to imposing categories foreign to those of the authors and so misleading for ordinary modern readers. Also avoided is the term “family” (since the New Testament speaks only of “house[holds]” and never of “family values”).
- In addition to the above linguistic asceticism, I seek to encourage a kind of conceptual asceticism, avoiding convenient labels such as “conservative” and “liberal.” While liberating Israelite slaves in the Exodus, obviously neither God nor Moses could properly be labeled as “conservatives,” but neither were they being simply “liberal” reformers putting a patch on the oppressive and violent status quo! However, at Sinai and thereafter, the Hebrew Bible portrays God and Moses as seeking to conserve the radical gains of the Exodus and create norms for viable community in the desert and in the Holy Land. Such a process of radical change followed by strenuous efforts to conserve the gains is evident repeatedly throughout history. Hence, I would hope that “taking the Bible seriously” would rather liberate us from the kind of false dichotomies and grossly misleading labels that too often serve as a substitute for careful analysis, coherent thought, and faithful praxis.

Although the word itself occurs only once in the Bible, “asceticism” is the “methodological wedge” employed for interpreting the New Testament in a significant recent work (see Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, eds., *Asceticism and the New Testament*, 423). For more than twenty years in my own approach as a Bible professor in Latin America, I have advocated using “oppression” as the key “hermeneutical wedge” for interpreting scripture. Like a stone tossed into a pool, this approach leads to widening circles of concerns: beginning with the option for the poor so often explicitly voiced in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, but then challenging us to consider the sick and handicapped, women, sexual minorities, Jews (the question of anti-Semitism, or more accurately, anti-Judaism in the New Testament), racial prejudice (especially the use of texts to defend slavery and racism), ecology, and peace.

In this work I do not repeat the evidence (never refuted) from my earlier book and *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article on poor/poverty in the New Testament that oppression (represented in scripture by more than twenty roots and

occurring more than five hundred times in the Bible) is a fundamental structural category of biblical theology, and that oppression is viewed in scripture as the basic (not only!) cause of poverty in that epoch.¹ Although grateful for the many friendly citations of my book in later works, my major frustration has been the way so many excellent works on poor/poverty continue to neglect biblical teaching about its basic cause (oppression) and thus propose compassion, generosity, and charity (rather than liberating justice and fundamental structural change) as the appropriate solution (see the otherwise excellent works of Craig Blomberg and Ronald Sider, evangelicals cited in the general bibliography). Granted, biblical scholars and theologians, working alone, are ill-equipped to carry out specific work on the kind of viable and efficacious measures that are needed (and the twentieth century abounded in examples of fundamental structural changes that did much more harm than good). But where scripture so emphatically and repeatedly reflects one perspective, it is difficult to remain content with trumpets that give forth such uncertain sounds and reflect such superficial analysis of the root problems.

The category of oppressed and marginalized “sexual minorities” similarly functions in this work as a kind of hermeneutical wedge in the analysis of the New Testament books. The saint or sinner who perseveres soon will discover what a variety of persons and groups may be referred to with this phrase. My own ever expanding list now includes twenty-five subcategories of sexual minorities, which may describe any individuals or groups that do not represent the modern family, the standard married couple with offspring: unmarried adults (often gay, lesbian, or bisexual in orientation), childless couples, widows, divorced persons, single parents, polygamists, eunuchs, prostitutes, virgins, “bastards” (as the King James version translated literally), and so forth. Traditionally, biblical scholars tend either to ignore this common element in the texts or superficially reduce the texts to prooftexts for the traditional Augustinian sexual ideology. Even those who seek to explore or elaborate a bit commonly impose their heterosexual ideology, reflecting majority propaganda, and assume that avoiding marriage and procreation implies total sexual abstention, or “just saying no.” However, the evidence that persons with this alternative lifestyle actually managed to live without any sexual fantasies, erotic/wet dreams, masturbation, or homoerotic activities is never supplied. Recent studies of eunuchs in antiquity remind us, however, that although they did not procreate, they often married and engaged in all sorts of other sexual activities (see below under Matt. 19:12).

José Míguez Bonino, in commending my earlier book, warned that “nobody . . . will find total comfort in these pages”—and even more is that true, I’m sure, of the present work. No author attempting to refocus attention on so many neglected but controversial areas can pretend to infallibility on so

1. Thomas D. Hanks, *God So Loved the Third World: The Biblical Vocabulary of Oppression*, trans. James C. Dekker (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983); Thomas D. Hanks, “Poor/Poverty” (New Testament), *ABD*, 5:414–24.

many difficult questions. My concern, however, has not been to pontificate regarding the proper interpretation of a given text, but more fundamentally, to change the basic questions we raise and concentrate on in our reading and study of the New Testament. A reader might well conclude that I am naïve and basically mistaken in my conclusions. Many have concluded that a careful reading of the New Testament demonstrates rather that Paul and other authors are properly cited to uphold the divine right of kings, slavery, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, subjugation of women, and bourgeois complacency regarding the poor, and that hence the New Testament (or entire Bible) should be relegated to the purgatory of once important but no longer relevant works. For me, such honest disagreement about transcendent questions is much preferable to the endless monographs about whether Paul really wrote 2 Thessalonians—investigations commonly undertaken with a pretense of a “scholarly objectivity” that disdains others supposedly contaminated by their obviously political agendas.

Perhaps the most common complaint about my work has been that it represents only my interpretations, speculations, or hypotheses and that I should repeatedly make clear the purely hypothetical character of my unqualified affirmations (as opposed to supposedly “solid facts” represented in certain other writings on the Bible). However, when we interpret the literature and history of the ancient world, virtually any significant affirmation we make represents a hypothesis of greater or lesser degree of probability. Readers of all persuasions would find it insufferably boring were I to refer repeatedly to the hypothesis that Jesus or Paul really lived (and were not simply inventions of early church propaganda). Evangelicals and fundamentalists would be the first to object were I to refer continually to Jesus’ resurrection or virgin birth as “hypotheses.” Yet in the world of biblical scholarship we find much more overwhelming support for the admittedly hypothetical “Q” source than we do for Jesus’ resurrection or virgin birth. At the other end of the theological spectrum I encounter similar complaints: any suggestions that Jesus or any New Testament authors may well have been persons of homosexual or bisexual orientation is viewed as “novelistic” speculation, while the alternative hypothesis that they were “normal heterosexuals” but mysteriously sexually celibate, or just never managed to find an appropriate soulmate of the opposite sex, is assumed to be “fact.” Most commonly, of course, such questions about human sexuality are ignored by biblical scholars; hence, in order to change the questions we need to propose alternative hypotheses.

My conviction, stemming from long, often painful, personal experience, is that the kind of disturbing hypotheses abounding in this work gain credence not so much by scrutinizing and weighing each one in isolation, but rather as we face a whole series of questions and hypotheses that have been “off the map” for traditional scholarship. Whether it be stylistic criteria for distinguishing sources in the Pentateuch or historical problems resulting from rigid views of biblical inerrancy, fundamentalists often appear to win a debate conducted in TV sound bites by getting us to focus in an isolated way on a single

verse or problem. But many solutions that appear convincing when applied to isolated phenomenon are totally inadequate when we view the entire range of evidence (a process that may take months or years of study, and work in the original languages rather than translations).

However, though I have sought to change the questions and encourage serious interface between the New Testament and fundamental problems and concerns in the modern world, I have never been among those who think that modern relevance of the Bible is best promoted by maximizing historical skepticism and viewing it as a mere collection of legend, myth, and ecclesiastical propaganda. Admittedly, my bibliographies abound in works that commonly would be labeled “evangelical.” In part this reflects the context of my background, friendships, and life work, but perhaps even more the economic reality that in our capitalistic consumer society the major consumers of detailed exegetical commentaries are evangelicals; hence, publishers produce and market not what necessarily represents the “scholarly consensus” but what will bring in the most profits. We thus find ourselves affirming that the scholarly consensus overwhelmingly rejects traditional Pauline authorship of the pastoral letters (a consensus including evangelicals such as Howard Marshall), while providing bibliographies that may seem overloaded with works that deny that conclusion. However, since mainly evangelicals like to read and write about the pastorals, if you want linguistic or grammatical detail about some point in 1 Timothy, probably you will find yourself wading through pages of evangelical exegesis (often quite helpful where hidden evangelical agendas do not obscure significant questions).

In this area of basic philosophical presuppositions and historical methodology, in recent years I have been particularly encouraged by the work of N. T. (Tom) Wright. Obviously much cleverer than I, in recent years he has managed to become a virtual cult figure and guru in scholarly evangelical circles, while affirming and supporting many of the positions for which I was condemned as a “Marxist” or “communist” when my first book in English was published (1983). He generally abandons the Neoplatonic concepts of “ethics” and “morals” and prefers the biblical term “praxis” (see my comments about “walk” and “way” in Ephesians, 1–3 John, etc.). Wright recognizes that in biblical theology the “Exodus paradigm” is fundamental for interpretation (a hallmark of Latin American theologies since Medellín in 1968), which involves posing as fundamental the questions of oppressors and oppressed. He affirms that “salvation” in the Bible commonly refers to integral liberation, including a socio-economic-political dimension for individuals and society. This was something I was properly taught at Wheaton Graduate School (an evangelical academic stronghold) back in 1956–57), but when I repeated what for me had become a platitude in the 1980s, it was viewed by many as my most serious “heresy.”

I find Wright’s contention that Israel in the New Testament views itself as still in “exile” intriguing and helpful, but not totally convincing (the resulting “paradigm of the exile,” however, provides the same focus on oppressors

and oppressed that we find in the Exodus paradigm). I share many scholars' questions about Wright's conclusions that in Mark 13 Jesus did not refer to his second coming. However, for a multitude of fundamental questions regarding philosophy and historical methodology, I find Wright expressing conclusions similar to my own. This he does, however, with eloquence, wit, clarity, abundant bibliography, and all the proper qualifiers—generously sprinkled with those delightfully cautious double negatives (“not entirely impossible that . . .”) so beloved by British scholars. Much of what so many of my own students and readers have found lacking in this present volume they can find in Wright (for an excellent introduction, see the work on Wright edited by Carey C. Newman in the general bibliography).

I am deeply indebted to a large number of extended family and household members, an international network of friends and colleagues, to my translator John P. Doner, and of course to the staff at Pilgrim Press, my very patient and courageous publisher. However, the controversial character of the questions raised and the answers herein suggested has meant that many who have contributed most would be deeply embarrassed (if not fired!) to find themselves singled out for special mention. Since they have nothing more to lose, I will specifically thank the several homeless streetpeople who have faithfully attended the Bible course in the First Methodist Church in Buenos Aires, and also the members of the Metropolitan Community Church both here and in Mexico City, where much of this material was first intensively and repeatedly scrutinized and debated.

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Abbreviations

→	For more detail or related treatment, see (for subjects treated in this volume)
//	Parallel biblical passages
AB	The Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
HCSB	HarperCollins Study Bible (with NRSV text)
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
KJV	King James Version
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Q	Quelle, from the German for “Source”: texts absent from Mark, but occurring in both Matthew and Luke (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, Matthew 5–7 // Luke 6), probably edited ca. 60 c.e., and thus representing the most original form of many of Jesus’ teachings (see appendix A, p. 259 below, for related dates).
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Glossary

Deconstruction. This term is not used in this work in the more technical sense of postmodern linguistics, but in the more general sense, as opposed to purely negative destruction, of a dismantling of thought or rhetoric (whether intentional or subconscious), thus illuminating the tensions and apparent contradictions, with the goal of positive reformulation (or synthesis where dialectically opposed affirmations are involved) (→Romans).

Praxis. Greek word used in the title for the “Acts” of the Apostles, and common in German (i.e., for designated hours of work: “praxis” of a physician), whence developed as the central concept in Marxist philosophy (free human activity to change the world) and later in Latin American liberation theologies (which rejected traditional notions of theory—interminably debated—and eventually applied to practice). Latin American thinkers insist that theology *take praxis as the starting point*, with theology functioning as the posterior critical reflection on praxis; in modern linguistics this approach is developed in the understanding of the “hermeneutical circle” (the interplay or dialectic between action and interpretation); in this work (like many others—see Tom Wright in the general bibliography), praxis (as a Greek biblical term) is preferred to the nonbiblical categories of morals and ethics (Greek philosophical constructs alien to the Bible that gravely distort biblical interpretation).

THE SUBVERSIVE GOSPEL

Chapter 1

MATTHEW

A Log Cabin Publican? Good News for Sex Workers!

Outline

Structure: Narrative + Five Discourses (cf. the Pentateuch)

Prologue. Liberating the new Liberator: birth, infancy (// Moses, Exodus 1–2)	1–2
1. <i>Narrative</i> : How Jesus’ ministry began	3–4
<i>Discourse</i> : Sermon on the Mount: perfecting love for enemy-oppressors	5–7
2. <i>Narrative</i> : Ten miracles: solidarity with the sick and marginalized	8–9
<i>Discourse</i> : Twelve missionaries sent to oppressed Israel: their simple lifestyle	10
3. <i>Narrative</i> : Conflicts with local Jewish oligarchies	11–12
<i>Discourse</i> : Seven subversive word pictures portray God’s just new order	13
4. <i>Narrative</i> : Jesus’ alternative counterculture community in formation	14–17
<i>Discourse</i> : Keeping the space safe in the fictive kinship communities	18
5. <i>Narrative</i> : Toward Jerusalem: escalating conflict with local oligarchies	19–22
<i>Discourse</i> : God will judge oppressors: local oligarchies and empire	23–25
Conclusion. Liberating the Liberator: death, resurrection, universal mission	26–28

Commentary

1. Introduction: “Anti-Semitic” Judaism?

Just as Mark probably “signed” his Gospel with the scene of a young man who fled naked (Mark 14:51–52), Matthew apparently paints a self-portrait when he writes,

Every scribe who has become a disciple for the realm from heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure first what is *new* [Jesus’ good news] and then what is *old* [Moses’ law/the Torah]. (Matt. 13:52)

Since those who identified with Jesus' "way" continued to be a sect within Judaism during the first century C.E., it would be anachronistic to think of Matthew as a Jew who became a "Christian." Consequently, we should understand his harsh expressions against certain "Jews" not as an expression of anti-Judaism (much less modern racially based anti-Semitism), but as a prophetic denunciation against other sectors within Judaism, especially the Pharisees.¹

According to early patristic tradition, Matthew was written by the toll collector Matthew/Levi whom Jesus called to discipleship (Matt. 9:9), who then immediately threw a banquet to introduce Jesus to other toll collectors (despised collaborators with the Roman Empire who worked in the customhouses), including in the invitation even sex workers, their equally marginalized friends (9:10–13 // Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32; cf. Matt. 5:46; 11:19; 18:17; 21:31–32).

The name Matthew (*Mattiyah* in Hebrew) means "gift of Yah[weh]/God," but in Greek *Matthaios* sounds similar to "disciples" (*mathētai*), those who "become/make disciples" (*mathēteuō*), a key word in the Gospel (see "disciple all nations," 28:19). Matthew probably was written for a mixed church (Jewish-Gentile) in Syrian Antioch (4:24; Acts 13:1) at a time of much persecution (Matt. 5:10–12). The Antiochene church, founded by Hellenistic Jews, had a long tradition (since Paul's ministry, 46–65 C.E.) of reaching out to Gentiles.

The memoirs of the former publican (toll collector—perhaps the scribe of 13:52 in his later years) may have been edited in final form by another Jewish Christian (scribe [13:52]?). Whatever the process, Matthew has a markedly Jewish but emphatically Christian character: in 13:52 the new, unexpectedly, has priority over the old. Matthew uses Mark (written ca. 69 C.E.), as well as our earliest source Q (ca. 60 C.E.). Q consisted of the teachings that Matthew has in common with Luke (e.g., the sermon of Matthew 5–7 // Luke 6 [Luke ca. 80]). In addition to Mark and Q, Matthew contains much of its own and unique material, commonly indicated by M. The date for Matthew's final editing and publication may be ca. 85 C.E., after news about the destruction of Jerusalem (70 C.E.) became widely disseminated (21:41; 22:7; 24:15–16).

Most modern scholars find it difficult to accept as author of the Gospel Levi, the toll collector, especially because they cannot imagine that a disciple and eyewitness of Jesus' ministry would have taken over so much from Mark (a secondary source). However, according to patristic tradition, Mark represents the eyewitness testimony of Peter, who plays a uniquely large role in Matthew (see below). Moreover, literary habits of ancient authors and scribes regarding use of earlier documents differed from our modern capitalistic norms that emphasize originality and respect for copyrights to protect authors' economic

1. Luke T. Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Rhetoric," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 419–41; Scott McKnight, "A Loyal Critic: Matthew's Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective," in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 55–79.

interests in the market.² Consequently, even if our present Matthew does not proceed directly from the pen of the toll collector Levi, the Gospel still may preserve memoirs/traditions from this disciple, which formed the basis of the patristic tradition of Matthew as author. The Gospel's originality is evident in the author's remarkably creative theological and homiletic use of earlier documents (Q and Mark), as well as in the materials peculiar to Matthew (M).

Whoever the author, the emphatically Jewish character of Matthew is undeniable. Matthew so respects Jewish sensibilities that he prefers to speak of the "realm from heaven" (not "of God") and changes the reference to two men in a bed (Luke 17:34 = Q; KJV) to two men in a field (Matt. 24:40; cf. the "beloved slave" of Luke 7:2, but "son/slave" [Greek: *pais*] in Matt. 8:6). In addition, Matthew

- begins with a genealogy (1:1–17, "Abraham" and "David")
- emphasizes the law/Torah (5:17–20; 23:1–3)
- cites nine Hebrew scripture texts as prophecies Jesus fulfilled (2:5b–6, 15b, 17–18, 23b; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:35; 21:4–5; cf. 3:3; 13:14; 26:54, 56; 27:9–10).
- refers to specifically Jewish acts of piety (bring gifts to the temple altar, 5:23–24)

Matthew presents Jesus as the son of Abraham and of David (1:1, 17), the new Moses who ascends a mountain to receive and communicate divine revelation (5:1–2; 7:28–29), and collects Jesus' teaching into five great sermons, parallel to the five books of Moses. Matthew alternates Jesus' five great discourses with five narrations. The ten miracles in Matthew 8–9 (mainly healings) contrast impressively with the ten plagues of the Exodus. At the same time, however, Matthew is also emphatically Christian, emphasizing Jesus as the Christ/Messiah, Son of God, and Human One (literally "Son of Man") and (in texts taken over from Mark) underscores titles of divinity and even worship offered to Jesus.

2. *Literary Genre*

Even in conservative and evangelical circles, Robert H. Gundry's erudite commentary has provoked questions and discussions concerning the literary genre and historicity of the traditions Matthew preserves. Against the great majority of contemporary scholars, Gundry defends the tradition of Matthew as author and an early date (ca. 60–62).³ Gundry concludes, however, that in addition to historical traditions taken primarily from Mark and Q, Matthew also includes elements of "midrash" (homiletical and theological creativity that do not reflect historical data—see Jesus' parables).⁴ Another evangelical,

2. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 621.

3. *Ibid.*, 599–622.

4. *Ibid.*, xxiii–xxx (1994 edition). Perhaps the American conservative evangelical storm over Gundry (including his forced resignation from the inerrantist Evangelical Theological Society) was

Donald A. Hagner, defends the fundamental historicity of all that Matthew includes, without claiming that he wrote with the technical precision of a modern historian.⁵

Since 1985 the famous Jesus Seminar, a self-selected American group (seventy-four reputable scholars, but mainly of radical bent), has managed to utilize the mass media to disseminate their conclusion that very little in the four Gospels has any historical basis (the Seminar has voted that less than 20 percent of sayings the Gospels attribute to Jesus are authentic). Mainline and conservative critics point out that the conclusions of this self-appointed group do not represent the scholarly consensus.⁶ However, literature (such as Jesus' parables) may be inspired and a source of divine wisdom, even when not pretending to measure up to modern expectations of scientific historiography. Whether Matthew includes much, little, or no midrash, the historical basis of Jesus' life is solidly grounded in the other Gospels, as well as in the historical elements Matthew shares with them.

3. From "*the Poor in Spirit*" to "*the Least of These My Brothers*"

Careful readers have observed that in Luke's Gospel, Jesus addresses his first beatitude to his disciples as "you poor" (Luke 6:20), while in Matthew he speaks of "the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). Luke includes Jesus' discourse in which he cites Isaiah to specify that his mission is to proclaim good news to the poor and liberation for the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19, quoting Isa. 61:1–2 + 58:6)—a fundamental text for Latin American liberation theologians. At first glance, Matthew thus makes Jesus' option for the poor less offensive and thus appears more "conservative" than Luke.

A more careful reading, however, reveals that Matthew also is quite radical. "Spirit" in the Bible is not immaterial but is God's force, often invisible like the wind, a hurricane, or the cause of earthquakes. Matthew, who addressed a sect including a few affluent members, clarifies that God's blessing is promised not only for the poor but also for those who manifest solidarity with them in times of persecution, since such solidarity involves putting your life at risk (see Matthew's two Joseph paradigms: Mary's husband, 1:18–2:25; and Joseph of Arimathea, 27:57–61—an example of structural inclusion).

due in part to the fact that his interpretation of Matthew as including elements of midrash left open the door for someone to accept the inerrancy of the entire Bible and at the same time conclude that nothing in it represents history, including the tradition of Jesus' virginal conception and birth, one of the five "fundamentals" for fundamentalists (though hardly such in biblical theology—see under Luke). Inerrantists thought that with their view of inspiration they had everything of significance to them nailed down, but Gundry's questions regarding literary genre and midrash in Matthew indicated that with biblical inerrancy alone nothing is nailed down.

5. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, WBC 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993), xliii.

6. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 820–23; Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 184–85; Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 42–57; Luke T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1996); Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); see also N. T. Wright's three volumes in the general bibliography.

Throughout his entire Gospel, Matthew develops the sense of “poor in spirit” whenever he speaks of solidarity and justice in the new community, but above all when he describes the final judgment with his unique criterion of separation: solidarity with the poor, the needy, and the persecuted (structural inclusion: Jesus’ first and last teaching). In Jesus’ original teaching, transmitted orally, the needy “brothers and sisters” (Matt. 25:31–46) probably referred to *any human in need*. However, when Matthew included Jesus’ parable in his Gospel, his own linguistic usage and emphasis on the church resulted in a more concrete nuance of a “Christian brother” in need. Such a specific application was especially appropriate because of the oppression and persecution that the church in Antioch was suffering when Matthew wrote. This concrete application to Christian “brothers” (persecuted, missionaries?—see Acts 8:1–4), however, is not exclusive or preferential, but should be understood as paradigmatic for any humans in need (see God’s Exodus liberation of Israel; Luke’s parable of the good Samaritan; Gal. 6:10).

Many liberation theologians thus recognize in Matt. 25:31–46 a text even more radical than Luke 4:18–19. In this parable Jesus insists that at the final judgment “correct ideas” or proper theology (believing that God is one, or triune, or that Jesus is God incarnate) will not matter. The Judge inquires only about the works of loving solidarity done for humans in need. Religious people commonly devote immense energy, even resorting to “holy wars,” to defend their “orthodoxy.” Jesus, however, insists that in the final judgment all that will matter is their “orthopraxis”—sacrificial solidarity with humans in need (“take up your cross”). This revolutionary parable of Jesus, preserved only in Matthew (M), subverts all human ideologies and religions.⁷

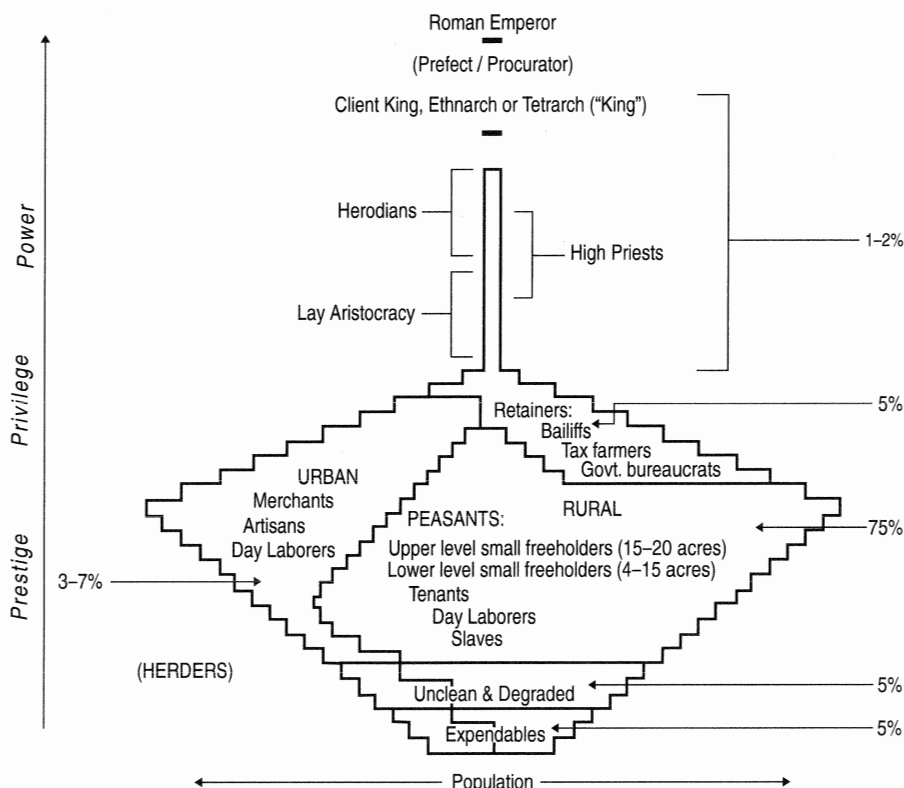
Dennis Duling summarizes well the vocabulary that describes the numerous types of poor in Matthew:⁸

1. forced laborers, 5:41 (implied)
2. day laborers (*ergatēs*): 20:1, 2, 8, perhaps 9:37–38; 10:10
3. slaves/servants (*doulos*): 8:9; 10:24–25; 13:27–28; 18:23, 26–28, 32; 20:27; 21:34, 36; 22:3–4, 6, 8, 10; 24:45–46, 48, 50; 25:14, 19, 21, 23 (2x), 30; 26:51; slave/son (*pais*, adopted?): 8:6, 8, 13; 12:18 (Isa. 42:1); 14:2; 17:18; 21:15.
4. peasants, urban poor, and destitute:
 - crowd(s) (*ochlos*): fifty references(!), including women, slaves, peasants, sick and physically challenged, eunuchs
 - tenant farmers (*geōrgos*): 21:33
 - poor (*ptōchos*): literal in 11:5; 19:21; 26:9–11; cf. 5:3, “in spirit” (allies)
 - receivers of alms (*eleēmosunē*): 6:1–6; 19:21

7. Xavier Pikaza, *Hermanos de Jesús y servidores de los más pequeños* (Mt 25, 31–46) (Salamanca, Spain: Sígueme, 1984).

8. Dennis Duling, “Matthew and Marginality,” in *SBL 1993 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 653. See also shepherds (*poimenes*, cf. Luke), which for Matthew is always a positive metaphor: 9:36; 10:6 and 15:24 (“lost sheep”); 25:32; 26:31 (Zech. 13:7).

Social Stratification in the Herodian Period⁹



Also, only Matthew indicates that the *meek* will inherit *the earth* (5:5), a reference to the Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25) as an image of the realm from heaven (Matt. 6:12; 18:21-35; Luke 4:18-19).¹⁰

To what extent does Matthew reflect the dominant biblical perspective that views oppression as the fundamental cause of poverty?¹¹ Granted, the more obvious technical vocabulary for oppression is not common in Matthew (see “unjust/oppressors,” 5:45; “injustice, wrong, harm,” 20:13). However, when

9. The diagram is from Duling, “Matthew and Marginality,” 651, and is used with permission. It is modified slightly from D. Fiensy, *The Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period*, 158, based on G. and J. Lenski, *Human Societies*, 203, influenced by G. Alföldy, *Die römische Gesellschaft*.

10. Marcelo de Barros and José Luis Caravias, *Teología de la tierra* (Madrid: Paulinas, 1988); Roy H. May, *Los pobres de la tierra* (San José, Costa Rica: DEI, 1986); ET, *The Poor of the Land* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991); Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Christopher J. H. Wright, “Jubilee, Year of,” *ABD*, 3:1025-30.

11. Thomas D. Hanks, *God So Loved the Third World: The Biblical Vocabulary of Oppression*, trans. James C. Dekker (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983), 33-39.

we recognize that persecution constitutes a religiously motivated expression of oppression in Matthew, his affinity with the Exodus paradigm becomes clear, since being persecuted for practicing liberating justice (5:10–12) forms the inclusion linking the final Beatitude with the first on those who show solidarity with the poor (5:3), while promise to the meek who are to inherit land (5:5) relates to the mourning of those who have lost their land due to exile and other mechanisms of oppression (5:4). Matthew is well aware of judicial mechanisms of oppression (see the more powerful “legal opponent, oppressor,” 5:25). His narrative of Herod’s violent oppression (2:16–20) shows his awareness of the social-political realities under Roman rule (see 5:40–41, 43–46). Matthew’s denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees refers to mechanisms of oppression with metaphor (“burdens,” 23:4) and synonyms (“robbery,” 23:25; “lawlessness,” 23:28) and concludes with indignant denunciations of violence (23:29–30). Violent oppressors are denounced as “serpents, offspring of vipers” (23:33; cf. 3:7, 10). Like →Mark, Matthew makes clear the link between the oppression and violence characteristic of the local temple-based political-religious oligarchy (23:38) and the destruction of the temple (24:15–28) and cosmic judgment (24:29–25:46; see oppression synonyms in 24:9, 12, 21, 29, 48–49; cf. the poor, oppressed, and weak in 25:35–39). As in James (5:1–9), so in Matthew, Jesus’ decisive final intervention constitutes liberating justice for the poor and all the oppressed, including the Gentile nations (Matt. 12:15–21).

4. *The Realm of Heaven as God’s Liberating Justice*

As John P. Meier points out, Matthew lacks the word that corresponds to the terms “morals” or “ethics,” both categories of Greek philosophy. For Matthew the equivalent general category is that of “justice” (commonly but misleadingly rendered “righteousness” in English versions).¹² However, justice in Matthew (and the Bible as a whole) normally refers to the kind of liberating justice with which God acted to liberate the Hebrew slaves in the Exodus, which serves as the fundamental paradigm in biblical theology (3:15; 5:6; 6:33; cf. human justice in 5:10, 20; 6:1; 21:32; esp. 25:31–46).¹³ Such liberating justice represents “God’s will” (12:46–50), revealed to the disciples in Jesus’ five discourses in Matthew, and is the fundamental characteristic of the realm of God (6:33; see also “realm of God” in 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43; Matthew, of course, prefers the synonym “realm *from heaven*,” used thirty-three times). Because he presents liberating justice as the fundamental characteristic of God’s promised new order, Matthew’s good news of the realm (4:23; 9:35; 24:14; cf. 26:13) is similar to Luke’s “good news to the poor” (4:18).

12. John P. Meier, “Matthew, Gospel of,” *ABD*, 4:640.

13. This was Jose P. Miranda’s fundamental point in his classic liberationist study *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974). Miranda’s understanding of “justice/righteousness” in the Bible as normally referring to God’s liberating justice (from oppression) has been confirmed in the investigations of Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986); *Justice in an Unjust World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987).