

Matthew – Matthew’s gospel is easily the most Jewish of the four. Matthew highlights Jesus as the Son of David in greater measure than the other three and has a predilection for pairing an OT prophecy with its NT fulfillment in Jesus the Jewish Messiah. For example, five such incidents occur before chapter three. With his Jewish audience in mind, Matthew is the only evangelist who records the Jewish explanation of the resurrection of Jesus (28:12-15). An interesting feature of this gospel is that its author mentions the Sadducees more times than the other three gospels combined and multiplied by two. At 1,068 verses, Matthew is the second longest synoptic gospel.

Exodus - Exodus is a pivotal book for a number of reasons, mainly because it narrates the birth of a nation -- but not just any nation. This nation was fashioned and nurtured by Yahweh Himself. That Exodus opens with the Hebrew word “and” or “now” connects it to Genesis, meaning that the nation conceived in Genesis is now born and moving around. Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea is the most recounted aspect of its history, especially in the psalms, and its wilderness experience contains much profitable material for NT believers. Both the date of the exodus itself and Israel’s particular route in the wilderness have been objects of considerable controversy among scholars. But for the average believer, Exodus easily falls within the scope of I Corinthians 10:6 -- it is in the Bible for us to profit therefrom.

Romans – Romans is the theological standard bearer of the NT. Most scholars consider it Paul’s greatest literary work, and not a few consider it the greatest book in the NT. If Galatians is the Magna Carta of Christianity, Romans is its constitution. This book contains a systematic presentation of the Christian faith, punctuated with a question and answer format. It moves gracefully from God’s condemnation of the Gentile (1:18-32) to the Jew (2:1-29) and then to the entire human race (3:20) before issuing God’s solution to our dilemma (3:21-31). Luther is said to have been converted upon reading 1:17 and Augustine upon reading 13:14. Former Jehovah’s Witness elder and now Christian author David Reed got saved reading 8:9. Chapters 12-14 contain priceless advice on practical Christian living. The book ends in Chapter 16 with a protracted greeting from Paul to his many brothers and sisters in Rome.

Haggai – Haggai is one of three post-exilic (after the exile) books, the other two being Zechariah and Malachi. In addition, Haggai is one of few OT books whose date we can pinpoint with a high degree of accuracy: 520 B.C. (see 1:1). Haggai’s prophecy opens with God in a sour mood and for good reason. He calls His people “this people”, a sure indication of His displeasure. The Jews have gotten too comfortable in their upper middle class homes. The temple, only half completed, remains in disrepair. God has charged Haggai with the task of reinvigorating them spiritually and restoring a sense of priority – God’s house first, theirs second. This tart prophecy ends with some encouraging words for Judah’s governor, Zerubbabel. There’s hope yet.

MATTHEW 3–7

LIFE WITHIN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

These chapters of Matthew's Gospel provide a foundation for the story of Jesus which will unfold in the rest of the book. The Sermon on the Mount, which takes up the bulk of this section, acts as a kind of manifesto for Jesus' life and work and has played a crucial role in defining discipleship throughout Christian history.

The four Gospels are written in different contexts and tell the story of Jesus with specific audiences in mind. Luke, for example, writes for a named person, so providing us with a clue as to why he shapes the narrative as he does. In Matthew's case, the original audience is less obvious but if, as many scholars believe, this Gospel was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, it addressed a community of disciples facing growing hostility from Jewish leaders, while also wrestling with the implications of the seeming triumph of Roman power and ideology. Elsewhere in the New Testament we discover believers in this same period facing hostile criticism from critics like those described in 2 Peter 3:3,4, who asked: 'Where is this "coming" He promised?' We should keep this context in mind as we read the early chapters of Matthew.

The question then arises as to how we apply this Gospel in our lives and communicate it to our contemporaries. We do not live in the ancient world but in a highly technological culture in which life seems to move at an ever-faster pace. Can a message from the first century be relevant more than 2,000 years later? We should not be too hasty in answering this question, because the cultural differences between now and then are considerable. However, there are parallels, or analogies, between Matthew's world and ours, so that across the gap of time and history, his message can still resonate in our broken world. The 'old, old story'¹ can be retold in ever-new contexts and sound as it did in the beginning: truly good news.

¹ Katherine Hankey, 1834–1911, 'Tell Me the Old, Old Story'

EXODUS 1-15

BLESSED REASSURANCES

Exodus is the sequel to the salvation story inaugurated by the Abrahamic covenant. Harking back to the promise of land, nationhood, and blessing,¹ God had reassured Jacob: ‘Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again.’² Exodus is just the beginning of the fulfillment of these assurances.

The band of seventy ‘who went to Egypt with Jacob’ (1:1) had ‘multiplied greatly’ (1:7). By the time the Israelites are finally brought out of Egypt, ‘there were about six hundred thousand men ... besides women and children’ (12:37); the makings of a ‘great nation’ are in place. God keeps His promise to ‘go down to Egypt’ with them; practically every page of Exodus displays God’s presence, protection, and power – in both spectacular and subtle ways. The reader cannot but echo the cry of Pharaoh’s magicians: ‘This is the finger of God’ (8:19)! God had also promised, ‘I will surely bring you back’: Exodus 1–15 narrates how God gets His people out of Egypt – and the rest of the Pentateuch describes the struggle to get Egypt out of the people, to become God’s ‘own people’ (6:7). The final fulfillment – the entry into the Promised Land – awaits Joshua’s conquest of Canaan.

The New Testament repeatedly employs the vocabulary and imagery of Exodus (lamb, blood, redeem, deliver) to describe the deliverance Jesus accomplished by the cross. The Exodus event foreshadowed the greater fulfillment effected by Jesus: ‘His departure [Greek, exodos], which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.’³ Our readings conclude with the jubilant song of Moses (15:1–18). Because of Jesus’ exodos, we can gratefully rejoice: ‘Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine; / O what a foretaste of glory divine!’⁴

FOR FURTHER READING:

Alan Cole, *Exodus*, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, IVP, 1973

PG George and Paul Swarup, *Exodus*, *South Asia Bible Commentary*, India: Open Door Publications, 2015

¹ Gen 12:1–3 ² Gen 46:3,4 ³ Luke 9:31 ⁴ Fanny Crosby, 1820–1915

ROMANS 1–8

A HISTORY OF SALVATION

To be asked to write on these chapters feels like being awarded a prize, so significant are they within the Scriptures! To read them is to enter into some of the most life- and world-changing words that humans have ever penned. Romans gives us a sustained account of the Christian message, perhaps the most complete account of early Christian preaching as Paul communicated it. Even so, there are important subjects that he does not touch on. As we shall see, the contents rise gradually in a mighty crescendo as we approach the final verses of chapter 8. We are treading upon holy ground.

This is not to say that the book is easily understood. There are difficulties aplenty in wrestling with scriptural texts. How could it be otherwise, with a library of books of such ancient pedigree dealing with such profound matters? But when we encounter difficulties in interpreting the Bible we should treat them as invitations to deeper thought. We wrestle with them. Those who are hostile to the Bible (and there are many) are destined never to profit from its wisdom. Equally, those who are hostile to Paul (and there are some distorted ideas about him) will consistently fail to value the enormous and generous scope of his thought. It is sometimes claimed that Paul is the true founder of Christianity, an opinion we decisively reject – Christ is our cornerstone – but the influence of Paul’s thought on the nature of the Christian faith is beyond contest and beyond price. Romans 1–8 lie at the core.

The church (or churches) in Rome was (or were) probably founded as new Jewish believers in Jesus returned to Rome after Pentecost. Soon after that, Gentile believers were gathered in. The letter was sent from Corinth, probably in A.D. 57,¹ and probably conveyed by Phoebe, accompanied no doubt by others. Phoebe herself was a significant member of the church at Cenchreae, the port town near Corinth.² The histories of Christianity and of Rome have been entwined ever since.

¹ Acts 20:2,3 ² Rom 16:1

EXODUS 15–27

A NATION IS BORN

Recent Western-engineered regime changes have taught us that removing dictators is one thing, constructing the peace is another. After securing liberty from tyranny, careful attention must be given to building a new nation. These chapters in Exodus concern Israel's first months in the wilderness after miraculously escaping Egypt and their first steps in becoming 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (19:6).

Initially (chs 15–17), they had to learn to trust God to provide for them in an inhospitable desert where water and food were inevitably scarce. Several chapters record God's provision for them and provide stirring lessons in faith. Not all the steps are miraculous. Some seem very ordinary, as when Moses learns about delegation (ch 18). Good organization is vital to building a harmonious people. Chapters 19–23 record the giving of the Law at Sinai, setting out the distinctive way in which they are to live as God's special covenant people. God's remarkable navigation system for their journey follows (23:20–33), before this short section concludes with the covenant being confirmed. The final chapters (chs 25–27) give very specific instructions about the building of a house for God, which was to be located in the midst of their camp. The details are like those any good architect provides if the building is to prove safe and fit for purpose. They are also rich in symbolism. As a result the details have given rise to all sorts of fanciful interpretations and spiritual lessons, some of which were probably not intended. Any interpretation needs to be done with disciplined care, ensuring that the overall meaning (that God is central to his people, eager to meet with them and providing a means of removing the obstacle of sin) is kept uppermost.

In all these ways, God's people are forged into a nation for the good of the world.

FOR FURTHER READING

Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, IVP, 2005

Douglas Stuart, *Exodus, The New American Commentary*, B&H Publishing, 2006

HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH*

TWO PROPHETS. ONE VOICE.

In 587 B.C. (some say 586 B.C.), Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and Judah came under his complete control. He took many of Judah's most prominent people into Babylonia for a long period of exile. In 538 B.C., after Persia had conquered the former Babylonian empire, the Persian ruler Cyrus allowed the captive Jews to return to Judah. There they began the work of rebuilding the ruined Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, with the aim of re-establishing worship. However, the reconstruction was halted by opposition from their non-Jewish neighbors and eventually the Jews lost enthusiasm for the Temple project, preferring to concentrate their time, energy, and resources on rebuilding their own lives. Enter the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, whose ministries began and intersected in 520 B.C., the second year of King Darius' reign.¹

Haggai's and Zechariah's message to their Jewish compatriots is essentially the same: put God first in your lives! For Haggai, this means completing work on the Temple. He berates them for spending too much time and money on their own personal comfort. By failing to get their priorities right, they deprive themselves of God's blessing and are consequently leading an unfulfilled and unsatisfied existence. Focus on rebuilding the Temple, and they will see God's blessing restored. For Zechariah, rebuilding the Temple and giving God his rightful place are a preparation for the nation's cleansing and revival as a light for the whole world. God will return to them in glory beyond anything they could imagine, for through his righteous priest-king to come (whom we know as the Messiah Jesus) God will gather a people for himself from all nations and Jerusalem will be a great, prosperous and peaceful city, where all peoples will gather to worship him.

The exalted, hope-filled message we encounter in Haggai and Zechariah will be interspersed with commentary on Psalms 141, 142 and 143. There we shall see how David finds help from God in times of danger, loneliness, and despair.

¹ Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1

*The Zechariah readings will appear later this year.