RESPONSE TO JACK DEAN KINGSBURY’S “THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EARTHLY JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW”

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I appreciated the opportunity to learn about the development of Matthew’s narrative from this paper, which builds upon—and, indeed, summarizes—over twenty years’ work by Professor Kingsbury in this area. On the other hand, I was somewhat disappointed that the paper says too little about the topics to which this year’s symposium is devoted, namely the earthly Jesus and his theological significance for the Church today.

In his introductory remarks, Kingsbury argues that “Matthew does not approach the earthly Jesus in the way a critical historian today would do so.” Two points support this argument, namely that “Matthew does not portray first-hand observers of the earthly Jesus as understanding him aright in the course of his ministry” and that the depictions of “Jesus’ virginal conception and bodily resurrection” are not demonstrable by one or more eyewitnesses, whose testimony can be corroborated by other texts or archaeological remains. These observations lead Kingsbury to conclude that Matthew, unlike the critically trained historian, presents “the earthly Jesus from the viewpoint” of “none other than God himself.” As a result, “the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel will differ remarkably from the Jesus of critical-historical research and eyewitness report.” An exception I would offer to these prolegomena to Matthew and the historical Jesus is that the first supporting point concerning the disciples’ lack of understanding in Matthew seems to equivocate between the depiction of events in Jesus’ life and the unsupported claim that the author of Matthew either did not possess, or chose not to use, reliable eyewitnesses for information concerning the earthly Jesus.

The first main part of the paper discusses the ways in which God’s perspective is communicated in Matthew’s narrative. This Gospel’s narrative includes, among other things, the story of Jesus’ conflict with Jewish leaders and the crucifixion, as well as discourse. Kingsbury notes that the discourse materials offer a certain “point of view”—that is, a (or the) divine perspective—of this Gospel’s presentation. One point of caution I would add here is that both this author’s depiction of events in Jesus’ life and the sections containing discourse should be recognized as indicative of a particular point of view concerning the earthly Jesus.

The second part of the paper concerns “the element of time in Matthew’s story.” In particular, Kingsbury rightly focuses on eschatology and the way in which the author of Matthew intends for the recipients of this writing to respond to its message. An unexplored point in this section and elsewhere in the paper concerns the question who is construed as the reader of Matthew. Kingsbury seems to address his remarks to modern individuals, who leave “the world in which they lead their daily lives... and enter for a period of time into the eschatological world that Matthew... creates for them.” I would be interested to see Kingsbury develop his thoughts more clearly on how the author of Matthew intended the original recipients of this writing to respond to its eschatological message.

With regard to the issue of time in Matthew, one might note that the author of the Gospel of Mark, who is followed in Matthew, highlights the eschatological expectation that “this generation will not pass away until all these things,” including the coming of the Son of Man, “have taken place.” One question to be asked, then, is the extent to which Matthew’s presentation of the
earthly Jesus' teaching on eschatology includes a dialogue with views held by the author of Mark and others in the early Church. In this connection it should also be noted that this evangelist extends beyond the Markan temporal designations of the coming of John the Baptist at the beginning and the empty tomb and imminent parousia at the work's conclusion (Mark 1:2-11, 16:1-8; cf. 13:30) to include the genealogies of ancient Israel and a worldwide mission to be culminated at some unspecified point at the end of the age (Matt 1:2-17, 28:16-20).

In the third, and by far the longest, section of the paper, Kingsbury examines "the significance of the earthly Jesus in Matthew's story." Much of this section is devoted to a very interesting discussion of the growth of the conflict between Jesus and other religious leaders in Matthew 9, 11-12, and 21-23. The final part of this paper continues to trace the aforementioned theme in the Matthean passion narrative with regard to Jesus' fate at the hands of the Jewish leaders.

In the paper's final paragraph, Kingsbury surmises that the question of "the significance of the earthly Jesus in Matthew's Gospel" is better stated as "the significance of the earthly Jesus in Matthew's gospel story of conflict... between Jesus and the religious authorities." Two inferences follow from this interesting approach to the problem, which is undertaken with this very emphasis in the third and fourth sections of the paper. First, "Matthew's story of conflict" presents Jesus as "the royal" and obedient "Son of God." Second, the author of Matthew asks the reader to receive Jesus "as the royal Son of God." One part of this last argument that remains unclear, however, is the way in which Jesus' identity as Son of God is exemplified in his various conflicts with other Jewish leaders.

At this point it remains to suggest two broad interpretive questions which could be explored. The first point concerns the relationship between Kingsbury's introductory remarks about the author of Matthew as historian and the narratological approach applied to this writing in the body of the paper. As Kingsbury rightly observes, "Matthew does not approach the earthly Jesus in the way [that] a critical historian today would." Consequently, the author of the First Gospel, perhaps like the rest of the NT authors, might well be perplexed by this symposium's discussion of the earthly Jesus, for, as Kingsbury's paper seems to imply, there is, for the author of Matthew, no difference between the Jesus of this Gospel's narratives and the earthly Jesus himself. Strictly speaking, then, the subject of the historical Jesus is not investigated by Matthew.

But it does not follow, as Kingsbury seems to imply, that one either cannot or should not proceed behind the narrative of Matthew to learn about this author's views of the earthly Jesus. Rather, there is much more that can be learned about Matthew's view of the earthly Jesus. Whereas the paper under discussion has been limited to an analysis of Matthew's narrative, I would have preferred a more comparative methodology in which Matthew's thoughtful use of the Gospel of Mark—and, for that matter, of the Sayings Source "Q"—would have also been explored. At a number of points, for example, when Kingsbury discusses Matthew's narrative, the prominent similarities to Mark's narrative also merit attention, for, as is well known, about 90% of Mark is reproduced in some form in Matthew. It is to be granted that, to the extent that Matthew reproduces Mark's account, Matthew agrees with the emphases of the Second Gospel. Absent in Kingsbury's paper, however, is a discussion of the sometimes instructive points at which Matthew chooses either to omit or to embellish upon Mark's depictions of the earthly Jesus.

A case in point concerns the re-writing of Mark 10:17-18 in Matt 19:16-17:7-8:

Mark 10:17-18
As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments. . . ."

Matt 19:16-17
Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments. . . ."

The Markan account makes perfect sense within the Jewish context of Jesus' ministry. Also of relevance here is the fact that in Mark no human being ever correctly recognizes Jesus as God's Son before the Roman centurion sees Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:39). The author of Matthew, however, who repeatedly speaks of Jesus as Son of God in passages not derived from Mark (for example,
Matt 3:17, 4:3, 4:6, 14:33, 16:16, 28:19; cf. 2:15, 22:2), seems to have been concerned that Jesus' calling "God alone" good (Mark 10:18) might seem to contradict other passages in the First Gospel where people recognize Jesus as Son of God. I would submit that it is especially at points like Mark 10:17-18/Matt 19:16-17, in which the evangelist's editorial activity is unmistakable, that there is much to be learned about the significance of the earthly Jesus for the author of Matthew.

Also noteworthy are the instances in which Matthew chooses to omit parts of Mark's depictions of the earthly Jesus. See, for example, Mark 1:23-28, 35-38, 45, 2:2, 4, 3:11, 20-21. All of these passages from the first three chapters of Mark are concerned with the spread of Jesus' popularity, usually through the performing of miracles, and the need for secrecy with regard to Jesus' identity as God's Son. Matthew's choice not to include these parts of Mark seems to have been intentional, because the Markan emphasis on secrecy stands in tension with the many instances in Matthew in which Jesus is openly recognized as Son of God.

A second point for discussion concerns the fact that there is much to be learned about Matthew's estimation of the earthly Jesus from this author's presentation of Jesus' teachings. In Matthew 5:20 Jesus makes the striking statement that, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." In the various interpretations of the Jewish Law and related customs that follow (Matt 5:21-48), a citation of the Torah is typically followed by an even stricter standard by which the members of the Matthean community are to live. For example, one is to refrain not only from murder but also from insulting or maliciously directing one's anger against another person (Matt 5:21-26). The point at issue to us here is that the continuing validity of the Jewish law is never questioned in this section of Matthew. On the contrary, the recurring assumption in the Sermon on the Mount is that the hypocrites do not adhere properly to certain esteemed laws and traditional practices, such as almsgiving.8 The inclusion of such statements in this Gospel gives rise to questions concerning the way in which Matthew understood the earthly Jesus' view of the Jewish law, as well as the need for continued obedience to the law by the Christians to whom Matthew wrote.

A related quandary concerns Jesus' missionary instruction that the twelve disciples travel not among the gentiles or Samaritans but only among "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6). By the end of Matthew's narrative, however, the risen Lord's commissioning includes "all nations" (Matt 28:19-20), but the question whether non-Jewish converts to the faith are to live in conformity with the Jewish law is never addressed explicitly by the author of Matthew. Truly, one can wonder whether this author's conceptions of missionary work and of the interpretation of the Jewish law were different from those of, for example, the Pauline Christian communities. Such issues continue to be integral to Christian self-definition to this day as we seek to understand the significance of the earthly Jesus.

NOTES


2. Generally speaking, Kingsbury's point is promising but needs further elaboration and clarification. One avenue that could be explored concerns the way in which the author of Matthew has taken over and modified the motif of secrecy concerning Jesus' identity as messiah or Son of God in the Gospel of Mark. See the discussion of this point below in this response.


4. Mark 13:30; cf. 13:24-30, Matt 24:29-35. I assume here the priority of the Gospel of Mark, which was used as a source at some later point by the authors of Matthew and Luke.
5. Historically speaking, however, such a position must be recognized as unsatisfactory in light of the fact that different narratives—each, presumably, offering its own divine perspective about Jesus’ life and teaching—are preserved in the NT and other early Christian writings.


7. For the purposes of this response, I have taken the time to mention only Matthew’s use of Mark 1-3. Note that the author of Luke, unlike Matthew, does include all or part of Mark 1:23-28, 35-38, 45, 2:2 and 2:4. In addition, the omission of Mark 3:20-21 (on the unpardonable sin) by Matthew (and Luke) is probably not related to the tendency discussed above.
