

“Son of David”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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Matthew 1:1-17

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The most complete

About ten days ago, I had a brief conversation with Kevin Watkins, who is completing seminary courses at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He told me he had just written what’s called a “narrative sermon” for his preaching class. In a narrative sermon the preacher tells a biblical story in the first person.

As the calendar turned to this week, we begin a series of sermons on the first book in the New Testament. Michael Green calls Matthew “perhaps the most important single document in the New Testament.” That may be debatable, but Green says it’s because Matthew writes the most complete account of Jesus’ life. The early church thought his Gospel was primary; that’s why it’s first.

It seemed to me the best way to introduce Matthew would be with a narrative sermon. My sermon is like “historical fiction” – a combination of what the Bible actually says, what other sources and traditions have recorded, and a little creative imagination. Instead of telling the story as Matthew, I will assume the role of his brother, James.

A zealot and a publican

What catches my eye as I walk into your sanctuary is the beautiful window at the front. Not only have you pictured Jesus on his resurrection day, but surrounding him you have shields for the twelve apostles, most symbolizing their martyrdom.

There's my shield in the upper right, symbolized by a hand saw. There's a story behind the saw, and it's not pretty, but that's not the story I want to tell today. They call me "James the Less." It's not a flattering nickname, and nobody called me that in my lifetime. There were other, more famous men named James – including one who wrote one of the New Testament letters. He's the Greater James.

But at least I have a shield in your window. My brother, Matthew, isn't even up there. It must be a mistake, because he was one of the twelve. Someone confused him with Matthias, who replaced Judas after he betrayed Jesus and committed suicide. Whatever the reason, there's a lot of irony (and a bit of competitive brotherly triumph) that the famous Matthew, the name behind the first Gospel, has no shield to commemorate him, while "James the Less" is at the top of the window.

Yes, we were brothers, the least well-known of three pairs of brothers among the twelve disciples – James and John, Peter and Andrew, Matthew and James. Sibling rivalry isn't something you might expect in Jesus' closest circle. No pair of brothers faced it like my brother and me.

Matthew wasn't his given name, you know. He was "Levi" growing up. Our father, Alphaeus, a pious man, wanted all his children to live our lives dedicated to the God of our fathers. Ancestry is so critical to our people. We all knew our identity through our lineage. Father named my brother after our ancestor, Levi, the son of Jacob. My name, James, is Ya'akov, or Jacob, in Hebrew. All the brothers went to synagogue. I never learned the Torah like Levi did. He loved learning. The rabbis adored him. He was the teacher's pet, full of promise, disciplined, and resolute.

Me? I would rather be outside playing. My friends and I would dress up as Maccabees vs. Greeks, or Jews vs. Romans. Any stick became a sword or a dagger. I don't know if my father named me Jacob because he was a deceiver. Did our father somehow know that I would become a radical, hiding and withdrawing and conspiring with others to cast off the occupying Romans? I would become a zealot – a terrorist.

Not Levi. Levi was a conformist. He was cooperative. He learned not only the Torah, but memorized psalms and writings and the Oral Law. He learned our entire genealogy. Why? He was a pleaser. Whatever anyone wanted him to do, he did.

Therein lay the problem. We were Galileans, born and raised in Capernaum on the north shore of the lake. The Jewish purists lived down south, below Samaria, in Judea. In Galilee we were surrounded and infiltrated by Gentiles. Greeks and Romans brought their games and gods and language to our doorsteps. Levi would later use the phrase, "Galilee of the Gentiles."

Somewhere along the way, those Gentiles snared Levi in their web. His love of language expanded from Hebrew to Greek to Latin. He was brilliant, and could master any subject he chose – law, history, business, politics. At first it was probably curiosity,

but then his world view expanded. He began to believe that not only coexistence but cooperation with the Romans was the better way. He had always been interested in kings and power, but I thought he would join me in the revolution – following the way of the Maccabees and restoring our land and people under the conquering Messiah.

Capernaum was located on the Via Maris, the Way of the Sea, a trade route from Egypt through the land of the Philistines and Galilee, connecting to Syria and then Asia and Europe. After Herod the Great died, one fourth of his territory was ruled by Herod Antipas, including Galilee and Perea to the east of the Jordan River. How Levi ever joined himself to that crowd I'll never know. He had dabbled too long in their languages and culture, spent too much time in their pagan cities, longed to become increasingly connected and wealthy.

One day I learned he had been employed by Herod Antipas as a publican, of all things! Levi, a tax collector! He had become a traitor, raising money to support the occupation and lining his own pockets in the process. I hated him for it. I didn't see my brother for years, perhaps afraid that if I encountered him he'd be on the pointed end of the dagger under my cloak. Yes, I would have killed my own brother.

He was worse than a Gentile. He had no friends except other publicans, no associates except Gentiles and prostitutes. He was banned from the synagogue, as he should have been. He stopped going to Jerusalem for the feasts. There he sat, day after day, at the toll booth in our home town of Capernaum, ever buying and building finer homes from the involuntary tips he added to the taxes levied by the Romans.

Follow me

I followed Jesus first. Something about him drew me. At first I'm sure it was his massive following. His miracles, his teaching – he drew thousands throughout Galilee as no one ever had in my lifetime. He spoke of the kingdom of God, and I desperately wanted God's kingdom to come. At times I thought Jesus was far too good and kind, but perhaps that was necessary to entice the masses into a revolution. In the meantime, he was like a doctor to my soul, healing my angry heart.

I was just starting to warm up to Jesus' way of life when one day we passed through Capernaum and Jesus stopped at my brother Levi's collection booth. I knew Jesus would put him in his place – correct his faulty understanding that cooperating and compromising with a worldly and evil system of deception and power and accumulation of money would never, ever bring the kingdom of God.

Indeed, as we passed through Capernaum, Jesus saw Levi at his station. He went right up to Levi. My heart raced, and the ire of earlier years began to rage again – the envy, the resentment, the hatred. Would Jesus even acknowledge him? Jesus did the most surprisingly thing of all, said words I never expected to my brother: "Follow me."

I thought Levi would snarl at him. “Follow you? Empty your pocket first and follow me to the true king of Galilee – Herod.” Instead, Levi got up from his seat, left every silver coin, denarius, and drachma in his booth, and followed Jesus. Levi then invited Jesus into his house, where all sorts of notorious tax collectors and sinners carried on in what seemed to me a quasi-pagan feast. Matthew didn’t have any other friends. But there sat Jesus, reveling with them!

No wonder the Pharisees called him on it. Well, they didn’t do so directly. They came to James and John and Peter and Andrew and me, and asked, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” I was about to say, “Beats me,” when I realized Jesus had overheard the question and framed his own answer: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor,” he said, “but the sick...I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” He always knew the right thing to say. Levi *was* sick.

At first I had no idea what to say to my own brother as he joined the inner band of disciples. Jesus gave him a new name – “Mattit-yahu” (Mathhew), which means “gift of God.” He was by far the smartest among the twelve, the most educated, the most multi-lingual. He carried his parchment and pen with him everywhere we went, writing down Jesus’ sayings, keeping records. When Jesus spoke about money or included Gentiles in his circle of influence and inclusion, Matthew took notice.

I grew to love my brother again. We had both been drawn by false ideas of kingship and human power. I would bring in God’s kingdom by hatred and sword; Matthew by cooperation with the powers of this world. Both of us were wrong. Both of us would learn that the kingdom of heaven is not of this world.

To the Jew first, and also to the Greek

And that’s how you came to know the name “Matthew.” He originally wrote his notes in Aramaic, the language we all spoke every day, compiling Jesus’ sayings. Later, after Jesus died, rose again, and ascended, Matthew preached first among Jews. None of us had a record of Jesus’ sermons comparable to Matthew’s.

Matthew preached to both Jews and Gentiles – from Ethiopia to Persia to Macedonia (Greece). Always interested in royalty, he ministered to kings and high officials. Eventually he settled in Syrian Antioch, where both Peter and Paul had helped to establish a community of Gentile and Jewish believers in Jesus. Matthew became a teacher of teachers. All that early education prompted a passion to persuade non-believers, no matter their background, that Jesus was and is their true king, and to help Christians defend their faith in dialogue with unbelieving Jews or ignorant Gentiles. He could start from zero knowledge of Jesus or go toe-to-toe with philosophers.

In Antioch, he finally decided to summarize all his notes and research into a global gospel, written in Greek. Crisis was brewing in the homeland, as more and more of my former patriot friends determined to throw off Roman rule. Matthew wanted all

of his readers to know that the kingdom of heaven would succeed not through armed conflict or economic power, but through the message of the true king, Jesus the Messiah, through baptizing people of all nations and teaching them what Jesus had taught and done. He organized all of Jesus' life, from beginning to end, integrating his own notes with what others (like Mark, the associate of Simon Peter) had written and said. He focused especially on the discourses of Jesus about the kingdom and discipleship, the end of the world, and the worldwide reach of his gospel.

The gospel

Now perhaps you know why his Gospel begins with a genealogy. It makes far more sense to me than it would have if I didn't know my brother's story.

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

This will be the gospel of salvation, for that's what "Jesus" means – Yeshua, Yahweh saves. He's also deliberately connecting this to the book of Genesis, the beginning of all things and especially the beginning of the story of my people, Israel.

*Abraham was the father of Isaac,
Isaac the father of Jacob,
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,
Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,
Perez the father of Hezron,
Hezron the father of Ram,
Ram the father of Amminadab,
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,
Nahshon the father of Salmon,
Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of King David.*

This will be the gospel of inclusion. Three Gentile women (Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth), all three of whom are in one sense or another of questionable morality. This gospel is for everyone.

*David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,
Solomon the father of Rehoboam,
Rehoboam the father of Abijah,
Abijah the father of Asa,
Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram,
Jehoram the father of Uzziah,*

*Uzziah the father of Jotham,
Jotham the father of Ahaz,
Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,
Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,
Manasseh the father of Amon,
Amon the father of Josiah,
and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.*

This will be the gospel of grace. Matthew not only establishes Jesus as rightful heir to David's throne, he lists both godly kings like David and Jehoshaphat, but kings who turned the people toward idolatry (Manasseh and Amon).

*After the exile to Babylon:
Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel,
Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,
Zerubbabel the father of Abihud,
Abihud the father of Eliakim,
Eliakim the father of Azor,
Azor the father of Zadok,
Zadok the father of Akim,
Akim the father of Elihud,
Elihud the father of Eleazar,
Eleazar the father of Matthan,
Matthan the father of Jacob,
and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary,
and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.*

This will be the gospel of fulfillment. It will seem as if God has abandoned his promises to Abraham and David at the exile, but his word will be fulfilled. All through Matthew's gospel, he will tell us what happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

This will be the gospel of completion. Fourteen is seven times two – double the perfect number. Matthew selectively chooses that number of generations, perhaps also because the numerical value of "David" in Hebrew is fourteen. For whatever reason, Matthew's purpose is to demonstrate that this Jesus will complete God's purposes.

The meaning of my brother Matthew's story is that his story isn't about him. He writes anonymously and never boasts about the importance of his education or his record-keeping. This will not be the story of Matthew. It will be the story of Jesus, the one who transformed both Matthew and his brother, James the Less. Amen.