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## The Plot of Matthew's Story

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*In Matthew's gospel story, Jesus becomes embroiled in mortal conflict with the religious authorities. In bringing Jesus to the cross, the authorities believe that the victory in the conflict is theirs. In raising Jesus from the dead, God shows that, ironically, the victory has gone to Jesus.*

**G**ENERICALLY, whatever else Matthew's Gospel may be, it is a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.<sup>1</sup> This narrative tells the story of Jesus, from conception and birth to death and resurrection. The story of Jesus is one of conflict, so that its plot turns on conflict. At the human level, this conflict is between Jesus and Israel, and especially between Jesus and the religious authorities.<sup>2</sup> The fundamental resolution of this conflict comes at the end of the story, in the pericopes that tell of Jesus' death and resurrection. In point of fact, the "cross" is the place where Jesus' story reaches its culmination. The purpose of this essay is to trace the unfolding of the plot of Matthew's story of Jesus and, in so doing, to show how and to what effect Jesus' conflict with the authorities reaches its resolution in the cross and resurrection and its culmination in the cross.

### I

In the beginning of his story (1:1–4:16), Matthew introduces the reader to both Jesus, the protagonist, and the religious authorities, Jesus' antagonists. In the pericopes that tell of Jesus' origin and baptism (1:18–25; 3:13–17), Matthew describes Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, whose God-given mission is to save his people from their sins. In describing Jesus as the Messiah, Matthew presents him as the Anointed One, Israel's long-awaited king. In describing Jesus as the Son of God, Matthew ascribes to him a unique filial relationship with God. By virtue of this relationship, Jesus is the wholly obedient, supreme agent of God,

whom he designates as Father (4:1–11; 26:39), and God is the one who is authoritatively and decisively at work in Jesus to save (1:23; 3:17).

Without so much as permitting the religious authorities to come into contact with Jesus, Matthew also introduces them in the beginning of his story. Still, in the first pericope in which they appear — in the persons of the chief priests and the scribes of the people (2:1–6) — Matthew invites the reader to distance himself or herself from them by depicting them as standing in the service of wicked King Herod. Herod, eager to know where the Messiah is to be born, calls the chief priests and the scribes together and asks them. In ready reply, they inform Herod that Bethlehem is the place. By thus assisting Herod, the chief priests and the scribes make themselves complicit in Herod's plot to kill Jesus. In so doing, they signal the reader that, later in the story, they will prove themselves to be deadly opponents of Jesus.

It is, however, in the scene in which the religious authorities make their major debut that Matthew reveals unmistakably how he would have them understood in his story. This scene occurs in the pericope on the ministry of John the Baptist (3:7–10), and those representing the religious authorities are the Pharisees and Sadducees (3:7–10). Seeing the latter coming to him for baptism, John, the forerunner of Jesus, greets them with a scathing epithet: "Brood of vipers!" he calls them (3:7). What "brood of vipers" means becomes clear at a later point in Matthew's story. At 12:34 Jesus, addressing the Pharisees, exclaims, "Brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil?" As Jesus' words indicate, John, in calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers," describes them — and indeed the religious authorities as a whole<sup>3</sup> — as "evil." In Matthew's purview, "evil" is the "root trait" that characterizes the religious authorities; it is the trait from which such other traits as being "hypocritical,"<sup>4</sup> "spiritually blind,"<sup>5</sup> and "conspiratorial"<sup>6</sup> spring.<sup>7</sup>

It is apparent that Matthew, in introducing Jesus and the religious authorities to the reader, characterizes them in starkly contrasting terms. On the one hand, we have Jesus. Jesus stands forth as the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who enjoys a unique filial relationship with God and serves God in perfect obedience. Jesus, therefore, is "righteous." On the other hand, we have the religious authorities, who are Jesus' antagonists. Through the words of John the Baptist and Jesus, Matthew characterizes them as "evil." As such, they are like Satan, whom Matthew describes as the "Evil One" (13:38). As is obvious, therefore, Matthew works in stereotypes. For him, there is no middle ground: Whereas Jesus is "righteous," the religious authorities are "evil."

Despite this tendency on Matthew's part to stereotype characters, it is a mistake for modern readers to accuse him of being anti-Semitic. Because Matthew fervently believes that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and God's

to be “utterly serious” within the world of Matthew’s story, must have to do with the Mosaic law. After all, for forgiving sins and affirming that he is the Son of God, Jesus incurs the potentially capital charge of blasphemy (9:3; 26:63–66). But this notwithstanding, it is a mark of the enormous importance that Matthew attaches to the Mosaic law that he does not declare that the religious authorities are bent on killing Jesus until the conflict between Jesus and them has shifted to focus on a precept of the Mosaic law, as we shall see in a moment.

Accordingly, if one reviews the four controversies that Jesus has with the religious authorities in chapter 9, one discovers that they are not yet “to the death,” that not one of them is “acutely confrontational” in nature, and that their focus is not on Mosaic law. In broader perspective, these insights corroborate the point we made at the outset of this discussion: In chapter 9, the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities is yet “preliminary” to the more intense conflict still to take place.

### III

This more intense conflict is not long in coming. Specifically, it occurs in the second part of the middle of Matthew’s story (11:2–16:20). We recall that in the first part of the middle (4:17–11:1) the leitmotif that controls the action is that of Jesus’ proffering salvation to Israel. In line with this, Matthew subordinated the motif of conflict to the leitmotif of Jesus’ proffering salvation by depicting the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities as “preliminary” in nature. Here in the second part of the middle, the leitmotif controlling the story focuses on Israel’s response to Jesus’ ministry; Israel, in fact, repudiates Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Because in this part the motif of conflict has now become part and parcel of the leitmotif of Israel’s repudiating Jesus, Matthew as a matter of course shapes Jesus’ conflict with the authorities so that it becomes noticeably more intense.

In chapter 12, Jesus once again clashes with the religious authorities. Unlike earlier conflict, the immediate issue that sparks debate is the Mosaic law itself: breaking the divine command to rest on the Sabbath (12:1–8, 9–14).<sup>13</sup> In the two controversies at hand, one discovers that there is clear progression as one moves from the first to the second in terms of how acutely confrontational each is. In the first controversy (12:1–8), the Pharisees confront Jesus, but the charge they make has to do not with him but with the disciples: “Behold, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” In the second controversy (12:9–14), the Pharisees again confront Jesus. This time, however — and, in fact, for the first time in Matthew’s story — the accusation they make in the question they raise concerns an act that they anticipate Jesus

himself is about to perform: If Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath who is not in danger of dying, he will have violated Moses’ command that enjoins rest (12:10). In the case of both these controversies, Jesus rebuts the Pharisees by asserting that attending to human need in these instances is not only not unlawful but is necessitated by God’s will that mercy be shown or that good be done (12:3–8, 11–12). In direct response to Jesus’ setting himself against the law of Moses as they interpret it, the Pharisees now do what they hitherto have not done: They go out and take counsel against Jesus, how to destroy him (12:14). With this sharp turn of events, Matthew’s story has arrived at that juncture where the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities has intensified to the point where it has become “mortal.” Indeed, it is a mark of Jesus’ conflict with the authorities throughout the rest of Matthew’s story that this conflict does remain mortal, and the observation that Jesus “withdraws” in the face of the conspiracy to destroy him (12:15) corroborates this.

Later in chapter 12, Jesus again confronts the religious authorities and again the note that his controversies with them sounds is shrill. In 12:22–37, Jesus exorcises a demon from a man who is blind and dumb so that the man sees and speaks. Whereas Jesus’ miracle amazes the crowds and prompts them to wonder whether Jesus could perhaps be the Son of David, the Pharisees, on overhearing the crowds, reiterate their charge of 9:34: Muttering to themselves, they insist that Jesus casts out demons not on the authority of God but on the authority of Satan (12:24). Discerning their thoughts, Jesus minces no words in responding to them: He accuses the Pharisees of being agents of Satan (12:27); he contends that their vilification of him is tantamount to committing blasphemy against God (12:30–32); and he asserts that their charge springs from hearts that are evil (12:33–37).

In 12:38–45, the conflict is no less intense. In this controversy, some scribes and Pharisees accost Jesus and demand that he show them a sign. In demanding a sign, the scribes and Pharisees have in mind that Jesus should predict a miracle that God will subsequently perform and thus prove that he acts not on the authority of Satan but on the authority of God. Attacking the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus castigates them as an “evil and adulterous generation” (12:39), that is to say, as persons who are “like Satan” and “faithless to God.”

Accordingly, as the second part of the middle of Matthew’s story draws to a close (11:2–16:20), the reader is keenly aware that the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities is beyond reconciliation. Each time Jesus and the authorities meet in controversy, the impression reinforces itself in the mind of the reader that their struggle is henceforth a struggle “to the death.”

## IV

From the middle of Matthew's story we turn to the end (16:21–28:20). Here Matthew tells of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and of his suffering, death, and resurrection (16:21). So that the reader knows that the leitmotif guiding the narrative is indeed that of Jesus' journeying to Jerusalem and suffering, dying, and being raised, Matthew punctuates his story with three passion predictions (16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19); moreover, at the outset of the passion narrative Jesus reminds the disciples of these predictions (26:2). Because the motif of conflict is integral to the motif of going up to Jerusalem to suffer and die, the reader can be certain that Jesus' conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem will in no wise diminish in its ferocity.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus teaches the disciples. In fact, only once does he clash with religious authorities. In 19:3–12, Pharisees confront Jesus to put him to the test on the matter of divorce. In return, Jesus puts the Pharisees to shame, lecturing them on the attitude toward divorce taught by scripture. Yet, as Matthew reveals in the final verses of this controversy (19:10–12), the purpose the latter serves has relatively little to do with Jesus' larger conflict with the authorities. Instead, Jesus uses this controversy to instruct the disciples on divorce. The upshot is that it is not until after Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem that he has his last great confrontation with the authorities prior to his passion (21:12–22:46).

We recall that Matthew, in the middle of his story, depicted the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities as gradually intensifying: In the first part of the middle (4:17–11:1), this conflict had a "preliminary" quality about it (chap. 9); in the second part of the middle (11:2–16:20), it intensified to the point where it became a struggle "to the death" (chap. 12). Here in the end of the story, Jesus has now entered Jerusalem (21:1–11). Although the conflict he has had with the authorities has already been "to the death," Matthew nonetheless makes use of some five literary devices to indicate that the conflict Jesus has in Jerusalem (21:12–22:46) is of still greater intensity.

The first such device Matthew uses is the setting in which he places all of Jesus' controversies in Jerusalem. This setting is the temple (21:12, 23), and the reason it heightens still more the intensity of Jesus' conflict with the authorities is that the temple is both the place of God's presence — God whom Jesus calls Father — and the seat of the authorities' power. It is from the temple that the authorities rule the land of the Jews. For Jesus to defeat the authorities in debate in the temple is for him to defeat them at the very center of their power and privilege.

The second device Matthew employs to show that Jesus' conflict in Jerusalem is of still greater intensity is the "acutely confrontational"

tone with which he imbues each controversy. In each case, it is none but Jesus whom the authorities attack, and their constant aim is either to call him to account for something that he himself has said or done or simply to get the best of him in debate (21:15, 23; 22:16–17, 23–28, 35–36). In the final controversy, however, Matthew reverses the roles so that Jesus seizes the initiative and puts the Pharisees on the spot (22:41–46).

The third device Matthew uses to heighten still further the intensity of Jesus' conflict in Jerusalem is to arrange for all the controversies between him and the religious authorities to revolve around the critical question of "authority": the authority by which Jesus cleanses the temple (21:23), discharges his ministry (21:23), and interprets scripture and the law (22:17, 24, 36, 43–45). The importance of this issue of authority, of course, is that it underlies the whole of Jesus' conflict with the authorities and goes to the heart of whether Jesus is to be received as the supreme agent of God or repudiated as a fraud and agent of Satan (27:63).

The fourth device by which Matthew intensifies still further the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities in Jerusalem is his depiction of all the groups that together make up the united front of the authorities as clashing with Jesus over a span of less than two days (21:12–17; 21:23–22:46): the chief priests, the scribes, the elders of the people, the disciples of the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, a Pharisaic lawyer, and the Pharisees (21:15, 23; 22:16, 23, 34–35, 41). The effect that this parade of opponents over a short span of time has is that it not only enables the reader to look on as the respective groups or combinations of groups take their turn at trying to defeat Jesus in debate, but it also conveys the impression of "unceasing," and therefore highly intense, conflict.

Finally, the fifth device by which Matthew heightens still further the intensity of Jesus' conflict in Jerusalem is his characterization of the atmosphere in which this conflict takes place as being extremely hostile. To illustrate, Matthew reports, following Jesus' narration of the parable of the Vineyard (21:33–46), that the chief priests and the Pharisees become so incensed at hearing Jesus' parable that they want to arrest him immediately and hold back only for fear of the crowds (21:45–46). Short of the passion narrative, this is the one place in Matthew's story where the authorities are actually said to want to seize Jesus.

On what note does Matthew bring this last great confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities in Jerusalem and prior to the passion to a close? Matthew states this pointedly at 22:46, where he declares: "And no one was able to answer him [Jesus] a word nor from that day did any one dare to ask him any more questions." Jesus reduces all of the authorities to silence. Reduced to silence, the authorities fade from the scene until Matthew has begun the passion narrative.

## V

In the opening verses of the passion narrative, Matthew takes pains to inform the reader that, on the human level, it is the religious authorities who are squarely responsible for Jesus' death (26:3–4). At the palace of the high priest Caiaphas, the chief priests and the elders make their plans to have Jesus arrested and killed by deceit. This strategy on the part of the authorities to act with deceit shows that, during the passion, "being deceptive" is the character trait that they exhibit most.

For our purposes, the scene that is of greatest importance in Matthew's passion narrative is the last scene in which the religious authorities confront the earthly Jesus (27:41–43). In this scene, the members of the Sanhedrin look up at Jesus on the cross and mock him. They mock him because, in their eyes, he hangs helplessly and does not even possess the power to rescue himself from death. In other words, as the authorities look up at Jesus on the cross, they see him as a fraud<sup>14</sup> who is stripped of all authority, they see the cross as the sign of his destruction, and they see themselves as having won the victory in their conflict with him.

Ironically, however, what the religious authorities do not perceive is that God and Jesus, too, will the death of Jesus. Jesus wills his own death because he is the perfectly obedient Son of God. God wills Jesus' death because, through it, he will renew his covenant and proffer all humans everywhere the forgiveness of sins and salvation (1:23; 20:28; 26:28). To demonstrate that Jesus' death is in line with his saving purposes, God raises Jesus from the dead on the third day (28:5–6).<sup>15</sup> In raising Jesus, God both vindicates him and exalts him. The upshot is that this same Jesus whom the religious authorities see as stripped of all authority is, in fact, entrusted by God with all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18). In combination, therefore, the events of the cross and resurrection mark the places in Matthew's story where the principal conflict among humans in this story, that between Jesus and the religious authorities, comes to fundamental "resolution."

True as this is, the cross itself is nevertheless the place where Matthew's story reaches its "culmination." From the standpoint of the religious authorities, the cross attests to Jesus' destruction and their victory. From the standpoint of Matthew and of the reader, however, the cross stands as a sign of the victory Jesus has won. By the twist of irony, the cross attests, not to the destruction of Jesus, but to the salvation that God henceforth proffers through Jesus to all humankind.

## VI

In retrospect, we have now seen how the plot of Matthew's story of Jesus unfolds. This plot is one of conflict, and this conflict, at the human level, is above all between Jesus and the religious authorities. As Matthew's story progresses, Jesus' conflict with the authorities becomes ever more intense until, at the last, it finds its fundamental "resolution" — in favor of Jesus — in his cross and resurrection. By the same token, it is in Jesus' cross that Matthew's story reaches its "culmination," for the cross becomes the place where God in Jesus accomplishes universal salvation. It is to announce this salvation that Matthew tells his story. In addition, Matthew is concerned to show that despite his conflict with Israel and especially the authorities, Jesus does not turn his back on them. At the close of the story, the risen Jesus commissions the disciples to go and make of all nations his disciples. To be sure, the expression "all nations" includes the gentiles; besides them, however, it also includes the people and the leaders of Israel.

Although during his earthly ministry the leaders were Jesus' inveterate enemies and Matthew himself seems doubtful that they will ever turn to Jesus, the risen Jesus would nonetheless also have them become his disciples. It is on this saving note that the reader exits from Matthew's story.

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of the structure of Matthew's Gospel, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom*, reprint (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 1–39. For the most thorough exploration of this topic to date, see David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, Bible and Literature Series 15 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988).

2. For an approach to the overall plot of Matthew's gospel story that views the conflict between God and Satan as constituting the main plot and the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities as a subplot, see Mark Allan Powell, "The Plot and Subplots of Matthew's Gospel," *NTS* 38 (1992): 198–202. For yet another approach to the plot of Matthew, see Frank J. Matera, "The Plot of Matthew's Gospel," *CBQ* 49 (1987): 233–53.

3. On treating the religious authorities as a single character, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, rev. and enl. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 17–18.

4. See, e.g., Matt. 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29.

5. See, e.g., Matt. 15:14; 23:16–22, 24, 26.

6. See, e.g., Matt. 12:14; 26:3–4; 27:1.

7. Concerning the way in which Matthew characterizes such persons or groups of persons as Jesus, the disciples, the religious leaders, the crowds, and

minor characters, see Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 9–28. For an insightful discussion of the religious leaders in all three synoptic Gospels, see Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* GBS (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 51–67.

8. For a careful study of the expression “all nations,” see John P. Meier, “Nations or Gentiles in Matthew 28:19?” *CBQ* 39 (1977): 94–102.

9. How different this is in Mark’s gospel story! At the end of Jesus’ first cycle of controversies, Mark reports, “The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (Mark 3:6).

10. See Matt. 9:33.

11. See Matt. 12:24–25a.

12. On this point, see Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 72–74.

13. See Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15.

14. See Matt. 27:63.

15. See also Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19.