

## SBL-Matthew paper 2009

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### From the Centre to the Margins: German-Speaking Scholarship on Matthew's Gospel as a Case Study for Matthean Scholarship as a Whole

Abstract: Matthean scholarship was once a booming discipline and one of the centres of New Testament research; it's probably not just biased prejudice when a German claims that the initial thrust behind the heyday of Matthean scholarship in the early second half of the 20th century came from German scholars such as Bornkamm, Frankemölle, Hummel, Strecker, Walker and many more. Since then, however, it appears that these former glories have largely vanished: Matthean studies have relinquished their prominence within the study of the New Testament and the understanding of early Christianity. What was once at the centre has become marginal, even somewhat isolated. It seems as though the study of Matthew's Gospel has become just one of (too) many subsections of New Testament studies and hardly the most inspiring and important of these. German scholarship on Matthew mirrors this trend in that more recent German-speaking scholarship (with some exceptions, of course) has proven itself to be methodologically dependent on – and influenced to a large degree by – predominantly anglo-saxon scholarship. This is not to say that this influence on German scholarship forced it to the periphery, but it could be taken as indicative of a decline in creativity and originality.

#### *Introduction*

This paper seeks to explore what might be the reason for the marginalisation of Matthean Studies within the wider field of Theology (which gives my peculiar vantage point to look at Biblical texts), or, put more provocatively, 'Why did Matthean scholarship become so boring?' (perhaps I should add, "boring" for a theologically-oriented mind). The answer I am seeking to put forward is that Matthew was once thought to be an authentic and reliable source for Jesus and Christian discipleship. The influence of the first Gospel from the second century to the twentieth cannot be overestimated, but at this point in time Matthew, to a large extent, has been reduced to his specific profile and, related to it, to the questions regarding his own community's relation to Judaism. In other words, Matthew is mainly used as a source for the conflict-laden situation between Jews, Jewish-Christians and non-Jewish followers of Jesus Christ in the time between 70 and 90 C.E. For some of us this is no decline at all but in fact a progression and a successful liberation story. For the first time in history, Matthean scholarship is no longer directed by a theological master-narrative, ecclesial concerns and Christian dominion. Freed from the obligation to demonstrate the

truth of Christian doctrines, strictly historical and narrative analysis revealed Matthew's Gospel as what is really was: for the historically-oriented, a document for a very specific setting in the conflict-history between Jewish adherents of Jesus and other Jews in the latter third of the first century; and for literary critics a narrative which creates a narrated world<sup>1</sup> in the minds of those who read and hear it. Whereas the strictly historical understanding leaves hardly any room for a current 'theological' or 'existential' application, the narrative analysis enables (sometimes even encourages) identifications within the narrated world that lead to a certain attitude or motivation within the factual world. Both approaches preserve an important element, namely the rootedness of the biblical texts within history (historical approach) and their existential and imperative character (narrative analysis). The problem I see is that the narrated world is at best loosely connected within the historical set-up of the Gospels and both (the narrated world and the historical localisation of the Gospels) are disconnected from Jesus' own ministry and goals.

My thesis is therefore: The negligence of Matthew's wider theological and canonical meaning as a witness for God's saving actions in Jesus, partly because he touches upon topics which are considered objectionable for modern and politically correct Christianity,<sup>2</sup> stands at the heart of his historical and/or narrative domestication and, as a result of this, his marginalisation. The more we claimed to know about Matthew's Gospel the less meaningful it became. It looks as if our scholarship increases in knowledge but decreases in understanding, and connected to this, relevance. Matthew is no longer *the* Gospel on which the church is built but a stone quarry for whatever political, social or - but only occasionally - religious agenda needs a biblical push-up. As a whole I count four losses within Matthean scholarship in the last half a century:

1. The knowledge about Jesus surrendered to merely knowledge about the Gospel and its author
2. The theological message about "salvation from sin" (Matt 1:21!; 26:28) is reduced to a social and/or political agenda; the "world to come" (Matt 7:13-14; 10:28, 32-33; 19:28-29) is no longer of any concern and righteousness is a means for this world only<sup>3</sup>
3. The universal claim to be a message for all people at all times (Matt 28:18-20) is replaced by the notion of a partisan book for a sectarian-like community whose ongoing impact and relevance is not seen in line with its initial intention but as its complete perversion: the Gospel for a group of law-abiding followers of Jesus within Israel became the most important Gospel of a completely Gentile church whose stance towards the Torah is marked by spirit-driven freedom
4. The conviction of dealing with God's revealed word or actions in history (which as *kerygma* is the heart of the Gospel) is given up for the sake of narrative patterns and literary analyses which are a form of redaction criticism without any remaining histor(icit)y

To understand what happened here, a look at some developments of Matthean scholarship in the last fifty years or so is helpful. I limit myself to some major steps in German-speaking scholarship which was, at least at the beginning, the driving force into this new development of Matthean scholarship.

### 1. *Matthew but not Jesus*

The first reason why the first gospel lost its relevance is because of the ugly ditch put between Jesus and the Gospels, a development that came to completion within the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, this had a devastating impact on the other Gospels as well but it harmed the influence of Matthew more than the others (and indeed even benefitted Mark as supposedly the oldest one) because it was the main source for the understanding of Jesus due to its unrivalled place in preaching and teaching up to the 19th century and at the level of the churches and Christian education even after that.

Today the historical Jesus is reconstructed (I dare say) mainly on the basis of Q and Mark and the ingenuity of its fabricator. That leaves for Matthew as an author only the role of one of the first producers of a Gospel and, as such, he is more or less one of us, one of the professional scribes who earns his living by teaching and writing about Jesus. He wrote the Gospel, this is often the unexpressed implication, as we write books about Jesus<sup>5</sup>: for a certain market, for a certain audience, with a specific agenda in mind, applying the available information with more of a concern for a current agenda. So Matthew placed Jesus in a little box of how he understood him, or how he thought that Jesus should be understood within his community and within the set limits his community experienced at the time of writing.

The development started with the appearance of a book in 1960 in Germany which would influence Matthean Studies for many years to come. At first glance the book was not very impressive. Indeed, it was a collection of two shorter papers on Matthew by an established NT scholar and two PhD-dissertations written under his supervision, both dealing with the first Gospel. The impact this book had and still has can clearly be seen by its impressive commercial success: a second edition appeared one year later. In 1963, SCM Press in London and Westminster Press in Philadelphia launched an English version for the British and American readership; an expanded fourth edition appeared in German in 1965, a sixth edition was necessary in 1970 only ten years after its first appearance, which was then again reprinted as the 7th edition 1975. This year, 2009, in the same monograph series, parts of the book appear again in a slightly different format together with fragments of a commentary to Matthew's Gospels by its main author which are here published for the first time. For an exegetical book this is an astonishing career, only excelled by Rudolf Bultmann's slightly older *History of the Synoptic Tradition* and his *Theology of the New Testament*, whose appearance paralleled the present collection.<sup>6</sup> I don't know of any other comparable monograph in Matthean scholarship (at least not in the German-speaking world) which achieved similar success. As you may all know by now I am speaking of *Überlieferung und Auslegung im Matthäusevangelium* or, as the English title goes, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, written by Günther Bornkamm (1905-1990) together with his two PhD students Gerhard Barth and Heinz Joachim Held. The first study in this book, which was originally published in 1948, marks the beginning of redaction criticism for textbooks in the field of Matthean Studies.<sup>7</sup> What Hans Conzelmann has begun for Lukan studies<sup>8</sup> and Willi Marxsen for Mark,<sup>9</sup> Bornkamm and his disciples started even earlier, although their results were published only slightly after Conzelmann and Marxsen. These studies speak a lot about Matthew's assumed theology and what

he thought about the law, miracles, the church etc. but no longer was any attempt made to connect Matthew's theology directly with Jesus' doings and sayings. With some exaggeration one could say that this is typical for most German-speaking literature on Matthew since then. This can be demonstrated by the titles of the major monographs dealing with Matthew (see appendix).

They are dealing with Matthew, and that is of course what they are designated for, but in dealing with Matthew they no longer deal with Jesus, and that is what unbalances the whole enterprise in the long run. This is not to deny that Matthew was and still is used as source in studies devoted to the historical Jesus, but this happens in a way that Matthew's narrative is deconstructed and the few bits and pieces that are regarded as reliable memory of Jesus, which are not found in Q and Mark, are used without their Matthean context. The result with the commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew is slightly different: in most of them, due weight and effort is given to reach through the surface of the Gospel to the historical Jesus. But if I am not mistaken, the tendency here is to move away from a search for Jesus in favour of an understanding of Matthew's theology as reflection more of his own circumstances than a true reflection of Jesus' words and deeds.<sup>10</sup>

As a result we sceptically deny that much can be learnt about the earthly Jesus from Matthew's Gospel, but we overconfidently describe with astonishing details what was going on in his community, with whom the community clashed, what were the relations with the contemporary Jewish world and with Gentile Christians, even what they thought about Paul and his message, and how they felt challenged by Roman imperialism. And because we don't actually know anything for sure about Matthew's real community (at the best we can say something about the intended community of Matthew<sup>11</sup>) there is plenty of room for all kinds of assumptions about what his community was like and where precisely it should be located on the social, economic, geographic, political and religious map of its time. In the end that means a kind of black hole for PhD dissertations that will never be filled up because nothing can be proven finally as right or wrong. It is a game where all the options are played through in the course of time and then, when all is done, it starts again from a slightly different angle.

The fact that the results are nevertheless received as something new is mainly due to our exegetical memory becoming shorter and shorter because of the huge amount of brand new books we should look through (do we really have time to read them?). While preparing this paper I read through some of the older scholarship dealing with Matthew and Jesus. First of all I was again amazed that most of the questions we address today as the most urgent ones have already been dealt with by many others; secondly, that the answers we are so proud of have quite often already been found before us. But in comparison to the more recent books on Matthew I find many of these older books - despite the occasionally outdated language or anti-Jewish slant - stimulating, even encouraging, and exciting. One reason is that they are embedded in a wider theological horizon which can be summarised under the term *kerygma*.

Having said this, I want to make clear that this does not mean giving up any further attempts to understand Matthew as a document that reflects his theology and his own time. I don't want to 'throw out the baby with the bathwater.' But, to stay within this picture, I am afraid we have drowned the baby in the bathwater by focusing so strongly on the Matthean theology and its assumed setting,

because first and foremost he wrote a book about Jesus and *not* about his understanding of Jesus (anonymity!).

## 2. *The Matthean Community instead of Early Christian Kerygma*

Bornkamm, as a disciple of both Julius Schniewind and Rudolf Bultmann, and the other pioneers of redaction criticism, started their enquiries as a correction of form criticism, esp. its understanding of the evangelists as mere collectors of isolated and short traditions from or about Jesus which they weaved into an unartificial narrative without any literary sophistication or expertise. This is clearly visible from the first sentence of Bornkamm's introduction: "It belongs to the established conclusions of Synoptic research that the first three evangelists were, in the first place, collectors and editors of traditions handed over to them."<sup>12</sup> The main focus of form criticism at this time was twofold: first, to move behind the literary frame of the Gospels and to search for the "Sitz im Leben" of the smallest detectably literary units; and second, if possible to reconstruct a more original form of the respective saying or narrative. This latter attempt was based on the assumption that in the beginning of a tradition process the literary unit had a 'pure' form which became distorted in the transmission process and that the 'laws' of this gradual distortion can be understood in such a way that they could be undone and the original, 'pure' saying could be reconstructed. As a result the evangelists and their work was seen more or less as a distortion and all attempts were directed at going behind them to recover the more original forms of the tradition. Against this prevailing notion, Bornkamm (as well as Marxsen and Conzelmann in similar ways) emphasised the fact that the Gospels as literary units have two important things to tell as well; first, something about the author or, as it was customary to say in those days, about the redactor, and secondly, about the needs and positions of the communities they wanted to address:

"This [namely that the evangelists are collectors and editors with limited editorial expertise] is true in spite of the fact that the first three Gospels are documents expressing a definite, though in each case very different theology, which gives to each of them, without detriment to what they have in common, a more or less consistently and systematically developed theme, which makes it possible to recognise as their background, different communities with their particular problems and views."<sup>13</sup>

Against form criticism's minimalization of the role of the evangelist, redaction criticism insisted that the author (resp. the redactor or evangelist) and the "Sitz im Leben" of the Gospel within the author's community are a necessary step in the exploration of the Gospels. In a footnote Bornkamm quotes G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel of St. Matthew* (1946, p. 2), who already hinted at the importance of the community in which and for which a Gospel was written. But this insistence of community and context is again only understandable if one takes into account the prevailing scholarship of the time with its strong focus on the early Christian *kerygma*.<sup>14</sup> There was a shared understanding among the leading NT scholars at the time that the Gospels are no biographies, not even rudimentary ones, of Jesus, and that there is no way back from the Gospels to anything like a biography of Jesus: the formative period of Bornkamm fell in the period which nowadays is sometimes labelled as "No Quest," whereas the beginning of redaction criticism is parallel to the heyday of the Second Quest for

the historical Jesus.<sup>15</sup> As is well known, Bornkamm is not only one of the fathers of redaction criticism but also the author of a very influential Jesus book, actually the first comprehensive one of the second quest.<sup>16</sup> These no-questers and their pupils had – and this needs to be kept in mind – a very strong interest indeed in Jesus, his message, his meaning, his influence and, more than anything else, his impact on his first followers. In German, this interest is called “geschichtlich” to differentiate it from “historisch” and in my days as a student not knowing the difference was the sign of being a theological *ignoramus*.

The magic word was “*kerygma*” which was “geschichtlich” even if it was not “historisch” in the sense that something was actually said or done by Jesus. This high understanding of the *kerygmatic* (that is *theological*) character of the Gospels functions - and this is my impression in hindsight - as a helpful corrective against an understanding of the historical questions that is too narrow.

The *kerygmatic* element can be described as a kind of core tradition about the relevancy of Jesus that was formed after Easter and before the written Gospels. Within the *kerygma*, Jesus as a preacher of the coming kingdom itself became the content of the message in a way that the coming of Jesus was experienced by those who formed the earliest Christian *kerygma* as God’s salvific revelation and fulfilment of the eschatological hopes for his kingdom. The early Christian *kerygma* about Jesus was the decisive content of the Gospel as an existential, decision-requiring message and it connected the written gospels with Jesus and with each other. What is more, it connected the message of Jesus with its interpreter, who found themselves to be standing in the situation of decision, because the *kerygma* remained its force as a call. In sum, the *kerygma* contained the message of Jesus (as genitive subjective as well as objective) as God’s ultimate call that forces its hearer - which includes even the exegete - into a decision about life and death. The challenge for Bornkamm and the early redaction critics was to bring this theologically loaded concept down to earth and to ground it within the historical reality of the early Christian communities. In other words, in a time when there was a danger of too much theology and too little history, redaction criticism provided the necessary balance and grounding. As Julius Schniewind, one of Bornkamm’s teachers, described it, the Gospels need to be understood as “Kerygma einer bestimmten Lage und Aufgabe,” that is, the application of the given *kerygma* to a specific condition and task.<sup>17</sup> In other words, redaction criticism explored how the given *kerygma* was applied to a concrete situation,<sup>18</sup> and only then the situation of the presumed communities started to arouse the interests of the investigators.

In the relatively short contributions of Bornkamm in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, most of the points that have since dominated (and paralysed to a certain extent) Matthean scholarship can be found: the Matthean Jewish-Christian community is still within Judaism and opposes a law-free mission (18-19); the understanding of the Torah is in conformity with the Judaism of his time; the anti-pharisaic polemic is concerned only with the discrepancy between saying and doing (28); Jesus is described as a second Moses (32); to be “righteous” means obedience to the Torah (28, 33); at the end of time one and the same judgement awaits Jews, Christians and Gentiles alike:

“Rather it is typical for the end-expectation of Matthew that by means of a great picture already current among the Jews the judgment of the world is announced as applying to ‘all nations,’ but now in such a way that no distinction is made between Jews and Gentiles, nor even between

believers and unbelievers. All are gathered before the tribunal of the judge of the world and are judged by the 'one' standard, namely that of the love they have shown towards, or withheld from, the humblest. That decides who belong to the righteous, who enter into eternal life, and who have to go into eternal punishment."<sup>19</sup>

Only at the end of "Enderwartung und Kirche" ("End-Expectation and Church") Bornkamm asked for the geographical location of Matthew's "church," but again his wording expresses that at this time an excuse was necessary to engage with such trivia in the face of the *kerygma*:

"All these are questions which can by no means be disposed of wholesale as hopeless and theologically of no consequence, and in a cheap sort of way be sacrificed in the interests of the 'kerygma' or the 'doctrinal concept' of the Gospel."<sup>20</sup>

But these historical questions, which started more or less as an appendix and were investigated for the sake of a better understanding of the *kerygma*, became more and more weighted in the following decade and since then have dominated the way we look at the Gospel of Matthew. This was done in some detail for the first time (in German scholarship) by Reinhart Hummel in his PhD dissertation *Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Judentum im Matthäusevangelium*, which was supervised by Eduard Lohse in 1960. He investigated "das zeitgenössische Judentum" for the sake of understanding "die Kirche des Matthäus."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Georg Strecker starts his influential study *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit: Untersuchung zur Theologie des Matthäus*<sup>22</sup> with a chapter "Zeitgeschichtlicher Hintergrund." The historical setting of the Gospel and its author is no longer a cautious supposition at the end of the analysis of Matthew's text but now too often turns into the starting line. One can draw a direct line from Hummel, who for the first time placed Matthew strongly within an inner-Jewish setting. He is the first representative of the *intro muros* position whose main representatives closer to our time became Anthony Saldarini, Andreas Overman and others who on their behalf now strongly influence German-speaking scholarship, so that an increasing number of studies are based on their historical localisation of the Matthean community.

I suggest that the loss of the *kerygma* which transcended the pure historical questions into theological and existential ones is one of the reasons for the vapidness of some of the more recent inquiries about Matthew's Gospel. They more or less only have something to say about the community of Matthew and their specific concerns, and many studies try to localise the historic setting with uttermost precision. And then, after proposing exactly the assumed when, where and why of Matthew's Gospel, everything is explained alongside this proposed setting.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, the explanation that follows from such an assumed "Sitz im Leben" (the famous *third* "Sitz im Leben" of redaction criticism) is true, or at least convincing, only when the historical setting would be proved without doubt. But that seems to be impossible (which is now occasionally acknowledged<sup>24</sup>), not least because the whole procedure is circular. This is so because one has to start within the Gospel itself to find its assumed social and historical setting, and the result proves itself naturally within the Gospel. What is lost is the relation between Matthew and the earthly Jesus, the relation between Matthew and the early Christian *kerygma*, and very often the relation between Matthew and the rest of the New Testament also. Even worse, one often wonders how the Gospel, which is said to have originated in such a peculiar and unique situation, within a

matter of decades became the most important Gospel of the predominantly gentile churches.<sup>25</sup>

A good example for this is the great commentary of Ulrich Luz which is without any doubt one of the milestones in Matthean scholarship and a real gift of German-speaking scholarship to the wider exegetical world. But - at least in my opinion - one of his pitfalls is that Luz, right at the beginning, decided about the historical context and even the psychological climate of the Gospel's origin. With this very precise picture of the Matthean community, the commentary was trapped into supporting the initial assumption. It was caged as the voice of a desperate minority which has lost the battle for the lost sheep of the house of Israel against the Pharisees as representatives of the emerging rabbinic movement. Everything provocative, everything embarrassing for the modern reader and their understanding of political correctness is excused by the traumatic situation of the Matthean community. The message of the Gospel, the *kerygma* with its transhistorical relevance and its appealing character stands in danger of being reduced to a partisan dispute between two rivalling groups in the last third of the first century. If that is the true "original meaning" (cf. Dunn, see below) which determines what should be regarded as normative in the interpretation process, then the Gospel of Matthew is no longer a book for "all Christians" (Bauckham).<sup>26</sup> It lost its flavour and can be disposed of safely on the shelves of specialists for Jewish-Christian sectarianism in the late first century. For them it might be of great value. But only for them.

### 3. *Ethics and Social Justice as Compensatory for the Kerygma*

Again, what is considered here to be a problematic element for Matthean scholarship will be seen by some colleagues as part of its real strengths. I just want to mention this point to indicate how closely interwoven Matthean studies are not just with the wider development within biblical studies and theology but also with the political and social climate in which it takes place. This can be seen in the work of Georg Strecker who (not alone, but surely as one of the important voices) tried to connect Matthean studies with the political discourses about war and peace and the question of social justice that began in the late sixties and slowly drifted away in the eighties. Even the title of his book, although taken from Matthew's Gospel (cf. 21:32), points in this direction: According to Strecker (and followed by many others since then) all references for δικαιοσύνη in the Gospel are redactional (153) and always and only describe the right behaviour of the followers of Jesus (149-58). At the same time he minimises the topic of forgiveness of sins (cf. 148-9), which by his analysis means for the followers of Jesus that they are as long as they live under the demand to forgive others so that they may receive forgiveness in the eschatological judgement.

With this strongly ethical understanding of "Gerechtigkeit" (which can be translated as "justice" or "righteousness") Strecker (and others with him) applied Matthew's message to the political discourse of his time. The political relevance of the Sermon on the Mount, summarised in the question "Kann man mit der Bergpredigt Politik machen?" dominated Matthean scholarship. The Beatitudes in particular became the 'Gospel within the Gospel.' As a result, a number of commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount appeared in this time and many

ecclesial manifestos for justice used phrases from the Sermon on the Mount in the title. But the interest in Matthew ebbed away parallel to the abatement of the Peace Movement. As a whole, the political utilisation of a handful of phrases from Matthew's Gospel did it no good. Isolated from their context they were not more than moral rules and - as all moral rules - became mouldy with the time.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. *The De-scripturalization of Matthew's Gospel*

What is forgotten or overlooked, or at least not sufficiently taken into account in Matthean scholarship, is the possibility that the evangelist has not just written a further book on Jesus for his community and their current needs. I would like to give more weight to the thought that Matthew has indeed written a *Gospel for all Christians* and I would even go one step further and contend that he attempted to write Scripture. The beginning and end of his Gospel, the 'biblical style' as well and his careful attempts to link his book with the already established Scriptures, but also his impressive and amazing efforts of *not* allowing contemporary events to surface strongly can be named in support of this claim. To this, a historical argument can be added as well: the fact that the Hebrew canon was not closed during the time of Matthew and that there was no 'dogma' in place that Scripture writing had come to an end, makes it at least possible that the authors of the Gospels saw themselves in a succession of the previous 'biblical' authors. I think it is highly conceivable that the impact of Jesus' life, death and resurrection (which was undoubtedly taken by Matthew as a historical event), exerted influence in a way that the experience and reflection of this new revelation of God within the history of his people was also calling for a new Scripture-like memorisation and preservation. What can be learned from Jewish literature of the time is that contemporary events could be seen and understood in the light of Scripture in different ways: either Scripture was applied to enlighten the present in the form of commentaries (the *pesharim* from Qumran); or Scripture was rewritten to make it more applicable to a present situation that was considered to be in need of incorporation into the salvation history between God and his people (e.g. Josephus' *Antiquities*); or contemporary events were commented on (or 'sanctified') by 'inspired' writing of new books in the wake and style of the established Holy Scriptures (e.g. 1Maccabees, 1QHodayot).

Within the kerygmatic tradition of Matthean studies, the *kerygma* functioned in the way of a placeholder for a theological dimension that transcended a mere historical approach. And simply because the evangelists were understood mainly as mere collectors, their authorial intention was counterbalanced by the *kerygma* which kept its character as 'a word of God.' When redaction criticism turned more and more into the maelstrom of narrative analysis and literary criticism, the narrator and/or author received much more weight. Jimmy Dunn, to give just one example, is a good representative of such an approach, in what he describes as the single most important criterion for the right understanding of the Bible:

"... I would wish to emphasize that ... the original meaning as intended by the author and heard by his first readers should have normative status. That is not to rule out other interpretations, other expressions of the word of God as heard through these texts. But it is to say that all interpretations should be able to justify themselves in the face of the author's original intention. ... His meaning is *the* meaning. And if other meanings are to be read from the text, they must always be measured against his meaning."<sup>28</sup>

In principle this emphasis of Dunn on the author's intention is commendable, but nonetheless not without problems. I would like to mention three:

1) The scholarly optimism regarding the possibility of recovering the "original meaning" might be an illusion, or based on debatable assumptions. To be sure, most of those writing books and commentaries on Matthew's Gospel do this with the honest and sincerest intention to bring out what was the "original meaning". And yet the results are often completely at odds with each other. So which of the many proposed "original meaning[s]" is the one which should be taken as normative?<sup>29</sup>

By the way, Martin Kähler, the father of the kerygmatic Christ, came to his differentiation between the historic Jesus and the Christ of faith exactly at this point: the many conflicting Lives of Jesus at the end of the first quest, which are all based on attempts to grasp precisely the original meaning, failed dramatically in what they promised to do, namely to give faith in Jesus a solid historical foundation. His solution was to yield the historic Jesus to the exegetical playgrounds and deny their findings any relevance for the "Christ of faith". As is well known, this turn to the other extreme led directly into the 'no quest'.

2) Matthew in particular, but the other NT authors as well, expose themselves in their writings as being saturated by the habit of looking upon reality through the lenses of Scriptures. This means that these authors are accustomed to seek understanding of what happens in the light of Scriptures and naturally this is even more true with respect to their experience with Jesus and, within Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, with God himself. Nevertheless, the Gospels are written anonymously; this means the author completely steps back behind his work. Should not this be read - in light of the possibility that the NT authors used the existing Scriptures as an example for their own writing - as a concession that such a work transcends the limits of its author because it is seen as a work of God? Inspiration as part of the writing process is a topic that is too often neglected in historical studies about Matthew, esp. if one realizes that Matthew himself has a clear sense of it. As can be seen in Matt 10:19-20 he knew about words given to believers by God's spirit and which are not their own. In addition, I find it very interesting that the description of what inspired writing is for, according to 2 Tim 3:16, fits the Gospel of Matthew extremely well; it is indeed a book full of teaching (διδασκαλία), reproach/correction (ἐλεγμός), and setting things straight (ἀπανόρθωσις) for the sake of an education in righteousness (πρὸς παιδείαν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ), so that the man of God may be competent for every good deed (πρὸς πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθόν).

3) A third point is that the Gospels (or any other writing within the NT) are never meant to be read in isolation but always as part of a web with other biblical and liturgical texts.<sup>30</sup> This means a kind of scriptural or canonical embeddedness needs to be taken into account from the beginning: the Gospel of Matthew is intended to be read and understood with the help of Isaiah and the other prophets, and with the books of Moses and the Psalms. The canonical embeddedness right from the beginning not only justifies but even requires a reading 'in context' with those books. But if the Gospel is read, heard, and preached alongside and as 'co-text' to Scriptures - does this not turn it into Scripture itself? And is it reasonable to assume that the evangelist was completely unaware of this dynamic? I think it is not. Because an author like Matthew knew what happened with Scriptures. He knew that Scriptures get expounded, preached, and connected with other

Scriptures. The saying of the early Tannaite Ben Bag Bag in Misha Avot 5.22 (26) reflects such an attitude quite well:

“Turn her (the Torah) around again and again, because everything is in her. Look at her until you turn grey and old in her but don’t move away from her; because there is no better ‘rule’ than her.”<sup>31</sup>

For the rabbinic tradition it is clear that the meaning of the Torah goes beyond the understanding of its initial author. That is wonderfully illustrated in the famous story about Moses sitting in the *bet midrash* of Rabbi Aqiva and listening to how he interpreted his, namely Moses’ Torah (*b. Men.* 29b). When he got confused because he could not follow Aqiva’s explanation, he turned to God and asked him, what is going on here? God told him to listen carefully, so finally Moses heard Aqiva saying that all his explanations were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. By this Moses was satisfied even if he was not able to follow the explanation and application of his own writing. That means, for an author like Matthew, the idea of a textual understanding that goes beyond the capacity of its originator is not impossible but instead even likely. Scriptural intertextuality is an inherent quality of all NT writings, and linked to it is their character to witness God’s interaction with his people.

Dunn’s helpful reminder (which again needs to be understood in the context in which it was said and to whom it was addressed!) of the norming functioning of the “original meaning” turns out in the end as a too narrow concept, at least if one reads it solely in terms of the individual author’s understanding only. The canonical approach of Brevard Childs is one of the paths that leads out of this *cul-de-sac*. The negligence of the scriptural character of the first Gospel appears to be one of the results of an overly narrow fixation with a limited historical “Sitz im Leben.” It is therefore highly commendable that recent Matthean studies emphasise the connectivity of the Gospel with Scriptures. But I think one more step needs to be taken, namely to see the Gospel’s genesis itself as Scripture in progress.<sup>32</sup>

### 5. *The Third Quest and Its De-Christianising Impact on the Gospel*

Finally, and only briefly and in the form of a question, the influence of the third quest for the historical Jesus on the study of Matthew needs to be addressed. The second quest is rightly condemned because of its negligence of the Jewishness of Jesus. And its beginning is clearly marked by the lecture of Ernst Käsemann in 1953 in the meeting of the “alte Marburger,” Bultmann’s friends and former students. But the step from the second to the third quest is not as clear as the previous one (if it was a step at all and not merely an intensifying of an already existing trend). When Matthew’s Gospel was located by Bornkamm and other redaction critics within a law-abiding Jewish-Christian community, then suddenly the historical reality of Judaism starts to matter again. The Jewish context needed to be established to understand the conflict the Matthean community found itself in. This was done, as mentioned already, for the first time (in German scholarship) by Reinhart Hummel in 1960 and it remained an important feature of subsequent Matthean studies. But is this not exactly what is counted as major characteristic of the third quest, namely “to place Jesus more firmly in his historical context”?<sup>33</sup> Similarly to Matthean scholarship, Jesus research has also

come a long way since the start of the third quest. And again, like with Matthew, it was necessary to ground the life of Jesus in the Jewish soil of his time for not allowing history to get absorbed by theology. But since Ernst Troeltsch, theologians should know that history is a tricky thing for theology. Because for Troeltsch, the employment of the historical method allows no metahistorical or transempirical realities like God's saving action in the world, and that means also no *kerygma* that is in anything connected to history:

“Give the historical method an inch and it will take a mile. From a strictly orthodox standpoint, therefore, it seems to bear a certain similarity with the devil.’ In the German original nothing is said about the devil! “Wer ihr den kleinen Finger gegeben hat, wird von ihr [= the historical method] so energisch ergriffen, dass er ihr die ganze Hand geben muss” (35/7).<sup>34</sup>

This is what happened with the third quest, and the same thing happened with Matthean studies. The third quest's fixation on the Jewishness of the historical Jesus has lost its 'Christian' element (*kerygma*, theology, Jesus as God's agent transcending the purely historical) and ended with “a marginal Jew.”

The second quest was saved from theological marginalisation, boredom and irrelevance by its *kerygmatic* and therefore theological character (Barth and Bultmann as the two light-houses, and many of their direct disciples as the main protagonists in this enterprise), whereas the third quest stands in danger to end like the first: with repetition and irrelevance due to ever more historical sophistication without theological frame. This does not mean that is time now for a fourth quest, although some writing on the wall points in this direction,<sup>35</sup> but to reconsider why the Gospel of Matthew was written first of all: “To bear witness ... to the one saving message of Jesus Christ.”<sup>36</sup> A Gospel “that has lost its taste is no longer good for anything except ...” this I will leave for the discussion.