

R. Alan Culpepper
Matthew: A Commentary
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JOHN KAMPEN

jkampen@mtso.edu

Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Delaware, OH 43015

R. Alan Culpepper's commentary is a masterful work which should become one of the standard references for academics and the first commentary on Matthew consulted by clergy. The mind and hand of a seasoned exegete are evident in every paragraph, both in the careful reading of the texts and in the clear prose of the author. It is extensive, evident from the number of pages in the volume, and for the most part comprehensive. The latter point will receive more discussion below.

A bibliography of thirty-three pages precedes the "Introduction" to the volume. This introduction contains a good evaluation of the sources employed in the creation of this gospel. While recognizing that much of the special material in Matthew (the M source) may be redactional, Culpepper's treatment of this material may not pay enough attention to the creative work of the redactor / final author. A good evaluation of "Matthew's Place" among the New Testament voices and in other early Christian writers is included (10-14), and he consistently deals with this broader issue of the relationship between biblical books throughout the commentary. His evaluation of the value of the Papias tradition attesting to an early Hebrew or Aramaic version appears to be negative, even though he ultimately takes no firm position. This means that the later Hebrew manuscripts of Matthew in the medieval period receive no mention. There is also a good and clear evaluation of the manuscript witnesses to the transmission of the Greek text. Important points in diverging manuscripts are treated in the textual notes to each passage throughout the commentary.

Culpepper considers the distinctiveness of the first gospel to lie in the manner in which it treats Jesus's teachings in relationship to his role as Messiah, to the interpretation of the Mosaic law, and to the fulfillment of scripture. He identifies three major themes: Christology, Scripture, and eschatology. His choices are sound. He shows that the distinctive nature of Matthew's Christology rests in its ethics and the view of righteousness promulgated therein, citing similarities to viewpoints in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The vigorous denunciation of opposing

Jewish leadership is treated as a major theme in his consideration of the work's eschatology.

The wide-ranging commentary is distinguished by a few features of note. The first is the extensive use throughout the volume of references to the Hebrew Bible and a learned evaluation of those passages, whether direct quotations or indirect allusions. He also shows how these inform our understanding of the text of Matthew. This discussion is comprehensive and well-informed. In addition to the Hebrew Bible, Culpepper skillfully mines diverse Second Temple Jewish texts as well as early Christian literature. Josephus, Philo, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha are all employed to advantage in this comprehensive treatment.

Culpepper's exegetical skill is evident in his literary sensitivity to the text of the first gospel. Nuanced treatments of the meaning of central terms, attending to both Greek and Hebrew literary contexts, are found throughout the work. The same could be said for his treatment of literary forms such as those in the Beatitudes and similar constructions, as well as Matthew's use of the poetry of the Psalms. The ten excurses are valuable and well-done, summarizing the pertinent scholarship on important topics such as the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin. In these discussions he points to significant scholarly literature on each topic and is cautious in his judgments, recognizing when there is limited evidence.

The comprehensive approach of this work also illustrates the limitations evident in most contemporary Christian Bible commentaries. While approaching the Gospel primarily within a Jewish context, Culpepper identifies as major issues those relevant to developments within the early Christian movement: "To orient ourselves we will in turn consider Matthew's use of its sources, this Gospel's place among other NT voices, its reception in the second century, and its major themes" (3). In this case the sources are from the early Christian movement. In other words, the specific issues Culpepper often addresses in Matthew are those that put it in conversation with other Christian literature, such as the debate over the validity of the law with a Pauline wing of the movement. The Jewish literature serves a supplementary role in the consideration of the major themes of the work. For example, in the comprehensive and well-informed treatment of texts from the Hebrew Bible one could be left with the impression that Matthew is primarily an exegetical project rather a sophisticated argument addressing issues of a dynamic Jewish community facing a host of challenges. Another noteworthy example is Culpepper's omission of the texts on polygamy and divorce found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Finally, Culpepper, following the scholarly majority, highlights the problem of the status of Jews and Gentiles as Matthew's primary concern, rather than issues of Jewish identity in relationship to the Roman occupation after the destruction of the temple. In other words, even expert and learned Christian commentators accept Matthew is a Jewish composition and use comparative Jewish material in their studies but still situate the Gospel primarily within the context of the early Christian movement. If one accepts it more as a Jewish composition then one needs to study it within the context of the major issues facing the Jewish world at that time. Then

Matthew becomes one more voice in the debates about the future survival and well-being of the Jewish people during a traumatic period in their history.