

Three commentaries on Matthew: a review

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The author, who is an international editor of Themelios, is Director of the Albrecht-Bengel-Haus in Tübingen, and is himself author of a two-volume commentary on Matthew. He here reviews the commentaries of U. Luz, Das Evangelium nach Matthäus, Teilband 1 (EKK, Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1985), of D. A. Carson in the Expositor's Bible Commentary vol. 8, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), and of R. T. France, The Gospel according to Matthew (Tyndale Commentary, Leicester: IVP/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

Matthew exegesis is on the move again! 1981 saw the appearance of another major commentary in English by F. W. Beare (after a long interval);¹ even before that a two-volume popular-level commentary on Matthew was published in the German *Bibelkommentar* series.² But then in 1984 and 1985 three remarkable commentaries were published, by D. A. Carson, R. T. France and U. Luz on Matthew 1-7. So 1984/5 was a great year for Matthew. Incidentally, Theodor Zahn's commentary on Matthew was also re-edited and published in 1984.³

1. Luz

It will be helpful to look at Ulrich Luz first. In the series of EKK commentaries (*Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*) he published in 1985 the first volume of *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, which expounds Matthew chapters 1-7. He needed 420 pages for this first volume. If he proceeds at the same rate through the gospel, by the end he will have produced five volumes with a total of 2,100 pages (whereas the Nestlé-Aland text requires 87 pages for Matthew, 17 of them for chapters 1-7). It will be interesting to see whether and how Luz sticks with the present structure in the coming volumes. On the back cover we read: 'This commentary is the first major academic commentary on Matthew's gospel for twenty years.' If at all, this can only be the case on the Continent (note Beare 1981, Carson 1984!).

The introduction is about 70 pages long, the exposition of the Sermon on the Mount 240 pages. This shows the main emphasis very clearly. Of particular importance for the user is the section in which the author explains the intention behind his commentary (pp. 78-82). The distinctive characteristic of his commentary for him is his attempt to make fruitful use of the history of interpretation and of the study of the historical influence of the gospel (its *Wirkungsgeschichte*). Through this he hopes to achieve two things: first to show 'what we have become through the texts' (p. 79); we will thus learn to understand more of ourselves as we are now. And second to offer helpful correctives, showing us 'what we could be through the texts' (p. 80). The author says explicitly that he wants to help 'overcome a deficiency in historical-critical exegesis' (p. 82). The text should be brought out of the distant past back into the present. Luz is aware — and it is good that he mentions it — that 'doing this introduces an element of personal engagement and an element of subjective limitation' into his work (p. 82). One can detect this, for example, in his view of the peace issue. On the other hand, Luz feels thoroughly committed to historical-critical exegesis. Neither 'a backing out of history' nor 'a fundamentalist elimination of history' is a viable option for him (p. 79). Luz therefore takes a moderate critical position, as is characteristic of many contributors to the EKK.

Concerning the dating of Matthew, Luz says: 'The writing of Mark's gospel and the destruction of Jerusalem constitute the *terminus post quem* (22:7)' (p. 75). He takes it completely for granted that 22:7 is a *vaticinium ex eventu* (a prophecy after the event), and he finally concludes that Matthew can be dated 'not long after the year 80' (p. 76).

On the authorship of the gospel, Luz honestly admits that a lot of arguments speak for the apostle Matthew. Nevertheless he remains convinced that the author is anonymous (pp. 76f.). He is a Jewish Christian, coming from a Jewish-Christian community (p. 62). 'It is sure that . . . his mother-tongue is Greek' (p. 63). It is 'sure' that the gospel was composed in a 'larger Syrian city where Greek was the *lingua franca*' (p. 75). But a knowledge of Aramaic cannot be excluded (p. 63). The author of the gospel looks back on the final break with the synagogue (p. 70). He does not presume to reach non-Christian Jewish readers (p. 71).

His sources are Mark and Q: 'Matthew's gospel was composed by working the Q-tradition into the threads of Mark's gospel' (p. 65). This combining of traditions was a theological, and not just a literary, exercise: the author is the

theological heir of Mark and Q: 'Matthew is the student, or, better, the heir of his theological fathers Mark and Q' (p. 57). Even if this point of view may be distinctive of Luz, it is clear from his other conclusions on introductory questions that he stands in the mainstream of historical-critical exegesis, being in that respect 'conservative'.

So far as the exposition itself is concerned, we can only give a small sample here. It is remarkable that in the 'Prologue', which Luz defines as from 1:1 to 4:22, he recognizes only 'a loose association with the Old Testament' (p. 88 on Mt. 1:1). The genealogy of Jesus is 'fictitious' (p. 91). 'It is hopeless to try and prove the historicity' of Jesus' virgin birth (p. 102). Luz assumes that the story of the virgin birth was 'part of an attempt by Jewish-Christian communities to testify to their faith in Jesus as the one installed as Son by God through his Spirit (Rom. 1:4), in a way analogous to other ancient narratives involving a childhood story' (p. 102). It is also hopeless to try and prove historically Matthew 2:1-12 (p. 115) and 2:13-23 (p. 128), possibly with the exception of the visit to Egypt.

The commentary becomes explosively controversial when Matthew is seen as the starting-point for an anti-Jewish *Wirkungsgeschichte*, i.e. as giving rise to anti-Semitism, such as 'has become fatal' (p. 141). Matthew lends support to anti-Semitism by the way he underlines the exclusiveness of the Christian claim to the OT, thus taking the OT away from Judaism (p. 141). In the same way Luz notes on Matthew 4:14-16 that this citation is an 'expression of the basic polemical claim that . . . the evangelist makes for the Bible of Israel' (p. 171). So is Matthew anti-Semitic, a Jewish Christian against Judaism?

The commentary becomes explosive again when Luz claims that the Sermon on the Mount is not just 'disciple-ethics': he asserts, 'The Sermon on the Mount lays claim on the whole world' (p. 190). In that statement he turns against the Lutheran two-kingdom tradition. Luz sees himself in the same line as some minority groups who take the Sermon on the Mount as practicable and who, in Luz's eyes, come closer to the gospel of Matthew than, for instance, Luther (pp. 191f.). This idea comes into sharp focus towards the end of the first volume. On pp. 416ff. Luz offers thoughts about the practical implementation of the Sermon on the Mount for today. His thoughts lead in two main directions: (a) 'Matthew, as exponent of a minority community', can help the church today in the necessary task of coming to terms with being a minority church, now that the era of the nation church has come to an end (p. 417); and (b) The peace movement poses a serious question about the 'form of the church' (p. 418). The Sermon on the Mount helps us 'to show our obedience to the will of the Father in all secular fields', and that also includes politics, especially a responsible and rational 'politics of peace' (p. 420), involving Christians and non-Christians.

It would be good to mention many other points, but lack of space does not permit it. The style of the commentary becomes quite chatty at times. But this is alongside impressive scholarship which, for example in the bibliography, almost reaches encyclopedic dimensions. Once finished, Luz's work must stand a good chance of becoming the top historical-critical commentary in the German-speaking world for some time.

2. Carson

We will compare Luz's commentary first with that of Don A. Carson, which was published in 1984 together with Walter W. Wessel's commentary on Mark and Walter L. Liefeld's commentary on Luke as volume 8 of the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. It is a commentary on the whole of Matthew's gospel, running to almost 600 pages. Apart from F. W. Beare's, this is to my knowledge the most detailed of all English commentaries on Matthew in the last few decades (with the exception of Gundry's work).

In many ways Carson's work is at the opposite pole to Luz's. This applies, first, to its hermeneutical position. The *Expositor's Bible Commentary* is an international and interdenominational series. Its contributors are, according to the back cover, 'the best in evangelical scholarship committed to the divine inspiration, complete trustworthiness, and full authority of the Bible'. In terms of scholarship Carson is comparable to Luz. Both obviously draw their information primarily from the literature of their own theological background. So we have here two top-class exegetical works from differing perspectives, which is what makes a comparison of the two particularly exciting and instructive. How does an evangelical exposition of Matthew on the same academic level differ from a middle-of-the-road, critical exposition?

Carson devotes about 60 pages (10% of his commentary) to introduction. After a short overview of historical research he emphasizes that the evangelist did intend to convey historical information as well as theology (p. 10). An interest in faith and historical authenticity do not exclude each other. As Carson writes, 'the burden of proof rests with the skeptic' (p. 11). This valuation of historicity is one of the major differences from Luz.

Concerning the synoptic problem: 'This commentary adopts a cautious stance' (p. 16). He agrees that Mark is older than Matthew and that Matthew worked with Mark's information. It would be a mistake, however, to tie oneself slavishly to the two-source hypothesis, although it is still the best theory in the field. Above all one may not draw any conclusions from this hypothesis for questions of historicity and the age of the tradition (p. 16). Carson wants to approach his commentary in such a way that his conclusions would not be affected substantially by the downfall of the two-source hypothesis: 'The aim throughout has been to let Matthew speak as a theologian and historian independent of Mark, even if Mark has been one of his most important sources' (p. 17). Compared with Luz, this approach allows Carson a greater freedom *vis-à-vis* the two-source hypothesis; as the hypothesis is one that is increasingly being called into question these days, Carson seems that much more 'modern' than Luz in this respect (*cf.* pp. 14ff.).

Carson adopts a similarly cautious point of view on the authorship of the gospel. However, he tends to believe that the apostle Matthew is the author and that this is the most likely theory. The following sentences are quite typical: 'Though Matthew's authorship remains the most defensible position, very little in this commentary depends on it. Where it may have a bearing on the discussion, a cautionary notice is inserted' (p. 19).

Carson also considers the date of the gospel very carefully. As Jesus was quite able to prophesy the destruction of

Jerusalem, AD 70 need not be the *terminus a quo* (p. 20). The circumstances in which Matthew's gospel is set permit a dating between AD 40 and AD 100. Also, Matthew's gospel is not anti-Jewish to the extent that we can presume the final break between synagogue and church. Although no fixed date can be given, 'perhaps the sixties are the most likely decade for its composition' (p. 21). So Carson dates Matthew approximately twenty years earlier than Luz. The place of composition was probably somewhere in Syria.

A considerable part of the introduction is devoted to discussion of the gospel's distinctive themes. Luz's commentary does not have much comparable discussion. Carson discusses Christology, prophecy and fulfilment, law, church, eschatology, the Jewish leaders, mission, miracles, and the understanding and faith of the disciples (pp. 26ff.). It is striking that Carson gives much less importance to anti-Jewish polemic in Matthew than does Luz (see pp. 32ff.).

Let us turn to some examples of exegesis which enable us to compare Carson and Luz. Over against Luz, Carson believes in the virgin birth as an historical fact: 'There is a good case for treating chapters 1-2 as both history and theology' (p. 73). The visit of the magi is also historical: 'Matthew records history so as to bring out its theological significance and its relation to Scripture' (p. 83). Similarly on Matthew 2:13ff.: 'there is nothing historically improbable about this account' (p. 90). Although Carson is willing to treat any objection to historicity seriously, we can note a fundamental difference from Luz in this respect. Carson's interest in history is far greater than that of his historical-critical counterpart.

The classification of the Sermon on the Mount leads us to another difference. In Luz's volume it is qualitatively and quantitatively an unparalleled high point. This is evident from the way he divides the prologue (1:1-4:22) and the words of Jesus (4:23-11:30), with the latter consisting in this first volume of nothing but 'A. The Sermon on the Mount'. Carson, however, groups 3:1-7:29 together under the heading 'The gospel of the kingdom', seeing it as one of seven main sections in Matthew's gospel. And this (second) main section chapter is again divided into two main sections: 'A. Narrative' (3:1-4:25) and 'B. First discourse: The Sermon on the Mount' (5:1-7:29). In this way the Sermon on the Mount is seen more strongly than in Luz as part of the general development of the story.

And the differences continue. Carson places importance on the authenticity of the words of Jesus in Matthew 5-7, and that includes 5:17-20 (pp. 123ff., 141), whereas Luz believes that Matthew 5:17-20 is without doubt the work of Matthew himself (Luz, pp. 228ff.). Even the context of Matthew 5-7 is seen by Carson to be authentic and historical: 'The authenticity of that context must be assumed' (p. 125). Carson discusses different ways of interpreting the Sermon on the Mount: the Lutheran, the classical liberal, that which takes its starting-point from a Matthew community, the Baptist ('Anabaptist-Mennonite'), the existentialist, the 'Interim Ethic' approach, that starting from a radicalizing of the OT, and the classic-dispensational approach (pp. 126ff.). Luz sees himself as closest to the 'minority community of Matthew' or the Anabaptist interpretation. Carson refuses both those interpretations. The first is 'reductionist' in his eyes, because

the gospel is more than a community catechism, and we have to interpret it in terms of salvation history (pp. 126ff.). The second leads to pacifism and retreat from the world and does not fit in with the Scriptures as a whole (p. 127). The other possibilities mentioned above do not satisfy him either. So Carson decides in favour of an interpretation in terms of salvation history, with the kingdom of God as the starting-point (pp. 127ff.). This means for him that the Sermon on the Mount has to be seen Christologically, pointing to Jesus as the fulfiller of law and prophecy (pp. 128, 143f.). This interpretation allows for the unity of Old and New Testaments, of Matthew and Paul, of Palestinian Jewish Christians and of Pauline Gentile Christians (p. 144). The NT and the two Testaments together can be interpreted as a unity if we follow Carson.

After the Sermon on the Mount the comparison between Carson and Luz has to come to an end. Carson follows his path consistently in the following chapters, *i.e.* he interprets them in the light of salvation history and Christology, and combines this with his interest in historicity.

Let us start by examining the outline. 'The kingdom' is also part of the heading of the third and fourth main sections and of the second half of the fifth main section. It is a theme followed through to Matthew 28:16-20, 'The Risen Messiah and His Disciples'. Let us have a look at the conclusion of the commentary. Carson talks about 'historical reminiscence' used by Matthew in 28:16-17 (p. 594). Carson's interpretation of Matthew 28:18-20 seeks to show continuity between the authority of the Risen One and the earthly Jesus in his ministry (p. 594). Disagreeing with Hill, Carson asserts the authenticity of the Great Commission to make disciples in all the world (pp. 596f.). In the same way he defends the authenticity of the reference to the Trinity in Matthew 28:19, which he, with D. Wenham, traces back to Jesus (p. 598). On the last page Carson writes: 'The revelation of Jesus as Messiah at this late stage in salvation history brings the fulfilment of everything to which the OT Scriptures pointed and constitutes their valid continuity; but this means that the focus is necessarily on Jesus' (p. 599). This masterly commentary is notable for its discussion of historical issues, of salvation history and of Christology.

3. France

Finally, let us have a look at the commentary of Richard T. France, who teaches at London Bible College. It is in the series of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries and was published in 1985. France has only 410 pages for his commentary on the whole gospel. This does not allow him to go into highly detailed academic discussion. Furthermore, we have to remember that the purpose of the whole Tyndale series of commentaries is to bring out the contemporary relevance of the biblical text for a general readership (see the preface by Leon Morris). So the academic discussion of the text is of secondary importance, and France's commentary has to be viewed on a different level from the works of Luz and Carson. Comparison of the three is only possible to a limited extent.

The relatively large introduction to France's commentary, extending as it does to over 50 pages, shows, however, that he, like the others, has done his work thoroughly. He stresses the close connection of Matthew with the OT (p. 16). It is a

Jewish Christian gospel (p. 17) and at the same time universal (pp. 18ff.). Despite its 'ecclesiastical' features it should not be too narrowly viewed as a church catechism or the like (pp. 20ff.). France, like Carson, speaks out against the opinion, represented most recently and notably by Gundry, that Matthew is a midrash (pp. 22ff.). Instead, he defends the historical authenticity of the gospel (p. 26).

The place of composition could either be Palestine or Syria (pp. 27f.). Like Carson, France prefers 'a date in the sixties' for the final 'publication' of Matthew (p. 30), but he remains as cautious as Carson in his arguments about this. From the point of view of someone on the Continent two things stand out: the cautious evangelical argumentation, and the tendency to date Matthew relatively early. The apostle Matthew is possibly the author, though here too we cannot be completely certain: 'we simply do not know the extent of the role of the apostle Matthew in the composition of the First Gospel, but the tradition of the early church encourages us to believe that it was a major one' (p. 34).

The synoptic problem is also treated with great caution by France (pp. 34ff.). He refers to 'areas of growing uncertainty' (p. 35) with regard to the classical two-source hypothesis and notes the questions both about the priority of Mark and about the direct literary dependence of Matthew. Nevertheless, like Carson, he works from the assumption of Markan priority, taking Mark and Q to be Matthew's sources (p. 38).

A long section deals with the central theological themes of Matthew's gospel (pp. 38-56). Like Carson, France deals with themes such as promise and fulfilment, Christology, law, community, and then turns to the structure of the gospel. As we have already referred to parallels with Carson several times, it ought to be stressed that France did not know Carson's commentary when he was writing his (see p. 14).

It is characteristic of France that he structures his commentary on geographical lines. Following the first major section, 'Birth and Preparation of Jesus' (1:1-4:16), there follow two major sections on the 'Ministry in Galilee', 'public' (4:17-16:20) and 'private' (16:21-18:35), then the 'Ministry in Judaea' (19:1-25:46), and finally 'Death and Resurrection' (26:1-28:20).

In his exposition France emphasizes firmly the historical credibility of the fiercely debated chapters 1 and 2. We are dealing here with 'facts': 'It would be a strange apologetic, which invented "facts" in order to defend them' (p. 71). Concerning the Sermon on the Mount, the discussion of the different possible interpretations is much shorter than that in Carson or Luz. It is 'throughout the teaching of Jesus, but much of the structure derives from Matthew' (p. 106). France points out that we are dealing with teaching for the disciples and not for all: 'indeed much of it would make no sense as a universal code' (p. 106). Of the three commentators, France stands closest to the two-kingdom theory of the Lutheran-Reformation tradition. His Christological interpretation allies him with Carson. The Sermon on the Mount compels us first to think about who is speaking here, *i.e.* about the identity of the preacher of the Sermon (p. 107). He differs from Luz in his view that man cannot fulfil the Sermon (pp. 106f.). Evangelical exposition is — at least in this area — closer to the 'majority Reformation' point of view than the critical view. Matthew 5-7 and 8-9 highlight 'the unparalleled authority of Jesus the Messiah' (p. 151).

France is also convinced of the historicity of the miracles. One reflection of this conviction is his ability to accommodate the fiercely debated 'Messianic Secret' in his historical understanding of Jesus' way; he does not have to reinterpret it as an artificial construction of the later community.

The reader will be very grateful for the careful and down-to-earth approach France takes on many questions that cause problems in the Christian community. He says, for instance, that Matthew 10:23 and 16:28 refer to Jesus' taking of heavenly authority, not to his parousia (pp. 184f., 261). Partly due to the shortness of the commentary, there are of course many points where the keen reader would have liked a more detailed exposition (e.g. on 1:17 or 23:39).

Towards the end of the commentary France's convictions about historical authenticity are evident again. It is indeed Jesus who speaks to the disciples after his resurrection, and gives them the Great Commission referring to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (pp. 413f.). Neither Carson nor France reflects on the significance of the order 'baptizing' and 'teaching' in 28:19. The commentary ends

pointing to the glory of Jesus Christ: 'That the risen Lord can now make such a promise (sc. in 28:20) as God made to his people in the past brings the Gospel's portrait of Jesus . . . to a stupendous climax' (p. 416).

Although he writes independently of Carson and at a different level, France agrees with Carson in emphasizing the same three important things: salvation history, historicity, and Christology. In the reviewer's opinion this is no accident, but may be seen as a typical characteristic of current evangelical exegesis, at least in NT studies. Despite its brevity, France has provided the reader with an excellent commentary.

¹ Cf. my review in *Bib* 64 (1983), pp. 434-437.

² G. Maier, *Matthaus-Evangelium*, 2 vols (Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1979/80).

³ In R. Brockhaus (Theologische Verlagsgemeinschaft).

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There is a further review of France's commentary in the book review section (below).