

Reading Matthew from the Margins: Finding Faith and Hope in Challenging Texts

Introduction to This Issue

In the spring of 2020, although the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted my classroom, I enjoyed the opportunity to lead a biblical exegesis seminar called “Matthew and the Lives of Others” at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Through this class, my students and I saw how Matthew resonates with modern religious and public life despite our temporal distance from the gospel’s historical community (c. 90 CE). To be clear, this realization came to us not because we found in Matthew ready-to-use scriptural answers directly applicable to our modern concerns. Rather, as we tried to trace the realities of the marginalized in the Roman Empire, we were introduced to a series of challenging topics in Matthew (e.g., colonization, ethnic enmity, state violence) that we should not water down in our modern application. Indeed, in those topics, we found the value of reading Matthew today. When contextualized historically and approached from various interpretive angles, the physical violence, political and economic oppression, and social prejudices that Matthew’s gospel documents speak to the grief, pains, and lived experiences of many people in

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Natalia Goncharova. Costume design for St. Matthew for the ballet “Liturgy,” 1915.

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Addressing openly both the relevance and the challenge Matthew’s gospel presents to us, the five essays collected in this October issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* offer fresh perspectives on Matthew for today’s civic, religious, and congregational life. The authors cast new light on all-too-familiar yet exegetically demanding stories in this gospel and promote contextual thinking without losing sight of Matthew’s own historical context. Above all, Matthew’s stories told at the margins of the empire about 2,000 years ago shine through the diversity of the authors’ voices and their unique social locations, as the interpretive methods we find in this issue’s articles range from historical criticism to womanist

reading to hauntology to Jewish Latin-American reading and are utilized by scholars from the United States, Japan, Brazil, Canada, and South Africa. In this variety of essays, history connects with modern ministry, spirituality and social justice stand hand in hand, and conflict and suffering lead to faith and hope. Without a doubt, this October issue will illuminate our readers' understanding of Matthew in the coming lectionary year (2022–2023) as they continue to reflect upon how this gospel's challenging stories resonate through their ministries and public lives.

The current issue begins with **Mitzi Jane Smith's** womanist reading of the Matthean story of the attempted infanticide of the baby Jesus, born king of the Jews. In Matthew 2:13–18, although Jesus avoids death through divine and human intervention, other children do not. Paying close attention to Rachel's cry, Smith places in dialogue the precarious reality of Black women and their children, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, and a critical reading of Matthew 2. Black women give birth to babies who enter a world hostile to them. Poor women and their children have nowhere or no means to flee the violence. Rachel is inconsolable, while poor Black women lack a quality of life that ensures the survival of the children they birth.

The next article, by **Mayuko Yasuda**, invites us into another difficult topic in Matthew: the death of Judas. Matthew 27:3–10 tells a story of Judas hanging himself after betraying Jesus, and some see Judas' death as a well-deserved punishment, while others see it as a tragedy or a noble death. However, Catherine Hamilton considers Judas an ambivalent figure. Highlighting the larger context and history recorded in the Hebrew Bible, she argues that the core of the story is the shedding of Jesus' innocent blood and its outcome, (i.e., the defiled land), and that Judas' fate is tangled with the defiled—haunted—land. Stimulated by Hamilton's argument, Yasuda further explores the issue of haunting as it relates to Judas' death and raises questions about justice, a (corrupt) judicial system, failed desires to make things right, and hope that is haunted by such failures.

The following two articles lead us to rethink either a stereotyped character or a well-known passage of Matthew. First, **Isaac W. Oliver/de Oliveira** examines the Sabbath praxis of the Pharisees from a Jewish Latin-American perspective. Although New Testament scholars affirm Matthew's Jewish portrait of Jesus, many still treat the Pharisees in a one-sided manner. Oliver/de Oliveira seeks to appreciate the Sabbath praxis of the Pharisees on its own terms by focusing on the Sabbath controversies reported in Matthew 12:1–14 and reconstructs the Pharisees' praxis from a Jewish Latin-American perspective that underlines the Sabbath day imperative to rest from all work as an expression of liberation and complete trust in God's providence.

Next, **Ole Schenk's** article situates Matthew 11:25–30 in historical context and ministry. Preachers and pastoral caregivers often bring traditional expectations that Jesus' invitation to the weary to come and rest has an individual and emotional application. However, literary and historical studies expand the range of applications of the text to situations of conflict and challenges

to identity and purpose. By delving into Matthew's post-70 CE historical setting and the literary plot of Matthew 11 that addresses the unrepentant cities, Schenk shows how Jesus' call to rest moves a community forward in compassion and deeds of power despite opposition.

This issue of *Currents* culminates in **Gerald O. West's** article. West documents and reflects on how Matthew's gospel has been a resource for church and community-based Bible study in South Africa. The Ujamaa Centre has worked with Matthew's gospel for more than thirty years, recognizing Matthew's own theological contributions as well as Matthew's preservation of the theology of the source texts he uses in his gospel. Through Contextual Bible Study (CBS), socially engaged biblical scholars have served and collaborated with local African communities of the poor and marginalized in rereading Matthew's gospel for social transformation. West's article introduces a set of Matthean texts (1:1–18; 14:22–23; 15:21–31; 20:17–34; 27:26–31) that the local communities have engaged in the contexts of apartheid, African death-related rituals, HIV and AIDS, and sexual violence against men. Explaining in great detail the ways in which CBS moves from the initial community-based reception of a biblical text through a close and careful rereading of the text to a community-based appropriation of the text, West's work inspires us to explore how Matthew's gospel still speaks words of life into our modern contexts.

*Dr. Eunyung Lim, Guest Editor
Assistant Professor of Religion, Middlebury College
Former Assistant Professor of New Testament,
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

The *Currents* editorial team is grateful to Dr. Eunyung Lim for serving as guest editor for this October lectionary-focused issue of the journal. Her colleagues and students from the Lutheran School of Theology have been deeply enriched by the intercultural sensitivity and competence that Dr. Lim brought to her scholarship and teaching; the breadth of her knowledge of the New Testament and boundless creativity in helping ancient texts come alive in contemporary contexts and struggles.

The October issue also features two *Currents* Focus articles on the practice of theology in our time. **José David Rodríguez** provides a Latinx perspective on the future of theological education in the United States. He discusses the historical development of theological education in the US from 1636 (with the establishment of Harvard College as the first North American institution of higher education) to the present. The article describes the notion of "interculturality" as the contribution of Latin American and Latinx sectors of North American society in projecting the future of theological education globally. In the second article **Ole Schenk** explores how Vitor Westhelle's published works brought the Latin American liberation tradition into contact with students of ministry and theology from around the world. Taking the theme

of praxis as intentional action, Schenk interprets Westhelle's *The Scandalous God* with reference to Paulo Freire and Hugo Assmann, drawing implications for ministry today in response to the biblical and liturgical summons to remember the poor.

Kathleen D. (Kadi) Billman

Craig N. Nesson

Co-Editors

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