



Luz, Ulrich

Matthew 8–20: A Commentary

Translated by James E. Crouch

Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible

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The first installment of Ulrich Luz's monumental four-volume commentary on Matthew for the EKK series appeared in 1985. The final volume has just appeared in 2002. In 1989 Augsburg published Wilhelm C. Linss's English translation of the first volume, which covers Matt 1–7. Now James E. Crouch has translated for Fortress Press Luz's second volume (which in German covers Matt 8–17) and part of his third (which covers Matt 18–25), and the commentary has now found its way into the Hermeneia series of Fortress Press. The preface to this second English volume informs readers that the remaining part of Luz's third German volume as well as the fourth will be printed as the third English volume, after which the first English volume will be reprinted in a revised edition with indices for the whole work. Presumably the revision of volume 1 will put the text into the Hermeneia format and so make all three volumes consistent.

The commentary proceeds pericope by pericope. Each section opens with a citation of secondary literature (no attempt is made to be exhaustive) and then a translation. The so-called "Analysis" follows. This consists of observations on the structure of each relevant passage, conclusions about its sources, and, sometimes, suggestions regarding its origins. (Regarding this last subject, Luz believes that "at the center of Jesus' proclamation" is divine judgment and that this focus on judgment keeps his message "from becoming a message of harmless love" [154]; sayings that forcefully proclaim eschatological judgment, such as 10:32–33 and 11:21–22, are authentic; Luz even considers the possibility that 10:23 comes from Jesus, and he offers an interpretation that does not "in principle" differ from that of Albert Schweitzer [91].) Then follows the interpretation proper, usually verse by verse. The comments tend to cover all the issues, although now

and then Luz can be surprisingly brief. For example, the two sentences on 10:30 (“even the hairs of your head are counted”), which cite from the secondary literature only Strack-Billerbeck, overlook recent discussions of whether this verse is about divine knowledge rather than divine care. The volume concludes with indices of sources, Greek and Hebrew words, subjects, and medieval commentators and modern authors.

Interspersed throughout the exegesis are sections on the “History of Interpretation” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). These sometimes conclude the exegesis and are often combined with a section entitled “Summary,” which typically addresses issues of theology and application. Luz is not interested just in recovering ancient readings of texts and what people have thought about them through the centuries; he is seeking to understand how the contemporary church should appropriate Matthew. So, when discussing 19:1–12, Luz explores how a text spoken in one context can be moved to another context. What do we say if “marriage based on love between two adults has taken the place of an arranged marriage involving juveniles” and if “the socially isolated nuclear family has taken the place of life in a larger extended family” and if “the average life span is about double that of antiquity ... [so that] the average length of a marriage has also at least doubled” (495)?

For this reader, Luz’s chief contribution lies not in his historical-critical conclusions (which do not in any case lend themselves to simple generalizations in a short review such as this) but in his résumés of two thousand years of exegesis. These regularly instruct and fascinate. They are, moreover, not just of antiquarian interest, for more often than not they raise important issues about the interpretation and application of Matthew’s text.

Others may disagree. A Matthean scholar, author of his own commentary on the First Gospel, recently shared with me his judgment that Luz’s concentration on the history of interpretation runs the risk of shifting attention away from the text itself. One certainly does get the feeling from reading especially Luz’s third and fourth volumes that his interest in *Wirkungsgeschichte* has grown as he has done his work. Yet this is altogether natural, for at this point in time surely there are far more discoveries to be made regarding the history of interpretation than regarding the meaning of Matthew in its first-century context. More importantly, Luz himself believes that we should not “delete simply as illegitimate everything which appears exegetically not justified before the forum of the biblical text. Rather it belongs to the power inherent in the central biblical texts to disclose new dimensions in new people” (1:240). He develops the idea in volume 2. When discussing the history of the interpretation of 11:12, the saying about the kingdom of heaven suffering violence, Luz observes that this, like other sayings of Jesus, is a “linguistic hull” that has “repeatedly been filled with totally new meaning” (143). He finds this fact not regrettable but necessary, for the interpreter encounters not “simply the individual text but, as it were, the whole believed Christ as the one who gives and demands, who is crucified and risen. He is the most important agent in bringing new

meaning to a text. He fills the husks of the sayings.... Christ always lives only in and from the hulls, the received texts, whose meaning he constantly changes” (144). If one accepts this theological understanding of *Wirkungsgeschichte* and recognizes that Luz is earnestly seeking to apply Matthew to his modern context, the repeated focus on meaning not in the text but associated with the text is an act of Christian faithfulness.

In addition to the theological justification, there is a mundane reason for applauding Luz’s approach. Sometimes the history of the interpretation of a passage is extremely rich and informative, whereas the text upon which that history is parasitic is far less interesting or useful. While the little phrase in 12:31, “blasphemy against the Spirit,” has led to a host of fascinating (and often very troubling) ruminations, its meaning for Matthew can be summed up in a couple of simple sentences (see 209). This phenomenon of an afterlife far more colorful and theologically valuable than its parental text occurs, as the volume under review shows, not infrequently in Matthew. This is what makes Luz’s volume not just instructive but also, if I may, so entertaining.

In contrast to my colleague mentioned above, for me in fact one minor blemish of the commentary as a whole is that the earlier volumes do not give quite as much attention to the history of interpretation as the latter volumes. The fact is particularly noticeable in volume 4, which features not only some very long sections of *Wirkungsgeschichte* but also numerous reproductions of Christian art regarding the passion narrative. The prints are quite welcome, as they helpfully expand the *Wirkungsgeschichte* circle beyond the usual mainstream theologians (e.g., Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Barth). The other volumes, by contrast, have no artwork at all. This is a particular pity for volume 1, given how much Christian artists have occupied themselves with episodes from Matt 1–2. One hopes that the English revision of volume 1 will be expanded in such a way as to include reproductions of artwork.

If one wants to be pedantic, there are, apart from the various individual exegetical judgments one might debate, a few things to query. The bibliographies could often be better. Several times I noted not insignificant omissions, both of books and journal articles. Then there is a vexing hermeneutical issue. On page 94 Luz judges that 10:23 may be “in part ... no longer valid for Matthew.” This is similar to the judgment he makes regarding 12:32a (one “who says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven”; see 209) and concerning 7:6 (“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine”) in volume 1: there is no Matthean sense. What we have in these cases are traditions that Matthew did not successfully incorporate into his Gospel. But was the Evangelist really a conservative redactor who could sometimes pass on materials that he did not understand? I have not made up my mind on this, but Luz’s occasional resignation that a text has no meaning in its Matthean context raises all sorts of important and difficult interpretive issues. Finally, this reviewer was a trifle annoyed with the occasional use of the generalizing expression, “modern readers,” when what Luz means

is individuals like himself, that is, Western academics of a certain stripe. To say, for instance, that “modern readers” (the German is *heutige Leser/innen*) have “difficulties” with 10:26–33 and that “the comfort Matthew [here] offers the church no longer seems to provide comfort” (105) is, in my experience, a palpably false generalization, unless by “modern readers” we condescendingly exclude vast portions of the Christian community: evangelical Protestants, traditional Roman Catholics, pious Eastern Orthodox, and so forth.

It would, however, be silly to register any real complaints about this wonderful commentary on Matthew (or about Crouch’s translation, which reads very well, smoother than the first English volume and which further seems remarkably free of typos, although I did note an “is” for “as” on p. 495). This is the mature work of a significant New Testament scholar, full of sound judgment and remarkable learning. It should evoke in all students of the Gospels both gratitude and admiration. One hopes that the rest of us will not only learn from it but will try to imitate it, so that the history of interpretation will, in future commentaries, be put to the good use that it is put to here.