

RBL 09/04/2000



**Keener, Craig S.**

*A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. Pp. xxi + 1040, Cloth, \$60.00, ISBN 0802838219.

R. Keith Whitt  
Huntington, WV 25705

This commentary comes on the heels of Keener's pneumatological study (*The Spirit in the Gospels and Acts: Divine Purity and Power*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) and his commentary for pastors and church leaders (*Matthew*, InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary Series. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997). Readers of those works will discover that much of the material has found its way into this present work. The commentary examined here is an enlarged academic version of the IVP commentary. The outline is the same, the introductory issues addressed are very similar, and the comments are an expansion of that which is found in the earlier work. The focus of the commentary is twofold: 1) to examine the social-historical contents of Matthew and his traditions, and 2) to provide commentary on the nature of Matthew's exhortations to his readers. Following Burrige (R. A. Burrige, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*. SNTSMS 70. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), he views the First Gospel as ancient biography, written to acquaint the readers with the character of Jesus through his words and deeds, providing the example for them to follow. He notes that the writer of Matthew takes great freedom in the arrangement and emphases of his sources (Mark and Q), but stays true to the tradition he has received.

The focus of the commentary is twofold: 1) to examine the social-historical contents of Matthew and his traditions, and 2) to provide commentary on the nature of Matthew's exhortations to his readers. Following Burrige (R. A. Burrige, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*. SNTSMS 70. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), he views the First Gospel as ancient biography, written to

acquaint the readers with the character of Jesus through his words and deeds, providing the example for them to follow. He notes that the writer of Matthew takes great freedom in the arrangement and emphases of his sources (Mark and Q), but stays true to the tradition he has received.

It becomes obvious fairly early that the book is also a mature evangelical apologetic. I say mature because Keener does not back away from issues of faith and addresses them in a manner that will cause some conservatives to be uncomfortable. His defense of the veracity and authority of scripture, the virgin birth, meritorious death, bodily resurrection, and deity of Jesus addresses the arguments both for and against adherence to these positions. Throughout the commentary he engages the Jesus Seminar and notes the differences he has with the conclusions of this group, as well as the individual scholars who compose its ranks.

The seventy-one-page introduction acquaints the reader with the various critical approaches, which are summarized and their strengths and weaknesses in relation to synoptic study are discussed. The usual preliminary matters of authorship (Matthean authorship on some level), date (late 70s), location (Syro-Palestine), and situation (handbook of teaching and polemic against Jewish authorities) are discussed in a cogent and helpful manner. His examination of Matthew's christology finds that Jesus is viewed as a sage, but much more. He is a charismatic signs-prophet, healer and messianic king, who fulfills the promise of a Davidic king and is the mediator of the divine presence.

The commentary section provides the corresponding synoptic parallels(s) at the beginning of each pericope examined, noting whether true parallels exist or if the material in the other gospels is related in subject matter alone. He engages other writers and offers his own thoughts throughout the commentary, sometimes as assertions and other times as hypotheses that need to be examined or argued further. His analysis is helpful, but hardly groundbreaking. The pericopae are divided along Keener's outline of the Gospel and the headings and sub-headings are homiletic in nature. This element is a by-product of incorporating his earlier work. At key junctures in the commentary, useful and informative excursions are provided on subjects ranging from the virgin birth to prostitution. These allow Keener to examine succinctly historical and contemporary views and provide his analysis and conclusions on subjects he deems important.

The real value of this work is the vast number of primary and secondary sources that are provided for the reader, though he notes correctly that they are not exhaustive. The commentary section includes extensive references to Greco-Roman material, rabbinic literature, Dead Sea Scrolls, non-canonical Jewish writings, early Christian and Gnostic sources, as well as ANE texts. Keener notes that much of the material may not fall within the time frame normally associated with the writing of Matthew, but chooses to include the material for those who desire further investigation of the milieu that may have

affected its composition and first-century reading. There are approximately 2725 modern sources cited in the text with full bibliographic information provided in one of the many indices, including one providing the location(s) where the authors are cited or discussed. Roughly one hundred of the sources he provides are drawn from New Testament Abstracts and are supplied for the reader's further inquiry. Several of these references do not include the corresponding NTA volume or page numbers. In other indices, page numbers are provided as well for all canonical and non-canonical sources cited.

Two areas in which the commentary could be improved include the subjects index and the table of contents. Both are woefully lacking. The contents page simply lists "Commentary" without giving the outline of the commentary and corresponding page numbers. A full list of the indices is provided however. The subject index lists most, but not all, of the excursuses and a very limited number of other subjects. This is unfortunate. Those doing research without reading the commentary cover to cover (and who does, except for reviewers and, of course, students!) will miss some of the information and documentation that Keener has worked diligently to provide.

Keener notes that the book is written for scholars and seminarians. The latter will find it more helpful than the former. That is not to say that the book is not valuable for Matthean study. Detailed discussions of textual and exegetical matters are absent. On the few occasions that Hebrew and Greek terms are brought into the text, they are transliterated and discussion is held to a minimum. Though the book contains a large number of excursuses, notably absent are in-depth discussions of some key Matthean themes and distinctions. While he briefly addresses righteousness, he does not note how the term is used in Matthew. The treatment of Matt 27:50-53 does not address the various interpretations associated with Matthew's distinctive presentation. He notes that Matthew uses "kingdom of God" four times in place of the usual "kingdom of heaven," but does not address the reasons the writer may have had for this change, nor does he point the reader to a very helpful article on this issue (John Christopher Thomas, "The Kingdom of God in the Gospel According to Matthew." *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 136-146). However, it is a social-historical commentary and I had to keep reminding myself of that when looking for things related to my own areas of interest and study. He does note that many things he wanted to address were left undone due to the space limitations of a one-volume work.

The commentary has the usual typographical errors and I never could find the discussion of the two ages in the section on 12:32, though it is listed in the subjects index. However, the work is well written and organized and moves the discussion within Matthean scholarship along. It will not replace the massive work of Davies and Allison (Davies, W. D., and Dale C. Allison, Jr. *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. 3 vols. International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997), but it does provide a one volume alternative to the other fine commentaries on Matthew that have emerged the last few years.