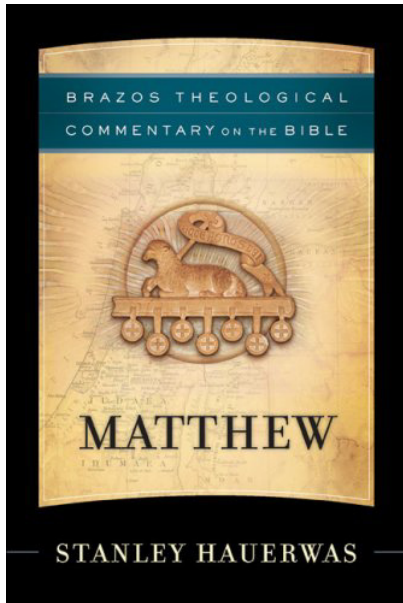


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Hauerwas, Stanley

Matthew

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible

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In their commentary work, biblical scholars for several generations have exercised great discipline in seeking not to go beyond what the text says. Initially this was in the name of Enlightenment objectivity, but more lately other reasons are likely to be in play, instead or as well: individual scholars often have an uncertain or problematic personal relationship to the faith stance of the documents they seek to elucidate; scholars belong to a whole structure of academic life in which communication across difference requires a certain amount of bracketing out of the difference; academic respectability may seem to require a certain distance from the life of the church; and so forth.

But despite the highly developed skills of objectivity that have undoubtedly been involved, it has not been lost on thoughtful students that scholarly readings have an uncanny way of mirroring features of the personal stances of the scholars involved or of what seem to be scholarly fashions of the moment. In any case, postmodern sensibilities have been chipping away at all claims to objectivity and pushing us toward the conviction that all scholarship is done from a standpoint.

The Brazos series of commentaries is after “an unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of Scripture” (series preface [13]). The contributors are not Bible scholars but those whose

expertise is in using the Christian doctrinal tradition, “qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formulation of their mental habits” (12). The “rule of faith” is the standpoint from which they write, understood not as a set of theological propositions but as “a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect” (12).

As one who has long thought that people of faith have an access to the “substance” of New Testament texts in a manner not possible for those who stand outside the faith, there is much about the vision for the series that I find attractive. But how does this pan out in practice? What is it like when one dispenses with the mental habits of an exegete? Clearly the theologians who contribute to this series do not cut themselves off from the works of exegetes, but they do inhabit a different world. Less than 10 percent of the items in Hauerwas’s bibliography are written by exegetes.

To begin reading Hauerwas’s commentary on Matthew was, for this exegete, quite a disorienting experience. For example, right at the beginning not only is a Genesis connection claimed for the use of *genesis* in Matt 1:1—exegetes will do as much—but it is used to sustain discussion not only about creation and new creation but also about Christianity as an eschatological and even an apocalyptic faith, without the need for so much as a second glance at the text of Matthew. Further, interpretations of features of Matthew are offered with no qualification that no self-respecting exegete—of faith or without faith—could agree with. I found it quite odd to learn that it is the crucifixion of Jesus that explains his identification as “the son of Abraham” (28); Gen 22 is in view. We are informed that in the feeding of the five thousand “the five loaves of bread correspond to the five books of Moses, and the two fish represent the law and the prophets” (139), while in the feeding of the four thousand they are “the law and the gospel” (145). Matthean texts are regularly read in relation to a fully formed Trinitarian faith (e.g., “God is acting our behalf by becoming fully one of us” [33]; “The God of Israel, the Lord who made all that is, will be found in a virgin’s womb” [127]), where the Matthean text itself seems to reach toward and begin to affirm the divine significance of Jesus only in more subtle and functional modes.

After a while, however, one settles in and learns how to read the commentary for what it is (as well, the commenting seems to become somewhat more “normal” as the text goes on). Hauerwas is offering commentary on the Gospel of Matthew in light of his own Christian faith, and he is offering it for those who largely share that Christian faith. He is telling us how Christians can use the resources of the Gospel of Matthew fruitfully in relation to their own faith. In the end, that is what any Christian is going to be doing with this Gospel. The question is whether merging horizons quite so immediately as Hauerwas does will serve us best.

A refreshing feature of this kind of commentary is that comment is disciplined and shaped in relation to what is significant for Christian faith. In a relatively small book, there is substantial discussion of a whole host of issues that are of profound importance to Christians. Sometimes the discussion remains theologically abstract, but often it is compellingly relevant and at times quite moving.

As an ethicist, Hauerwas is noted for his Christian pacifist vision, so it is no surprise that pacifism keeps turning up in Matthew, both in places where the fit is obvious and also in places where it is something of a surprise. John Howard Yoder is quoted at considerable length, and, like Yoder, Hauerwas wants to insist that the pacifism in mind is not politically disengaged: the political character of Matthew's gospel message is repeatedly underlined. In a now-familiar pattern, with the pacifism and the political comes the gospel priority for the poor. "The poor you will always have with you" (Matt 26:11) is uncomfortable for Hauerwas, at least what Christians often do with it is, so he spends some time on this text. He tells us that "the poor that we will always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given" (215). Not all will be convinced that Hauerwas's priorities are the natural priorities of Matthew.

The commentary is the work of one capable of acute observation and profound thought. At his best Hauerwas shows some real sensitivity to Matthew's story-telling technique, but this is a perspective that is not consistently maintained. Hauerwas is far from ignorant of first-century background, but one cannot avoid the impression that a certain amount of dehistoricizing takes place with his approach. Matthew's distinctive voice is inevitably diluted in favor of a wider New Testament voice and beyond that a mainstream Christian voice.

There will be those who find in this commentary a breath of fresh air. There is certainly much to challenge and inspire Christian readers. But this reader is not confident that reading Matthew in this way—immediately in the light of Christian faith—allows enough room for the possibility of Matthew saying something to us that is not already in our Christian repertoire.