



TEXTS IN DIALOGUE

REFLECTIONS ON READING MATTHEW 6:19-34

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1. Introduction

How do I speak about a text that I can't read? I can't read the Gospel text because I don't read Greek. And if I don't read Greek I am like a man trying to drive a car through thick fog: I see glimpses of scenery, vague outlines of buildings, something moving ahead, but all the time I know I can't really see what is there. So I feel insecure, and inadequate, because I can't see the text clearly. When I read this text of Matthew I am truly – as the apostle Paul so memorably put it (1 Corinthians 13:12) – a person 'seeing through a glass, darkly'.

So I have to read the Matthew text in translation – perhaps like many of you. We are all then in the same impoverished position, 'seeing through a glass, darkly'. In a sense this is true – whatever our language skills – whenever we read the Hebrew Bible or the Greek scriptures, it's like standing at the edge of a lake gazing into the water, trying to make out, to interpret, what lies beneath the surface: there are shapes, there is movement, we might have been told what's there, but what are we really seeing?

When we read in translation we sense that – I am going to change the metaphor again, I'm mirroring the Gospel's style of narrative – we read as if through a veil. We face the text; the text faces us, veiled in translation, and through the particular translation that we use, we are reading an interpretation. We know that with another translation we would see something different. Through the veil of translation we see the outlines of the face of the text: there's the eyes, the nose, a mouth ... but is it breathing? Is the text still alive? That's what we really want to know.

2. Authority

The verses we are studying come, as you know, within a larger context. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew are presented as a continuous speech by Jesus – there's no conversation, there's no discussion, there's no dialogue between the speaker and his audience. The words come literally from 'on high' – they are delivered, we read, from the top of a hill. Thus: 'the sermon on the mount'. The hilltop is pragmatic of course – Jesus's words can be heard better from there – but we sense the symbolism as well. Jesus chooses to enact revelation from on high – but without Sinai's supernatural effects, the thunder and lightning and clouds of darkness: just an uninterrupted flow of words, ideas, metaphors, analogies, moral teachings, poetry, prayer, flowing down to the listeners. And all of it delivered with a rhetorical forcefulness that survives even in translation. And what is

striking is that the whole speech is filled with a relentless certainty. There are questions asked – but no doubts about the answers given. We are in the presence of a powerful – perhaps frightening? – exhibition of knowingness.

The speaker speaks as if he is revealing *how things are*: he is not speaking provisionally, hesitantly, he is not weighing up multiple possibilities. He is speaking in a manner that is the antithesis of what the poet John Keats called ‘Negative Capability’: ‘when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason ...’ For Keats this receptivity to the not-yet-known, the still-to-be-discovered, keeps a person open to the mystery of who we are, and the strangeness of the world we inhabit. Shakespeare’s genius as a writer, thought Keats, lay in showing us how not everything is known in advance, that there is no single higher-order truth that we can rely on. But the writer of this Gospel has quite other designs on his listeners. He wants to convey, above all, Jesus’s authority – that here is a man who *knows*. Who knows the truth.

This is the feeling we have when we read the text. But it is also there in the content. Look how Matthew ends chapter 7: he says that when Jesus had finished speaking the people were astounded because he had taught, unlike their regular teachers, with ‘*exousian*’ – ‘authority’ (Matthew 7:29). The word comes another five times in this Gospel, and 50 more times within the New Testament: Authority. Is this repetition significant? Why do these texts need to keep reminding us about the *authority / exousian* of the speaker?

As far as I’m aware, the Hebrew Bible doesn’t have a word for ‘authority’. It never needs to insist on its own authority. Or the authority of any of its characters. Whereas the Hebrew Bible is characterised by the co-existence of multiple points of view (sometimes – as in Ecclesiastes – contradictory points of view within the same book), what is striking for me as a Jewish reader of Matthew is the absence of ambiguity and this Judaic quality of calling into question the truths that the text articulates.

3. Either / or – so choose!

I suppose that if the writer of Matthew thinks he is living in end times, he might believe the time for questions is over. Much more is at stake. The end is beckoning. Time is in short supply. And if time is of the essence, then it’s time to choose. It’s God *or* materialism – so forget your material needs, where you are always concerned about the possibility of loss. Choose another kind of treasure – spiritual treasure (verses 19-21) – which you cannot lose. You cannot serve two sources of authority, so you have to choose what you are going to put your trust in: it’s God *or* Mammon, God *or* Money (verse 24).

We are in a different world here from Ecclesiastes : ‘a time to pull down *and* a time to build up ... a time to weep *and* a time to laugh ... a time to keep *and* a time to throw away ...’ There’s time for everything, says Ecclesiastes. Not for Matthew. His message is: you have to choose. And when you choose don’t think of your daily needs. Food, drink? (verse 25/31) – forget about these needs. God will provide, as He does for the birds. Clothes? (verse 25/31) – look how the land is covered in lilies, nature testifies to God’s providence, and you too will be recipients of this same largess. When you choose, you can *either* focus on your daily needs *or* you can focus on God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness and justice (verse 33). It’s a choice which – in Matthew’s view – is no choice. One way of living and thinking leads to a life of anxiety – wondering how you are going to get your needs met. But the other choice, says Matthew’s Jesus, the one you need to take, is the choice to concentrate on God’s kingdom – and then all will be well, you’ll be given what you need.

It's a powerful message, a counter-intuitive message – and the writer uses all his literary skills to convince you of its reality. The analogies and similes are taken from everyday life – the birds, the flowers – and he draws too on the people's folk memory: 'Solomon in all his splendour was never clothed like this' (verse 29): that's an idiosyncratic twist on the mythology around Solomon – who was known mostly for his banquets rather than his *haute couture*.

4. Urgency – and Doubt?

But Matthew is not only concerned about the end times, when choices have to be made. The urgency in the text – and the repeated claims around Jesus's authority – is also evidence for a writer trying to shape for his followers a distinctive message in opposition to the established Jewish community. We hear a writer trying to convince his audience that this message represents the true Jewish way – and that Jesus is Torah incarnate, as it were. It's not – in the spirit of Ecclesiastes and the discussions of the Talmud – that there's a value in one kind of rabbinic authority and a value in another kind of rabbinic authority. No, the urgent question is: *who represents authentic Jewish authority now?*

Is a psychoanalytic perspective relevant here? One of the things I've learnt over the years in my consulting room is that the greater the urgency with which someone tries to convince me about something – how much they love their partner, for example – the more a secret (or unconscious) doubt about it is being denied. So when I read Matthew's repeated claims about Jesus's unique authority, or his urging people not to be anxious, not to question where their basic needs will come from, not to worry about tomorrow (verses 30-34) – when I hear his insistence on all this, I become a bit suspicious. Matthew wants it to be as simple as 'God will provide and all you have to do is learn to be dependent'. But does he secretly wonder if it is quite as simple as that? See how he suddenly accuses his listeners of being 'you of little faith' (verse 30). Is this the moment when we catch sight of a repressed doubt being projected onto Jesus's audience, Matthew's audience? Or is it a moment of realism about the limitations of what people can believe?

Whatever you think of that, we have in these verses the continuation of a familiar Biblical theme – it starts with the Israelites in the desert who had to undergo a training in dependence on God's daily miracle of manna and quail. But the Hebrew scriptures show how the people could never manage the faith required. The Torah texts are filled with the complaints and rebellions and doubts of a people for whom dependence on an unseen divinity stretched their faithfulness to breaking point.

And the Talmud has many examples of rabbis trying to persuade people to move beyond their natural human anxieties, towards greater faith in a God who provides. For example, in a striking parallel to our text, one of Matthew's contemporaries, the first century Rabbi Eleazar of Hyrcanus, is quoted as saying: "Whoever has bread in his basket and asks: 'What shall I eat tomorrow?', is none other than those of little faith (*qatnei emunah*)". (*Sotah* 48b)

The problems of religious trust – of what to trust, of who to trust, of when to trust – are, I think, an inevitable part of the religious territory we inhabit as Jews or Christians. Perhaps it is in our doubts and our insecurities around this theme – rather than in our certainties – that we can really meet?

Rabbinic and Biblical passages that mirror the Matthew text

Matthew 6:19-21

The Assyrian king Monobaz, who converted to Judaism in the year 36 C.E. and gave aid to the Jewish rebels against the Roman Empire, was rebuked by his brothers for squandering money. He replied: 'My fathers gathered treasures below but I am storing up above ... My fathers stored in a place which can be tampered with, but I have stored in a place which cannot be tampered with ... My fathers gathered treasures in this world, I have gathered treasures for the world to come ...' (Baba Batra 11a)

6:22-23

The commandment [*mitzvah*] is a lamp, the teaching [*torah*] is a lamp ... (Proverbs 6:23)

Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai [1st century] said to his disciples: 'Go out and see the right course a person should adopt. R. Eleazar [ben Hyracanus] said: A good / kindly eye [*ayin tovah*] ... He said to his disciples: 'Go out and see the wrong course a person should avoid. Rabbi Eleazar said: An evil eye [*ayin ra'ah*] ... ' (*Ethics of the Fathers / Pirke Avot* 2:13/14).

A good eye and a humble spirit and a lowly soul – the person who possesses these are the disciples of Abraham our father. (*Pirke Avot* 5:19)

Rabbi Joshua said: The evil eye and an evil nature and the hatred of humankind put a person out of this world. (*Pirke Avot* 2:11)

6:24

There is no rabbinic parallel to this verse but there is a contemporary parallel in the Greek-Jewish writer Philo: 'It is not possible for the love of the world to coexist with the love of God.' (Fragments II:64)

6:25-27

R. Shimon ben Eleazar [using the same kind of a *fortiori* argument as Jesus]: 'Have you ever seen an animal or a bird practicing a craft? Yet they are provided for without any effort on their part, although they were not created to serve my Maker. But I was created to serve my Maker. How much more might not I be provided for without any effort on my part?' (*Mishnah, Kiddushin* 4:14)

R. Shimon ben Yochai: 'Not even a bird perishes without the will of heaven, how much less the son of man [ie. 'me']' (midrash: *Genesis Rabbah* 79:6)

6:28-30

As for man, his days are as grass, as the flower of the field, so shall he flourish ... (Psalm 103:15)

A person who has what he will eat today and says, 'What shall I eat tomorrow?', behold, this person lacks faith (*Mekilta Exodus* 16:4)

And Moses said to him: 'Let no person leave of it [the manna] till the morning.' However they did not listen to Moses – these were those of little faith amongst the Israelites". (*Mekilta Exodus* 16:9)

6:34

Do not worry about tomorrow's trouble, for you do not know what the day will bring. (Proverbs 27:1)

Do not trouble about tomorrow's trouble, for you do not know what the day brings forth. Perhaps tomorrow a person alive today will not exist, and they will be found to have troubled themselves about a world they are no longer part of. (*Sanhedrin* 100b)

I am that I am (Exodus3:14) – The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: 'Go and say to Israel: I was with you when you were serving the other kingdoms [ie. Babylon and Rome]'. Moses said to God: 'Lord of the Universe, sufficient is the trouble / evil at whatever time it comes'. Thereupon the Holy One said to Moses: 'Go and tell them, ***I am*** has sent me to you ...' (*Berachot* 9b)