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How to Interpret the Scriptures according to Matthew

Matthew's Gospel maintains that people who do not know the Scriptures have no knowledge of the things of God. Note how Jesus upbraids the religious leaders of Israel:

“Have you not read . . . ?” (12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31)

“Have you never read . . . ?” (21:16, 42)

See also 9:13; 12:7; 22:29, 43; 26:31.

It is possible, however, to “know” the Scriptures in some sense without truly understanding them:

The religious leaders do possess an academic understanding of Scripture (2:3–6).

Even Satan is able to quote Scripture, albeit with perverse interpretation (4:6).

What is important, then, is to know how to interpret Scripture.

Matthew's Questionable Exegetical Tendencies

Matthew himself does not always interpret Scripture in ways acceptable to scholars today. He quotes verses sometimes from the Septuagint, sometimes from the Hebrew, and sometimes from a

“mixed text” of his own rendering. He creates “mosaic quotations” by joining verses that come from different sources. He adds or changes words in order to bring out the intended meaning. He quotes verses without any consideration for the original context. An example is Matthew 2:6:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

The text is basically from the Septuagint, but the word “rulers” in line 2 comes from the Hebrew (and a textual variant at that). Lines 1–3 are from Micah 5:2, and line 4 is from 2 Samuel 5:2. Matthew adds the words “by no means” in line 2, reversing the original sense of both the Septuagint and Hebrew. In their original context, it is unlikely that either the passage from Micah or that from 2 Samuel was intended to be a prophecy concerning the Messiah (cf. Matt. 2:4–6 with John 7:27).

The Christological Key

The key to interpreting Scripture for Matthew is recognizing that all Scripture is fulfilled in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17).

Twelve “fulfillment citations” (1:22–23; 2:5–6, 15, 17–18, 23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14–15, 35; 21:4–5; 27:9–10).

In emphasizing the fulfillment of Scripture by Jesus, Matthew expresses the theological conviction that the hopes of Israel are realized in him. Jesus is:

the Davidic Messiah

the Isaianic Servant

the Danielic Son of Man

the Greater Moses

Matthew’s citations and adaptations of Scripture do not provide convincing “proof” that Jesus is who Matthew believes him to be. Rather, the revelation of God in Christ sheds light on the Scriptures and reveals their true intent and meaning.