

**Davies, M 1993 — Matthew (Readings: A new Biblical commentary)**

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**Reviewer: Prof H J Bernard Combrink**

This commentary, as well the one on the Gospel of John by MWG Stibbe in the same series, is really ground-breaking in its consistent implementation of reader response criticism in a commentary. In the introduction Davies gives a very clear exposition of what such an approach entails. She underlines the fact that every reader's unique background and reading experience plays a role in the reading of a text. As readers furthermore belong to interpretive communities, the author lays her own cards on the table as a British female academic, member of the Anglican church, member of the Labour Party, et cetera. Utilizing insights of W Iser she draws attention to the fact that texts themselves are indeterminate although the text prestructures the response of the implied reader. She also discusses the rhetorical strategies used by Matthew to determine its readers' response. On page 29 the author gives an outline of the implied reader of the Gospel of Matthew as created in this manner. Through the selection and actualisation by real readers the text is then made determinate. Nevertheless, the commentator tries to

make sense of the Gospel of Matthew on its own terms as an expression of the theological and ethical practices of its community. She also admits to being challenged and surprised herself as a reader by the text.

The author treats the Gospel of Matthew as in some sense a historical narrative, yet different from modern historical narratives. The commentary then follows the narrative unit by unit, and not verse by verse. The main emphasis on reading the text of the narrative results in there being no detailed discussion of synoptic parallels, although mention is often made of the fact that a specific section is without parallel in Mark or Luke, while often only a fleeting remark is made about the differences. In a very condensed manner she therefore succeeds in drawing attention to the synoptic differences, without going into the detail of the other Gospels. It is very clear that for Davies the main emphasis is on reading Matthew.

It is interesting that a tension between the implied reader and modern readers becomes apparent at times. In discussing the fulfilment citations, the author of the commentary points out that modern readers have difficulties in following the force of the rhetoric in the same way as the implied reader was supposed to. Often she would draw attention to the similarities but also the differences in the reactions of first-century and modern readers.

In the case of the miracles, she underlines the differences in the reactions between the original and the modern readers. She goes further, however, to point to the opportunities for modern readers which would be beyond the wildest dreams of first-century Christians. At the same time she is also unmasking contemporary cynicism towards the poor, callousness towards the ill and the ruthless practices of some Western pharmaceutical companies. In the case of Matthew 23 she regards the speech in the story as being addressed to the scribes and Pharisees, whereas in the narrative it is addressed to the Christian readers. There is also of course the possibility that even in the story, Jesus' speech in Matthew 23 makes use of the rhetorical device, the apostrophe, as a highly effective manner of addressing the implied audience in an indirect manner.

Davies acknowledges the importance of the Jewish Scripture as a background to the interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, and she is also sensitive to the fact that the mission discourse in chapter 10 deals not only with a mission to Israel alone, but also implies a mission to the Gentiles. Yet the important issue of the relation between Israel and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew is never treated adequately, as is evident from her silence on the implications of the interpretation of 'all the nations' in 28:19.

The commentary is highly recommended as a welcome and helpful guide to reading Matthew as claimed by the series. The author should also be congratulated on her self-restraint in keeping the reading of a long book like Matthew within reasonable limits. It is enhanced by an index of Scriptural references as well as lists of quotations in Matthew from Scripture in varying degrees of conformity to the Septuagint. The reader using this volume as a guide to reading the Gospel of Matthew, will without doubt be richly rewarded.

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