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The Crowds in the 'Gospel of Matthew'

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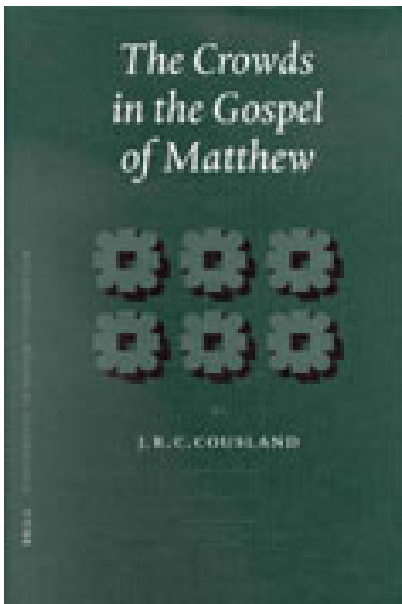
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Cousland, J. R. C.

The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew

Supplements to Novum Testamentum 102

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Among the central issues in the study of the Gospel of Matthew is how its relationship to first-century Judaism is to be conceived. Unlike several recent attempts to illuminate this problem from sociological or historical vantage points, this book, which began as a doctoral thesis under Ronald Piper at the University of St. Andrews (1992), engages it through a narrative- and redaction-critical study. The bulk of the book is devoted to an analysis of Matthew's crowds as a literary construct, but Cousland is particularly interested in the social-historical implications of that analysis. The result is a reconstruction that mediates between those who see in Matthew a Christian Judaism and those who find in it indications of a past break with Judaism: Matthew has decisively broken with the Pharisaic leadership of "formative Judaism" but not with the Jewish people as a whole.

The first chapter outlines the central problem the book will address: the "Jekyll and Hyde" (8) dimension of Matthew's crowds. Like the disciples, they are repeatedly described as "following" Jesus and manifest a number of apparently favorable reactions to him. At the same time, they are explicitly contrasted with the disciples as being entirely without understanding (Matt 13). More oddly, the latter evaluation comes soon after the crowds, in explicit contrast with the Pharisees, exhibit their first inkling of Jesus' messianic status (12:23). In fact, the crowds will go on to acclaim Jesus as both Son of

David and prophet at the “triumphal entry,” only to then emerge abruptly as key participants in his arrest and execution. Cousland seeks to replace the facile emphasis on one or another of these features, which characterizes past treatments, with a comprehensive study that makes sense of the ambivalence in terms of Matthew’s literary aims.

He begins in part 2 (chs. 2–4) with the issue of the crowds’ identity. That Matthew’s crowds serve as a distinct corporate character rather than a series of disparate, local crowds is suggested by his distinctive handling of them, particularly vis-à-vis Mark, his chief source (ch. 2). In contrast to Mark’s variegated terminology, *ochlos* “is virtually the only word” used of them by Matthew (39). More importantly, those traits that define the crowds *qua* crowds in Mark (“gathering,” “crushing,” “milling about,” etc.) have been largely excised in favor of more stylized characterizations (e.g., “following” Jesus, considering Jesus and the Baptist as prophets). Particularly through repetitive use of these latter, Matthew has effectively endowed the crowds with “a distinctive and unified *persona*” analogous to that of a Greek chorus (45). Chapter 3 argues that this corporate character is Jewish; the geographical dimensions of the text, in fact, suggest that its constituents have come from various regions of an idealized (Davidic) Eretz Israel.

Matthew’s interest in the crowds, in short, is less “historical or mimetic” than “literary and theological” (49ff.). They represent one constituent of Israel, with the Jewish leaders, from whom Matthew scrupulously distinguishes them, as the other (ch. 4). This distinction is fundamental to “Matthew’s theologizing of the crowds” and likely originated from the description of them as “sheep without a shepherd” in Mark 6:34, read in light of the pastoral imagery used in the Jewish scriptures (93). Ezekiel 34, which exemplifies the common use of such imagery to depict Israel’s suffering at the hands of corrupt leadership, was probably especially influential. In any event, this metaphor “becomes programmatic for Matthew’s portrayal of the crowds,” who “are no longer simply the fortunate bystanders to Jesus’ public ministry,” as in Mark. In Matthew’s hands, they have become, at the same time, “the present exemplars of the covenant people of God, who . . . have suffered from bad leadership and await divine intervention” (98).

Part 3 (chs. 5–8), which examines the “favourable” aspects of the crowds’ characterization, develops this point extensively. The crowds, as “lost sheep,” are the objects of the ministry undertaken by Jesus and continued by his disciples (ch. 5). As such, their “chief trait” emerges as “overwhelming need,” and “the most fundamental element” of Jesus’ ministry to them is healing (122). Their “following” of Jesus arises simply from “instinctive” need; they are thus fundamentally different from the disciples, whose following, initiated by Jesus’ explicit calls, is attended by understanding, radical

commitment, and active participation in (not passive reception of) Jesus' ministry (ch. 7). The crowds thus fall between the Jewish leaders' rejection and the disciples' commitment in a spectrum of possible responses to Jesus. Furthermore, Matthew charts "a clear progression" toward the disciples on the part of the crowds: "from amazement with the miracles (9:33) to an interest in the doer of the miracles (12:23)," and from pondering (12:23) to positive declaration (21:9) of his status as "the Son of David" (141ff.; cf. ch. 8).

Part 4 (chs. 9–11) analyzes their "unfavourable" dimensions. Essentially, this amounts to an analysis of their role in the climactic events in Jerusalem—their acclamation, ironically, of Jesus as prophet at the "triumphal entry" (ch. 9) and their part in the passion narrative (ch. 10)—plus the pessimistic evaluation of them registered in Matt 13 (ch. 11). The triumphal entry emerges as "a pivotal hinge point within the gospel narrative" (216). Cousland detects, in the shift from the crowds' climactic acclamation of Jesus as "Son of David" (21:9) to the subsequent designation "prophet" (21:11), a transition from the "lost sheep" paradigm that has thus far controlled their depiction of the *topos* of the "violent fate of the prophets" (225). The identification of Jesus as prophet invokes a different model that will dominate the remainder of the narrative, framing the relationship between Jesus and Jerusalem: Jesus will offer a prophetic denunciation of Jerusalem and its temple, while Jerusalem (including the crowds) will play its part as prophet-killer. The crowds' sudden about-face, therefore, signals not the introduction of a distinct Jerusalem crowd but a realignment of the "lost sheep" with the wicked shepherds to play out the decisive scene in Matthew's salvation-historical drama. While Matthew explains this abrupt turnaround, in part, with reference to the persuasiveness of the Jewish leaders (27:20), the larger sequence of events, including the crowds' seemingly inexplicable participation in the arrest of Jesus, is cast, rather chillingly, with an air of divine inevitability: "all of this has taken place," regardless, "so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled" (26:56). In any event, once the crowds take up the Jewish leaders' cause, the two distinct corporate characters merge in 27:25 to accept, as "the whole people" (*pas ho laos*), responsibility for Jesus' death.

Chapter 11 addresses the starkly pessimistic assessment of the crowds in Matt 13, which "poses serious problems for interpreting the crowds" (257ff.), given their basically sympathetic portrayal as lost sheep—and indeed, their apparent progress—elsewhere prior to the passion narrative. Cousland finds the best solution to this apparent anomaly by positing, at this point in the narrative, a particularly forceful intrusion of extratextual referents from Matthew's social world into his story world. Matthew's primary concern here is not "the crowds" who follow Jesus in the story but those for whom the latter are generally "transparent": the Jewish masses who have failed to join Matthew's community.

This issue of the crowds' reflection of social realities from the author's world is taken up at length in the final chapter. Much like those at the narrative level, the "transparent crowds" are taken to be the Jewish people "poised midway between two groups, except now the two groups are the church and emergent Pharisaism" (276; cf. "emergent rabbinat" [288]; "formative Judaism" [287]). As such, they "highlight Matthew's relationship to Judaism" (293). Juxtaposing the Vineyard parable, where the kingdom is transferred from the Jewish leaders to a new *ethnos*, with the harsh appraisal of the crowds' ability to understand the "mysteries of the kingdom" in the parables discourse, Cousland argues that Matthew portrays all Israel as "condemned," with his own community (including the fruits of its Gentile mission) being "the new people of God" (285). An important distinction, nonetheless, is drawn: while the kingdom has been taken away from the Jewish *leaders*, the *crowds* simply do not yet possess it, and may still. The upshot of all this is that Matthew has consciously divorced himself from "formative Judaism" but is nonetheless embroiled in a "custody battle" for the Jewish people (287), whose collective repentance he in fact anticipates.

Cousland has produced a solid analysis of a neglected "character" in Matthew's story and shed new light on other aspects of its narrative in the process. While readers will inevitably disagree in matters of detail—such as the extent to which the depiction of Jesus' ministry to the crowds was influenced by Ezek 34 in particular or whether the "therapeutic shepherd" was an "established topos" (120ff.)—the appeal to different controlling paradigms to explain the crowds' abrupt turnaround in the passion narrative is in the main quite illuminating. The weakest point of the analysis, to be sure, is the treatment of Matt 13. Particularly given the impression, developed over chapters 2–10, that Matthew has carefully and deliberately cultivated the crowds as an important "character" in his narrative, this reader was quite unprepared for Cousland's hasty retreat from the narrative world to dispense with this potential challenge to his schematic reading. Indeed, the ascription of the crowds' inability to understand, ultimately, God's will (13:11; cf. p. 253) seems quite a good fit with the narrative time, when they seemingly *must* participate in Jesus' execution "so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." Might not the passage serve simply to make it clear that, given his knowledge of the divinely scripted plan, Jesus (unlike, perhaps, the reader!) would not be caught off guard by the crowds' turnaround, even despite their apparent progress?

Cousland's delineation of the implications of this analysis for the question of Matthew's "*intra-* or *extra-muros*" status vis-à-vis Judaism (304), while suggestive in some respects, is somewhat less effective. His basic point that "Matthew has irrevocably broken with the leadership but not with the people as a whole" (304) would seem to be generally consistent with those who have understood the Gospel's trenchant attack on the Pharisees in terms of a struggle between Jewish groups: the hostility that an exclusivistic,

peripheral group feels toward a competitor that is becoming increasingly central (e.g., J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990]; A. Saladarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994]). Indeed, the competitive claim of superior leadership implicit in Matthew's "sheep without a shepherd" motif dovetails quite nicely with this scenario. Nonetheless, Cousland ultimately resists classifying Matthew within Judaism: Matthew itself "is *extramuros*," even if "very much focussed on those who are still *intramuros*" (304). This conclusion hangs largely on two hooks. The first is the interpretation of the fruit-producing *ethnos* referred to at the close of the Vineyard parable as contrasting with Israel as a whole. To be sure, many would interpret this difficult passage in this way, but Cousland's reading, which is alive to Matthew's specification of the chief priests and the Pharisees as the target of the parable, requires a subtle distinction between their and the crowds' relation to the kingdom that creates—but does not address—a new problem: In what sense was the kingdom already possessed by Israel's leaders but not its people? More fundamental is an apparent terminological slide from "emergent rabbinic" and "formative Judaism" to, simply, "Judaism." The terms are not clearly defined relative to one another, but Cousland seems to use them interchangeably, thus implying an outright identification of "Judaism" with rabbinic leadership that is problematic even in the decreasingly diverse post-70 C.E. situation. Would *any* group that challenged the rabbis' leadership at this time have ceased, thereby, to be "Jewish"? In any event, the absence of any discussion of what, empirically, the Matthean group's "conscious dissociat[ion of] itself from formative Judaism" (287) entails leaves Cousland's argument too abstract to be particularly helpful. How did they interpret the Torah, and what impact did their interpretation have on the non-Jews who joined their group? From the other side: If Matthew is "standing outside, trying to pull [the Jewish people] out of the building" (304), what aspects of their "Jewishness" would they be required to relinquish at the door?

This is an illuminating study that significantly advances the discussion of the crowds' role in Matthew, and thus makes an important contribution to the study of Matthew's narrative more generally. For those interested in the specific question of Matthew's relationship to Judaism, this study furnishes, if not a wholly compelling statement, some raw materials that should prove useful for future discussion. It is highly recommended to all readers of Matthew.