

Who Do I Say That I Am? The Great Declaration (Matthew 28:16-20, Exodus 3:1-15)

Turn to Matthew 28. Matthew does a surprising thing with the resurrection of Jesus: he makes it incomplete, he does not want the resurrection to stand alone. Our Lord's resurrection was a huge and wonderful event by itself, and Matthew cares about that. But for Matthew, on its own it's only half the story. Matthew joins the resurrection of Jesus to the deity of Jesus.

For Matthew, the resurrection was when the Lord revealed his deity to the disciples, and Matthew writes the resurrection story to show us this. By "deity" I mean that Jesus was God: fully human and also fully God. The disciples already knew that he was the Christ, but they did not know he was God until the end of Matthew.

Matthew ties resurrection and deity together in two steps. Firstly, he tells us the story of Jesus's resurrection in a way that keeps us waiting for something more. Secondly, he uses Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3 to show us that Jesus on the mountain is just like God on the mountain.

Matthew keeps telling us about the risen Jesus meeting the disciples in Galilee. Remember that the crucifixion and resurrection happened in Jerusalem. Right after the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples, "After I am raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." In other words, "Once I'm raised, you head for Galilee. We will meet there." Jesus said that Thursday evening.

When the angel appeared to the women on Easter Sunday morning, he told them, "Go quickly to the disciples, and tell them that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and he's going ahead of them to Galilee – there they will see him" (28:7). A few verses later, on the way to tell the disciples, those women met Jesus, and Jesus told them, "Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee – there they will see me."

In Matthew, the disciples don't see the risen Jesus at all until that final meeting on the Galilee mountain. The women see Jesus, but not the disciples. Luke and John don't tell the story that way. In Luke and John, the disciples see Jesus in Jerusalem. Matthew mostly likely knows about that, but he's teaching us something else, and today we will let Matthew have his say.

Let's read our text:

"The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" (Matthew 28:16-20, NIV).

How Shall They Bring in the Nations?

In Matthew, Jesus called the apostles differently than he called his other followers. The followers as a whole were to be a family whose good lives caught the world's attention. The family of followers was to be salt and light.

But the apostles were different, they were workers sent into the Lord's harvest. The apostles carried on the preaching that John the Baptist began and Jesus continued. Jesus spoke these final words to the apostles, which means that although we all need to hear this, Jesus says it to the workers he sent into his harvest fields.

“Make disciples of all the nations,” says Jesus, “by baptizing them correctly and teaching them whose commands to obey” (my paraphrase). Jesus does not talk about evangelism or missionary work, and he does not mention the gospel. Jesus tells the apostles how to bring in the Gentiles. He tells them how to baptize Gentiles, and whose commands to teach them after that.

The emphasis here is not on “go,” as in “go far away.” Jesus said this to the apostles in Galilee, and Galilee was full of Gentiles. The Gentile town of Sepphoris was only 5 km from Nazareth, and much larger than Nazareth. Matthew is the only Gospel written to Jewish churches. Every Jewish congregation in the Roman world was surrounded by Gentiles. “Go and make disciples of the nations” does not in itself send anyone very far, though the Lord has sent some far away.

The most startling and emphatic part of our text is the trinitarian name of God: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” These words declare the Trinity more clearly than anything else in the New Testament. That name is a huge surprise. Jesus has a new understanding of who God is and how to name him, and the apostles must pass this on.

[This baptism is not much different than what Peter preached at Pentecost – “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus the Son. The Father will forgive your sins, and you'll receive the Holy Spirit.]

Here's a big question in the early church: Whose commands should Gentile believers obey? Must Gentiles obey the commands of Moses? There was a lot of turmoil about this. Jesus was clear in Matthew 28: baptize them and teach them to obey my commands. Not Moses's commands, just the Lord's commands.

The Lord already said in Matthew 5 that he came not to destroy the law of Moses, but to fulfill it. When we obey Jesus, we are obeying the fulfillment of the commands of Moses. That's why the Gentiles need obey only the commands of Jesus.

But how to bring in the nations is only one part of our Scripture. To understand rest we need to take a detour into how the Gospel writers used the Old Testament.

A Detour: How the Gospel Writers Use the Old Testament

Gospel writers make clear reference to the Old Testament without saying so. They want us the readers to connect their story of Jesus to the Old Testament, but often they do this without quoting or naming the Old Testament in any direct way. They rely on us seeing the obvious similarities between an Old Testament passage and the particular Gospel story they tell.

Here's an example. Matthew 3 tells us that John the Baptist wore a cloak of camel hair and a leather belt, and he ate locusts and wild honey. For years I took this to mean that John was a wilderness man, which was interesting, but do John's food and clothes even matter?

Eventually I learned that 2 Kings 1 described Elijah much like this, and that Malachi 4 prophesied that in the last days Elijah would return. Matthew was telling us that John the Baptist was the Elijah that Malachi predicted. But Matthew did not quote 2 Kings or Malachi, or mention "Elijah." I missed this because I did not know the Old Testament.

Matthew assumes we know the Scripture and can see the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist on our own. Matthew thinks this is obvious. Gospel writers often make clear reference to the Old Testament without saying so. Unfortunately we don't read the Old Testament that much, so we stay in the dark.

The Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem works the same way. Zechariah 9 predicts that Jerusalem's messianic king will come into the city lowly and humble, and riding on a donkey. The Gospels tell us that Jesus made definite arrangements to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus carefully planned his fulfillment of Zechariah 9.

By entering Jerusalem this way, Jesus used Zechariah's prophecy to tell Jerusalem that he was Israel's messianic king. But he did not explain this or say one word about Zechariah's prophecy. He announced himself only by his actions, and gave them as much time as they needed to figure this out from the Old Testament.

We know what Jesus was doing by riding in on a donkey because Matthew and John quote Zechariah 9:9 to explain Jesus. Mark and Luke, on the other hand, do not mention Zechariah's prophecy at all. If we had only Mark and Luke, how long would it take to figure out that Jesus was deliberately fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy? Who reads Zechariah carefully? Not many.

Mark and Luke know that in the triumphal entry Jesus fulfills Zechariah's prophecy, and they tell us the story to make that clear. They think it's obvious. They assume we know the Scripture and will see this for ourselves. Let us carry this to Jesus on the mountain at the end of Matthew.

Jesus, in his final mountain appearance with the eleven, deliberately repeats how God appeared to Moses on Mt Sinai. As with riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus does this to show who he is, but like the triumphal entry, he says nothing about the Old Testament.

The parallels between Exodus 3 and Matthew 28 show us that here at the end of Matthew, Jesus reveals his deity by acting like God on Mt Sinai. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus asked the disciples who others said he was, and then asked them who they said he was. But Jesus did not tell them who he said he was.

Now at the end of Matthew, Jesus tells the apostles and all disciples who he really is. When we worship Christ and obey his commands, we serve the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. But he never says this in so many words. He simply acts like God on Mt. Sinai (“Horeb” in Ex 3).

To call Matthew’s ending the great commission misses the central truth. These five verses are the great declaration. Jesus declares himself, and that’s what Matthew wants to show us.

[In “The Great Commission as the Climax of Matthew’s Mountain Scenes,” Trent Rogers builds on the Old Testament view of mountains, specifically that mountains were considered places of worship.]

Mountains in the Bible

In the Old Testament, mountains were always seen as places of worship. Mt. Sinai is the most important mountain in the Old Testament, and Exodus tells us two stories about Mt. Sinai. On that mountain Moses saw the burning bush, where he met God and God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt. And then perhaps a year later, Moses brought Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, right back to Mt. Sinai. There God covenanted with Israel and gave Israel his commands and laws.

Matthew was written for Jewish believers. The apostles meet Jesus on a mountain, and worship him there. That will not have been lost on Matthew’s readers. Jesus being worshipped on a mountain and speaking there was telling them and us that Jesus speaks as God.

Moses did not speak to Israel from the mountain, God spoke to Moses from the mountain. In the same way, Jesus speaks to his disciples on the mountain; the apostles are like Moses. Matthew wants us to hear a clear echo of Exodus 3. Here are the specifics, nine parallels between Exodus 3:1-15 and Matthew 28:16-20.

Nine Parallels between Exodus 3 and Matthew 28

(1) Both went the mountain to see something remarkable: Moses to see the burning bush, which turned out to be meeting God (Exod 3:1-3). The disciples went to the mountain to see the risen Jesus, which turned out to be meeting God (Matt 26:32; 28:7, 10, 16).

(2) Both worshipped on the mountain. Moses worshipped Yahweh (took off his shoes and hid his face), and God told Moses that all Israel would worship him at that mountain; the disciples worshipped Jesus (Ex 3:5-6; Mt 28:17).

(3) This is a contrast: Yahweh said to Moses, “do not come any closer.” But when some of the disciples doubted, Jesus came toward them (Ex 3:5; Mt 28:18). In Jesus, God comes close to us.

(4) God and Jesus both introduce themselves as God. God said to Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Jesus said to the apostles, “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” In other words, “I now wear the cloak of Almighty God, because he put it on me.”

(5) Both Scriptures stress the special Name of God: God told Moses the Name which Moses would bring to Israel: “I AM WHO I AM”; Jesus told the eleven the revised name which they would bring to the nations: “The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Ex 3:14; Mt 28:19).

(6) Go and lead them: God told Moses how to lead Israel out of Egypt. Jesus told the apostles how to bring the nations into the kingdom. (Exodus 3:10-17; Mt 28:19-20).

(7) God and Jesus both gave commands: later in Exodus, from the same mountain, God gave Israel commands to obey; Jesus reminded the eleven of the commands he had previously given on a mountain (Ex 20 – 23; Mt 5 – 7; 28:20). Only here in Matthew does Jesus call his teaching “commands”: “teach them to obey everything I have *commanded* you.”

For years I wondered why Jesus calls his words “commands” here but not anywhere else in Matthew. Jesus calls his teachings “commands” here as another pointer, to make sure we understand that he is now the Exodus God who gives commands. The Gentiles do not obey the commands of Moses, they obey the commands of Jesus, whose commands fulfill the law.

(8) I will be with you: God promised to be with Moses; Jesus promised to be with the disciples (Ex 3:12; Mt 28:20). This parallel is simple to describe, but carries as much theological weight as any of the others. An essential trait of our God is his unfailing presence with his people; now so also Jesus.

(9) Baptism and then commands. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul says that Israel crossing the Red Sea was her baptism. Shortly after that God used Moses to give them his commands to obey. Jesus told the disciples to baptize the nations and teach them to obey his commands (Ex 14-23; Mt 28:19-20).

Seen together these nine similarities tell us to compare God on the wilderness mountain with the divine Jesus on the Galilee mountain.

Summary

Matthew wants us to meet the resurrected Jesus with the eyes of the eleven. To do this, Matthew will not let them see the resurrection until the Galilee mountain, not until they can also see his deity. Matthew is telling us that we have not properly seen or met the risen Jesus until we see him as the God of Mount Sinai, and worshipped him as that God, Father and Son and Spirit.

Earlier Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey; in this way Jesus used Zechariah 9 to tell Israel that he was their messianic king. Now he meets the disciples on the Galilee mountain; he uses Exodus 3 to show himself as the God of Mt. Sinai. When we worship Christ and obey his commands, we serve the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells the apostles how to bring in Gentiles, how to name God, and whose commands they should obey. But the bigger truth is what Jesus says about himself. He declares his deity and revises the name of God. It is his great declaration.

Israel was not called to do what God called Moses to do. In the same way, the Lord's words to the apostles were directed specifically to them.

Nevertheless these final words of Jesus shape *us*, and guide *our* lives. We have not really met the risen Jesus until we see him as the God of Mount Sinai, and worship him as that God, Father and Son and Spirit. We worship Jesus as we worship the one true God. We come to Jesus in baptism, and then we obey the Lord's commands. By this we show that we also have met the risen Jesus and heard his words. That Jesus is with us every day, and he's coming back to get us. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, we worship you as the true God on the mountain. You are Lord of heaven and earth, and you have full rights to our lives. Thank you that you are always with us, that your hand always guides us, and that your right hand holds us fast. You tell us, "Don't fear, I will help you, don't be afraid, I myself will help you." We are so glad to be your people. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.