Wim J.C. Weren


This volume represents the fruitful culmination of several decades of scholarship on the First Gospel by Wim Weren, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Tilburg University. The book consists of thirteen revised essays previously published between 1996 and 2011 and four newly written pieces (Introduction, Chapter Three, Chapter Five, Final Observations), all translated from Dutch by Mrs. Ineke Sijtsma of Tilburg University. The organization of the book is lucid and follows a clear pattern. The essays are clustered around three foci within Matthean studies: literary design (Part 1); intertextuality (Part 2); history and social setting (Part 3). Each opening essay of Parts 1–3 presents a new theoretical proposal of sorts, followed by a series of shorter studies that collectively illustrate, expand, and concretize the proposed model through actual exegesis. Given the organization of the book, and as is befitting a wide-ranging collection of exegetical studies, I offer a brief overview that highlights notable features of the three major sections rather than comment on each individual essay.

Part 1 of the volume opens with an innovative proposal on the literary configuration of Matthew’s macrostructure. The starting point for Weren’s proposal is the “final form” of the text, which he assumes to be a coherent literary whole that is particularly well-suited to the application of two synchronic methods: structural analysis and text semantics. However, what makes Weren’s use of these traditional methods distinctive is how he shifts attention away from the meaning of individual words, clauses, and sentences to the broader arrangement of textual units that comprise the Matthean text. To that end, the aim of his proposal is two-fold: (1) to establish the textual units, both major and minor, that constitute Matthew; and (2) to examine the intratexual relationships that connect these textual units. Weren identifies five key “hinge texts,” which have a three-fold structuring function throughout Matthew. At the first and broadest level, two hinge texts (Matt. 4:12–17 and 26:1–16, respectively) connect the Overture (Matt. 1:1–4:11) with the Corpus (Matt. 4:18–25:46) and the Corpus with the Finale (Matt. 26:17–28:20). At the second level, and within the Corpus itself, a third hinge text (Matt. 16:13–28) loops Jesus’ journey away from Jerusalem (Matt. 4:18–16:12) with his journey back to Jerusalem (Matt. 17:1–25:46). At the third and most atomic level, the remaining two hinge texts (Matt. 11:2–30 and 21:1–17, respectively) link smaller and even more refined textual units (Matt. 4:18–11:1 to 12:1–16:12 and Matt. 17:1–20:34 to 21:18–25:46, respectively). Together, these hinge texts not only “bring about a turning
point in the plot" (p. 30) but also strategically highlight the continuity of the Matthean narrative, connecting what follows with what precedes. In the remaining essays that make up Part 1, Weren offers a close examination of the structural and semantic relations of three recurring motifs throughout Matthew: children (Chapter Two), secret knowledge and divine revelation (Chapter Three), and the human body and life beyond death (Chapter Four).

In Part II Weren extends his central insight on textual units in his approach to intertextuality. He writes: “In my opinion, texts and pre-texts need to be textual units, at least the size of a pericope. This choice implies that an intertextual study does not lose itself in hypothetical reconstructions of written or oral precursors of the text under scrutiny ... . I emphasize this because, in an intertextual comparison, not separate words but structures, lines of meaning, and effects on the readers are central” (pp. 94–95). Applied to the Gospel of Matthew, Weren’s approach is predicated on the hypothesis that the “meaning and function of textual units from Matthew’s Gospel can be better understood if these textual units are related to other co-thematic or co-generic texts from the Hebrew Bible and/or the LXX and are considered to be transformations of these earlier texts from Scripture” (p. 100). The exegetical studies in Part II showcase Weren’s craftsmanship in constructing the complex intertextual relations between the Old Testament and Matthew. His analysis is meticulous and his conclusions are judicious. They are a competent demonstration of the model of intertextuality Weren advocates: an independent diachronic analysis of the pre-text (see Chapter Six); a synchronic analysis of similar literary genres and themes (see Chapters Eleven and Twelve); a rigorous cross-examination of the original language of the quoted source in the Greek or Hebrew Bible (see Chapters Nine and Ten); and a proper assessment of the degree of semantic transformation, which, over and against a strict diachronic approach characteristic of literary-historical studies, can only be determined when a text is compared to its pre-text (see Chapters Seven and Eight).

Part III of the volume turns to an extratextual examination of the history and social setting of Matthew. Here, Weren proposes a hypothetical model that represents the historical development of the Matthean community in three stages. Each stage corresponds with various sources and layers within the Matthean text. The first stage is pre-70 and refers to a period when “Christian Jews formed a robust group within the multi-form Judaism of the time” (p. 253). This phase represents the oldest layer of Matthew (i.e., any independent material that can be attributed to the so-called special M source). The second phase between 70–80 is still intra muros but marks a transition when “Christian Jews are forced into the margin within a Jewish community that was renewing itself” (p. 255). The corresponding textual layer consists of material