

## Inclusio in Matthew

By Neal Mattison

My purpose is not to teach from some text in the Gospel of Matthew but rather to explain a literary device that will help one to better interpret Matthew where this device is present. I will use the Book of Matthew to illustrate this concept. Once aware of this device, when it is observed in this and other books of the Bible, it will help one to better interpret that book in light of the author's meaning.

This literary device is only one of many which authors use to help their readers properly interpret their writing(s). The device I am referring to is called an "inclusio." That is, a section that begins and ends with the same meaning. Sometimes it is referred to as "bookends." The opening sentence or paragraph usually contains the same wording as the ending sentence or paragraph. While this device does not always appear as the first and last sentence, they are somewhere close to the beginning and end. Authors use this device to key in their readers that what follows in between has to do with what was explained through both bookends. Now, let's go to Matthew to see how he uses an inclusio.

Matthew 1:23 reads, "*BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,*" which translated means, "GOD WITH US" (NASB). Now if we flip to the very last two verses of Matthew 28:19-20 we read, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" Do you see Matthew's connection in the bookends? "God with us" in the first reference and "I [Jesus] am with you" in the last verse. So, we can conclude Matthew's book will have to do with what it will look and sound like to have God among humanity in the first century. If God came to the earth what would it be like? Read Matthew's Gospel and find out! It becomes very clear that Matthew wanted his readers to conclude Jesus is God and He will be with you if you are His follower! At the very close of the book, Matthew wants his readers to know that when God (Jesus) calls a person to Himself and commissions them that **He** will go with them. The wisdom, power, and presence that God gave to His people (Josh. 1:5), prophets (Jer.1:8), and Apostles (Matt. 28:19-20) He will also give to us. By application, one could run this concept through the Scriptures and see how extensive it is, memorize them, and live by the promises He gives so one does not live by their own strength but by God's!

Now with that in mind, let's look at another example in Matthew that falls within that framework (God among His people). The first text is Matt. 4:23: "*Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.*" And the second is 9:35: "*Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.*" The texts are so close, they are almost verbatim because Matthew doesn't want us to miss that when God stepped to earth among men in the first century He was seen and heard by man! He was teaching/proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease. Now when you look closely at the text between these two bookends, you see these two subjects—in chapter 5-7, Jesus is proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and in chapter 8-9 He is healing various diseases. In this section then Matthew reveals what happens when God comes to earth, we hear the wisdom of God, and we see the power of God in the man Jesus Christ.

There is another inclusio found in 5:3 and 5:10: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*"; "*Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" Look closely, what do both verses contain that are the same? Both contain, "blessed" and "the kingdom of heaven." If you read the verses in-between verse three and ten, all contain "blessed" but only verse three and ten contain the words "the kingdom of heaven."

Therefore, the inclusio is indicating that **all** the virtues which God produces in His disciples demonstrate they belong to the kingdom of heaven. These verses contain no commandments to be obeyed (they are not imperatives) — rather, they are declarations of the King to His earthly subjects who are promised nothing less than the King Himself in the age to come! So when God comes to earth as a man and calls a people to Himself, He produces these qualities which testify God is among them—they alone are truly blessed and are a part of God’s kingdom yet on earth. Do you see how this little section fits with the two larger inclusios?

I see another inclusio in the section of Matthew 5. The first bookend is in verse 20: “*For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven,*” and the last is in verse 48: “*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” Now while the sayings are not very close in wording, the meaning is. To have your righteousness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees (the most “holy” group of people in Christ’s day) is to be “*perfect*.” That is, as God is with you, as a follower of Christ, your life does not merely outwardly conform to the moral requirements of the law but you also live out the greater implications of the law from the heart. It is not just an outward “*thou shall not murder*” (5:21) but also you are not angry with hatred in your heart toward your brother, issuing verbal words of contempt or scorn (5:22). Not only do you not physically commit adultery (5:27) but by implication, you do not “*lust in your heart,*” thereby violating the greater extent of the law—and so forth, as Jesus continues to expound that His followers must have more than just an outward conformity to the law (as the Scribes and Pharisees) but an inward disposition that carries out the greater implications of the law. This is what it means to be “*perfect*” or have “*your righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees.*”

Another much more subtle “inclusio” occurs in the genealogy of Matthew which is easy to miss unless we read very carefully the names of the women. The only time women are mentioned in the genealogy, they are introduced by the phrase “*by Tamar*” (1:3), “*by Rahab*” (1:5), “*by Ruth*” (1:5), and “*by her* [who had been the wife—Bathsheba] *of Uriah* [or NIV’s, “*whose mother was*”].” By this, Matthew is signaling them out for special attention. We ought to ask why He is doing this. To answer that question, we must review our history of what these four women have in common. They were all **non-Jews**: Tamar, a Canaanite (Gen. 38:2, 6, 11, 13), was denied Judah’s son Shelah who was to raise up offspring to fulfill his levirate marriage obligations. While Er (38:7), Onan (38:8), and Judah (38:11) show total disregard for the promises given to Abraham, Tamar the Canaanite conceives (pun intended) a risky plan to “*propagate descendants of Abraham.*” Thus, “through her determination to have children, [she] secured for Judah the honor of fathering both David and the Savior of the world” (Wenham, p.365, 370, Word Biblical Commentary-Genesis). Rahab, the harlot of Jericho (Joshua 2:1), also receives honorable mention in the “*hall of faith*” (Heb.11:31). Ruth was a Moabitess (Ruth 1:4). Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:3) was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, the nation which was to be destroyed (Deut. 7:1, Joshua 1:4).

“In each case there were at least suspicions of some form of marital irregularity. [These four women] form an impressive precedent for Jesus’ birth of an unmarried mother from an obscure background” (R.T. France, p.79, Matthew commentary). Why the mention of these four “Gentile” women when Matthew could have left them out? The answer becomes clearer when we see Matthew quote Jesus’ great commission is to “***all the nations***” [ETHNE—the Greek term for “Gentiles”] (Matt.28:19) — not just Israel but the Gentiles as well. So, Matthew uses the bookends of Gentiles (the four non-Jewish women in the genealogy) in the beginning of the book and the word “all nations” (Gentiles) as the other bookend. R.T. France rightfully concludes this theme in Matthew as the final bookend when he states, “This then is the culmination of the theme we have noted throughout the Gospel, the calling of a people of God far wider than that of the Old Testament, in which membership is based not on race but on a relationship with God through His Messiah” (p.420).

So, when we look between the bookends in Matthew, what do we see? Astrologers from the east (2:1) who worshipped Jesus (2:11). Jesus comes to reside in “*Galilee of the **Gentiles,***” fulfilling what

was spoken through Isaiah the prophet (4:14-15). A **Gentile** centurion's servant is healed and Jesus marvels that this man has greater faith than anyone in Israel (8:5-12). Jesus enters the **Gentile** country of the Gadarenes and casts out the demons of two men (28-34). Matthew quotes Isaiah as being fulfilled, listing the following: "*He shall proclaim justice to the **Gentiles***" and "*in his name the **Gentiles** will hope*" (12:18, 21). He mentions the despised **pagan** city of Nineveh repenting and condemning this generation and the **Queen of the south** doing the same (12:41-42). He healed the **Canaanite** woman's daughter being demon possessed (15:21-28). He is the only Gospel writer to use the word "**church**" to describe His followers, which is later revealed to consist of Jews AND **Gentiles** (16:18, 18:17). Matthew records Jesus saying, "*This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the **whole world** as a testimony to **all the nations**, and then the end will come*" (24:14). "*And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the **four winds**, from **one end of the sky to the other***" (24:31). "*Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the **whole world**, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her*" (26:13). Matthew records the testimony of the **Gentile** centurion: "*Truly this was the son of God*" (27:54). We know that we have interpreted Matthew's inclusio correctly because with just a sample of verses we can see they indeed support one of his major themes – Matthew sees Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises to the Jews now being extended to the Gentiles. Reading what is in-between the bookends will either confirm or deny we have interpreted the author correctly without trying to force what we read into a questionable inclusio interpretation.

Finally, see if you can identify the inclusio and the authors' theme and better interpret the authors' meaning in the following texts: Romans, Psalm 8, 103, 104, 113, 135, 145, 147, 148, 149, and this text. While this literary device is not prominent in the Bible and is only one of many, it does occur and if we would be Bereans, we must be aware of how authors in the first century used commonly accepted literary devices if we would properly interpret and live by God's inspired Word.