

Generalization Practicum: Matthew Chapters 1 and 2
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No passage should be seen as devoid of content from which one can generalize. The Holy Spirit wrote with no superfluity – if someone thinks there's no generalizable content, that person, not the Text, is the problem.

For example, consider the genealogy in Matthew chapter 1:1-17.

This passage could properly be called, "the countdown to Messiah."

The fact that Jesus is called the "son" of others shows Him to be human—in time and materiality, in temptations.

These "generations" (14 plus 14 plus 14= 42) show a historical setting. This is different from a context, which is an outside framework made to surround the Text, and which would control the Text.

The appearance of the Messiah in this timeline is not a coincidence but a planned event; evidence of the persistence of eternal purpose; a definite before and after.

TIME CONTRACTION

Eternal purpose is the supernatural element of time. Each person in the list marks a shortening of the timeline. Therefore, time is reductive. Einstein and others have advanced the idea that time is expanding or dilating, like a river emptying into the sea. It is the sense of things getting better or worse (perceived by us when natural representations are conforming to our senses—an experiential, progressive percept.) Instead, this passage shows that time actually contracts back onto the purpose of God. Time is shortening toward God's goals, not expanding out. This contraction is not the result of something, it is the cause.

The purpose of time and history are as a convenience of God. They are functional as time contracts back onto the purposes of God. We can see here a contrast between the percepts of the human mind, and the percept of God.

One of the purposes of the book of Matthew is to show the revealed percept of time. It helps us see the difference between the spiritual percept and the naturalistic. Scriptural percepts are the true reality. Scriptural percepts are projected into time.

This is very different than the human practice of scripture interpretation, where human understandings and representations form limitations on the Word. For instance, some deny miracles in the Bible because their human representations of the "possible" form a limitation on the meaning of the Word.

In Matthew 1:1-25, we see the overlay of time on the birth of Christ, and we see in this a clash of percepts. Mary began by operating on human percepts of pregnancy, but these were corrected by Gabriel. Joseph was more firm in his hold on human percepts, though. His character was good, but God had to intervene and get him to accept spiritual percepts of the situation with his pregnant fiancée.

The human percept and the spiritual one of this situation were not compatible; nor could there be any compromise between the two. They both have great influence but they are not co-equal. They inherently clashed in this situation as they will inevitably clash in every human life. Joseph had to drop one and pick up the other, and it was such an effort that the angel told him, "Don't be afraid."

THE ARROW OF DEFIANCE

We can speak of this action as "the arrow of defiance," because Joseph had to defy his human percepts – the spiritual percept didn't just disagree, it had to be accepted as the only percept. This was true of David as he faced Goliath; at the Red Sea; with cancer (or any other situation we face in our lives.) How can we face such things? We have to defy natural percepts and seek spiritual ones; and use the understandings of Psalm 119 where we learn that we don't live in a naturalistic cause and effect universe but one that is "appellate" or subject to appeals – where the ultimate decisions are made by a God who invites us to appeal to Him for changes to a historical condition.

THE RULE OF SUBSTITUTION

In Joseph's case, revealed representations had to be mapped onto his facts. Joseph was dismayed at what he believed was true about Mary. He had to withdraw the human percept and replace it. We might call this the "rule of substitution," replacing human percepts with revealed ones. What happens when you don't do this completely? You do what Abraham and Sarah did with Hagar, trying to meld the two together.

Only revealed representations can open the mind of a person to the supernatural purposes of God. The meaning of an event or circumstance isn't found in the relationship of human percepts and the "facts." There can't be a unity between human percepts and faith. If we feel that there is a unity, we need a corrector to that. Revealed representations are that corrector, as Gabriel presented to Joseph.

All human percepts are subject to God's correctors. We don't just need hugs, we need correction. Revelation actually drives a wedge between human wisdom and Scripture. Pride can put the human percept above revealed representations, too.

TERMINAL AUTHORITY

Verse 22 of Matthew 1 shows that the revealed percept preceded time (a reference to Isaiah 7:13.) Thus there is a kind of authority -> revelation -> time/facts. This is a terminal authority (in the same way that our Supreme Court is the final or terminal authority on any legal matter.)

Joseph and Mary found themselves enmeshed in a terminal authority. They were chosen and in that sense without choice in the matter. Joseph expressed his fears in verse 20, but the words from God, “don’t be afraid,” took care of all the social implications and even the credibility of his coming actions. Joseph had to transcend the human percept of time and what would happen in it.

Revealed percepts open the mind to terminal authority, which reveals God’s connection to time and the events in time. Therefore the book of Matthew opens my mind and yours to the terminal authority of God over time and the events in time.

Therefore we can’t read it just as the recounting of events in history.

Joseph got his information in a dream. But it wasn’t a subjective experience, nor was it the product of his logic. It came from outside himself. It was put in his mind by God. Like Joseph, as we see the revealed percept of those events two thousand years ago, we have a supreme objectivity.

It is also a transmission, as is any revealed percept that comes from one world to another.

Joseph did as he was told. He respected the initial state of Mary (as virgin) but when the revealed representation was given to him, he saw that original state was changed by God (still virgin but carrying a child.) We have to give Joseph credit for “carrying on” in the face of changing representations! He marched to the drumbeat of terminal authority.

In chapter 2:1-2, we see the will of God and the power of God operating in a historical setting: the prophesied place, Bethlehem. Magi came from the east to Jerusalem, and did so on the basis of what they thought was an arranged history – they asked for the place where he “had been born King of the Jews.” They didn’t ask if, they asked where. They accepted the presence of a supernatural sign—the star—and came with one purpose, to worship and publicly acknowledge His eminence and His place in time and history.

They knew His future holds all the meaning of life for them and all mankind. They knew this birth had meaning beyond what the world could see. This percept pushed their natural percepts far down the road of importance.

The Magi were looking for the action of God in time. Herod, once he heard the Magi, understood that something with eternal ramifications had taken place. He, in contrast, was threatened by this news, and wanted not to worship but to murder the King. But he was soon to learn that violence and the actions of people with earthly authority alone cannot change the purpose of God nor can it reverse the terminal authority of God. Here we have a human king in open, personal, direct opposition to Providence.

Herod’s reasoning was a rationalized resistance to the will of God. In verse 4, we see he sought information from the priests to find out where Scripture said the Messiah would be born. He

used that to triangulate with the Magi's information on the time to try to change what revealed representations had presented. He thought human intervention could obstruct and nullify the purposes of God, the actions of God in time.

SUPERCESSION

He thought he could supercede the purposes of God. We see the desire for supercession everywhere in Scripture: in Genesis 3, in the tower of Babel, in the Hagar incident, in the desert, even when Peter denied the Lord.

Supercession is a mode of reasoning that can conduce to (lead to) modes of behavior. But people think it's fine – they want to reject any restrictions on human reasoning. Adam and Eve didn't put any restrictions on their reasoning, for instance. Some people, like Herod when he consulted the priests, hope to enlist the help of "real believers" in carrying out their aims.

He tried to make the Magi, too, complicit in his plot by saying that he wanted information so that he, too, could worship this King. But if someone does not have the firm foundation of revealed truth, he or she can also become complicit in rationalized plots. That's always operating at a deficit, though. Without revealed truth, you don't see a situation accurately. And of course, in the end, rationalized plots don't succeed –ever.

In verses 9-12, the star led the Magi to the Child they worshiped, then they returned to their own country. In a dream, they'd been warned not to tell Herod. So his rationalized plan was *already* enfolded into this supernatural arranged history. You can't surprise or ambush God.

The Red Sea was enfolded. Cancer is enfolded. Children, wealth, opposition are all enfolded. He has engulfed the world.

When we obey God, we overrule any rationalized plot against the will of God. Depending on Him and obeying revealed representations outranks "problem solving." In the book of Matthew, we see that God's ancient words had already been fulfilled.

Difficulties can ambush us. But all your problems, including your coming death, are part of an arranged history. Herod's rationalized plot failed (2:16) even after he killed all those babies, whose births were calibrated to the appearance of the star. But the passage quoted, Jeremiah 31:15, shows that centuries before the event, God had heard the cries of those poor mothers. Herod's reasoning had been accounted for, centuries before. It had not been overlooked by the Lord. Herod's reasoning was to intervene in God's plans. But it was ironically used by Jeremiah to show that God had already foreseen and accounted for it.

Everywhere in Scripture we see that overcalculation by human reasoning is always repudiated by revelation. Human reasoning is always in a state of war with the mind of God. But this event, the beginning of the life of Christ, triggers the downfall of human rationalized resistance to the will of God.

Without achieving his goal, it was Herod who died. Joseph was told it was safe to go back to Israel (2:20). All his enemies were dead: an example of how, yes, death can solve some problems.

Direct guidance from God—which we have in abundance in the Bible—overrides human rational disposition of circumstances. Even in the life of Joseph, he was warned not to go where he wanted to go but to go to Galilee. And when he did that, he helped fulfill the prophecy, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” Every move the young couple and their Child made was enfolded in providence.

Joseph obeyed God, and displaced reliance on human experience and common sense. He was a servant of the word of God – and then, he just disappears from human history. He did his job well. What we know of him is short in words, but all enfolded in the will of God. He obeyed direct guidance, and what resulted couldn’t play out with natural explanations.

Joseph was a spiritual “everyman.” He wasn’t a genius, and he didn’t operate on the sidelines but in the limelight of a crucial event of human history. He obeyed, then he disappeared. As do we all, obey then disappear. Our work is never wasted but purposeful.