

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - The Gospel Of Matthew As An Argument



1. Introduction: the Meaning of 'Gospel'

For 'gospel', the dictionary gives us 'the record of Christ's life and teaching' (NOD 2001). Earlier, in pre-Christian times, the term 'gospel' (Greek root *euangel-*) denoted the message of a messenger who was sent from the battlefield to convey *good news* about a battle. John Dickson (2005)

argues that in antiquity the use of the word always connoted a message that was news. Dickson (2005, p. 220) states that 'the larger eschatological context [...] makes clear that *euangel-* for the synoptists connotes news disclosed to the world with the arrival of the Messiah.' He also refers to Liftin (1994, p. 195-197) who points out that since *euangel-* in classical usage connoted 'report' rather than 'persuasion', it was of little significance in the rhetorical practices and literature of the period.

We should, however, not draw the conclusion that the gospels are non-persuasive and void of rhetorical practices. The gospels do not present Christ's life and his teaching directly, but conveys them through a complex process of reflection and revision. They are far from neutral historical accounts. If the gospels are news, they are a very special kind of news, presented in a certain way and with a certain intention.

The Christian evangelists adopt a whole set of standpoints that go against the status quo of the time. Consequently, the gospel was and is by many received as an argument. It therefore seems probable that the purpose of the gospel from the beginning was not only to report, but also to persuade. This aspect is often not given enough attention in commentaries and exegeses. Dickson's comment relating to the matter about the agent of the gospel is illustrative (2005, p. 220): 'Although Jesus is the principal herald of the gospel in the synoptic traditions, numerous others also take part in this act of eschatological disclosure: angels (Luke 1.19; 2.10), the Baptist (Luke 3.19), the disciples (Luke 9.6; Matt 24.14), and even the narrator himself (Mark 1.1). In all of these texts "gospel" connotes news.'

Certainly the evangelist wants to give an impression of many witnesses, but are these truly separate witnesses (or agents of 'eschatological disclosure')? Is it not *the author* who presents arguments; directly and also often indirectly through the way the story is told, and through the characters in the story? If so, *the evangelist* is the principal 'herald of the gospel'. My hypothesis is that the gospel can be viewed as an argument and that viewing the gospel as an argument illuminates an important aspect of the text.

In the next Section I briefly sketch a foundation for the analysis by putting the text in its historical context and by taking a look at some research from the point of view of narrative criticism and rhetorical criticism. Specifically I am interested in to what extent the gospel has been viewed as an argument. I then go on to attempt a preliminary argumentation analysis of the gospel. Does it make sense to outline the gospel as an argument-structure with standpoints, sub-standpoints, and premisses? In addition to presenting a structure of the gospel, I take a look at a shorter passage, the virgin conception (1: 18-23). Does the story lend itself to an argumentation analysis?

2. The Gospel of Matthew: Background and Some Earlier Approaches

2.1 Historical Context

Of the four gospels, I find Matthew to be a good choice for an argumentation analytical perspective for four reasons:

(a) it is a Jewish Christian gospel, providing many comments relating to Jewish tradition, testifying often to the Old Testament background and to Jesus' clashes with the official representatives of the Jewish religion and nation. The background of a disagreement between the status quo (Judaism) and the new Jesus-movement (Christianity) is very clear in Matthew.

(b) It is a carefully constructed gospel. In comparison with the other synoptists, Matthew 'impresses by the care and literary artistry involved in its composition' (France 1990, p. 21).

(c) Matthew seems to lend itself most naturally to an argumentation analysis. This is a consequence of the careful composition.

(d) In comparison with John, Matthew is older and closer to the historical situation, to the original dispute. This is not to say that the same arguments are not present in the other gospels, but in Matthew they are easier to identify.

In order to produce an interpretation that comes as close as possible to the author's intentions, familiarity with the original language and culture are

indispensable. However, space does not here permit an elaboration of these aspects. In brief, I note that the gospel was probably written in a larger Syrian city, with Greek as its main language (Luz 1985, p. 73-75), after Mark's gospel and after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. It probably reflects a situation shortly after the painful divide with Israel, before the Early Church stabilized, and should probably be dated between 80 and 90 CE (Luz 1985, p. 75-76).

The apostle Matthew is traditionally accredited as the author, but this cannot be confirmed (Luz 1985, p. 76-77). The most common theory is that the author, whom I shall call Matthew, made use of two sources: the gospel of Mark and the Q-source. Regarding the text of Matthew, none of the original manuscript papyri have survived; the oldest extant copies are from the second century. The variant readings given by Aland (1993) have no bearing on the type of analysis I undertake here.

2.2 Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism offers many observations which are relevant also for an analysis of Matthew as an argument. In the following I highlight a few of them.

Jack D. Kingsbury (1988, p. 3) remarks that 'the element of conflict is central to the plot of Matthew'. This conflict arises with different parties in the story: 'Satan (4: 1-11), demons (12: 28), the forces of nature and of illness, civil authorities (such as Herod and Pilate), Gentiles (including Roman soldiers), Israel, and, above all, Israel's religious leaders.' (1988, p. 3). Kingsbury stresses that it is the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel that leads to Jesus' death, not the ones between Jesus and the crowds or the civil authorities (Kingsbury 1988, p. 5). After the resurrection, the risen Jesus will also enter into conflict with the nations (24: 14; 25: 31-46) through the mission of the Church. Although Kingsbury does not explicitly mention argumentation, these observations indicate that we can reconstruct an argumentative situation on many levels: where there is disagreement, argumentation usually follows.

Kingsbury's analysis also shows the literary nature of Matthew. For instance, Matthew is omnipresent in relation to the world of his story - there is no scene from which he is absent. He is present with Jesus in the desert, alone, tempted by Satan (4: 1); he is with John in prison (11: 2), with the disciples in the boat (14: 22, 24), etc. Matthew is also omniscient. He knows the words of Jesus' private prayer in Gethsemane (26: 39, 42), he knows the feelings of many characters, for instance that Herod is frightened (2: 3), that Jesus has compassion with the crowds (9: 36), and he is also able to describe what characters see or hear

(Kingsbury 1988, p. 32). Kingsbury (1988, p. 33) remarks that 'Matthew as implied author [...] involves himself, through his voice as narrator, in every aspect of this story.' This remark is similar to Dickson's regarding how 'even the narrator himself' is a herald of the gospel (above, Section 1). I would like to add that the evangelist takes part in presenting the story – or 'involves himself' – not only through the role as narrator, but also through the layout of the story, and through the characters in the story.

Although narrative critics identify the purpose of the gospel, it is not treated as an argument. Therefore an important aspect of the text is more or less lost. Matthew does not only wish the reader to accept the information contained in the text, but also to accept the argument that is put forth.

2.3 Rhetorical Criticism

In his influential book on New Testament interpretation through rhetorical criticism, George A. Kennedy (1984) presents an overview of the rhetoric of the NT. Kennedy (1984, p. 12) describes the goal of rhetorical analysis as the 'discovery of the author's intent and of how that is transmitted through a text to an audience.'

Kennedy (1984, p. 101) notes that the evangelists made use of a range of rhetorical techniques by a 'careful use of ethos, pathos, and logos, in that order of priority' (1984, p. 101), and that Matthew 'makes the widest use of all aspects of rhetoric'. This is apparent in the careful arrangement of the different parts of the gospel, and also in the arrangement of proofs. Matthew has a concern 'consistently to provide his readers with something close to logical argument. He appears to furnish reason to make what is said seem probable and to allow his audience to feel some intellectual security in his account.' (1984, p. 102). Kennedy mainly focuses on the Sermon on the Mount, but also provides a summary of how he understands Matthew's use of external proof to show that Jesus is the Messiah (1984, p. 103):

'We are shown that Jesus must be the Messiah because

- (1) his birth fulfilled the prophecy of the birth of the Messiah,
- (2) he was so acclaimed by John the Baptist,
- (3) he was so recognized by God,
- (4) he was tested and proved true by the devil,
- (5) the disciples immediately responded to his call, and
- (6) he could heal the sick.'

In addition to external proofs, Kennedy (1984, p. 103) notes that Matthew also 'employs the internal proof of logical argument' through characters in the story, who regularly 'speak in enthymemes' by supporting an assertion with a reason. Kennedy (1984, p. 104) concludes about Matthew:

'For all its miraculous events, Matthew's world is far more rational than that described by Mark, who has little interest in such things. In many cases, the minor premise of the enthymeme is a scriptural quotation. The external evidence, which functions cumulatively to show that prophecy has been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, is thus utilized to construct an argument internal to the text.'

In his analysis of Matthew's use of external and internal proofs, Kennedy has in essence provided a basic argumentation analysis of the gospel. However, I believe it possible to provide a more precise description of Matthew's argument.

3. The Gospel of Matthew as an Argument

3.1 Pragma-Dialectical Argumentation Analysis

Argumentation arises when there is a difference of opinion, either implicitly or explicitly. A standpoint is an '(externalized) attitude on the part of a language user in respect of an expressed opinion' (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, p. 5). A standpoint implies specific commitments, such as a commitment to uphold that standpoint by clarifying it if asked to do so or by defending it, by providing arguments. The defence can be directed towards someone who holds a different standpoint, someone who simply disagrees with the standpoint, or even someone who just doubts the standpoint. In the last case, such doubt often remains implicit, making it more difficult to identify with certainty (van Eemeren et al. 2002, p. 12).

In such an implicit discussion – without a clearly defined antagonist – utterances that are strongly contrary to status quo are usually meant as standpoints since they probably will raise either doubt, rejection, or other, competing, standpoints. Often the writer or speaker refers to potential objections of a real or imagined antagonist. In such cases the focus of disagreement often becomes clear (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, p. 43).

Van Eemeren et al. (1996, p. 288) suggest the following five points that the analyst should clarify:

- (a) the standpoints at issue in the difference of opinion,
- (b) the positions adopted by the parties, their starting points and conclusions,
- (c) the arguments adduced by the parties,

(d) the argumentation structure, and

(e) the argument schemes used in the arguments. For the purpose of this analysis I will only highlight enough features to illustrate how the gospel can be viewed as an argument.

The first concern of the analyst is putting the text in a form suitable for evaluation. For this purpose, the standpoints and arguments are identified, and their mutual relationships displayed in an argumentation structure. Identifying standpoints and differences of opinion is not necessarily a straightforward process. A discussion may contain any number of arguments and sub-arguments and much in the discourse may be implicit or expressed unclearly. In order to get a clear presentation of the argumentation, the text is subjected to the four transformations of deletion, addition, permutation, and substitution (van Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 291-293).

Arguments can conveniently be displayed using the schematical presentation for complex argumentation structures suggested by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, p. 73-89). This graphical instrument is very flexible and facilitates a clear presentation of both simple and complex argumentation structures such as multiple argumentation, coordinatively and subordinatively compound argumentation, and arguments with unexpressed elements (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, p. 73-89). For evaluation, three types of argument schemes are distinguished between (here only in the example-analysis, not in the structure of the whole gospel): symptomatic, analogous, and causal (van Eemeren et al. 2002, p. 96-100).

3.2 Points at Issue and Positions of the Parties

It could be argued that Matthew is a story, a narrative, and not an argument. However, many narratives contain arguments. Even if the author of a story did not intend to make an argument, an argument may arise if the reader does not accept some of the propositions within the story. In the case of Matthew, the message he puts forth is in such contradiction with what most readers would accept that it necessarily becomes an argument.

What is, then, the main bone of contention in Matthew? Viewed from the perspective of the implied reader, the centre of the gospel is the person of Jesus: who he was and what he did. **[i]** If Jesus was not the Messiah, the long-awaited son of David, then all the prophecies related to him presented in Matthew would be irrelevant. If Jesus was not the Son of God, but just an ordinary man, much of

his promises about the future, much of his teaching about heavenly matters, and much of his demands would lose a crucial element of credibility and relevance. Consequently, the main standpoint can be formulated as 'Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah.' This comes close to Kingsbury's and David B. Howell's identification of the message of the gospel, as it emerges from a narrative analysis.^[ii] Howell (1990, p. 159) describes the element of confrontation in the story and how this transfers on to the reader:

'Matthew opens his Gospel by introducing his protagonist Jesus, the Son of God, whose mission is to save his people from their sins. His coming provokes a crisis as characters in the story are confronted with the choice of accepting or rejecting him and his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Acceptance or obedience to Jesus' teaching is the proper response according to the evangelist, and the implied reader is challenged to respond correspondingly in the open-ended conclusion to the Gospel.'

I agree with Howell's emphasis that the story aims at a response from the reader. In this sense we have two standpoints, one explicit and one implicit. The explicit standpoint is that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. The implicit standpoint relates to the consequence of the explicit one. If the reader accepts the proposed identity of Jesus, he should also arrange his life accordingly and change role from the one being evangelised to the one carrying out the Great Commission to make all nations into disciples (28: 19-20). The latter aspect can be construed as the main implicit standpoint. In this analysis, however, I will focus on the explicit standpoint – which is the basis for the implicit one – but I acknowledge that Matthew not only wishes to convince of a certain matter but that he also wishes to persuade into action.

What kind of a dispute should we envision? In Matthew we basically have two different types of dispute depending on the interlocutor. For many, we would have a single non-mixed dispute: Matthew presents Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, and people would question whether this would be the case or not. In addition, we have a single mixed dispute where the antagonist explicitly disagrees with this standpoint. (For those who have already accepted the main standpoint, the gospel functions in a different, non-argumentative way, as a reminder of the foundation for their faith, as a source for insight, instruction, comfort, etc.).

The question of Matthew's antagonists and audience is a complex one (Luz 2005, p. 3-17), but basically we have audiences on two levels, who also function as antagonists to the main standpoint: the audiences within the story and the

audiences in the real world. The first group is multifaceted: disciples, crowds of people, Pharisees, different authorities, etc. From a narrative point of view, some of these audiences are at the same time the projected audiences of Matthew: a reader of the gospel may react in the same way as a character in one of the stories. Space does not here permit a treatment of the issue of different audiences in the real world.

3.3 Argumentation Structure

When formulating an argumentation structure for Matthew it is clear that we are not reproducing the author's blueprint for the text. Rather, we are creating a heuristic tool for understanding one aspect of how the different parts of the text function with regard to one of the purposes of the whole text, namely to support the standpoint that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. It is interesting that if we take this as the main standpoint, it is not at all difficult to subordinate the rest of the Gospel as arguments in support – an indication that this approach does indeed capture a feature inherent in the text.

In his structural analysis of Matthew's faith, Patte (1987, p. 5) makes a similar discovery: 'an author's faith (system of convictions) is what gives a fundamental coherence to his or her discourse. This is why I could be confident that by systematically studying the convictions that Matthew expresses in each of the passages of his Gospel, my interpretation would be consistent.' What holds for 'system of convictions' should also *mutatis mutandis* hold for arguments in an argumentation analysis of Matthew, provided that Matthew can be viewed as an argument. If not, an argumentation analysis should turn out to give inconsistent results.

The first question to ask is what the main arguments are in support of the main standpoint. It seems that the material in the gospel can be placed in six categories, each supporting the main standpoint in a different way:

- (a) Jesus' birth and infancy,
- (b) the reactions Jesus received from others,
- (c) the indications of several prophecies,
- (d) the features of Jesus' ministry,
- (e) of his teaching, and
- (f) of his death and resurrection.

The second question is how these arguments support the standpoint: multiply or coordinatively? At first glance, it could seem that Jesus' death and resurrection

would be enough to support the main standpoint, and similarly the circumstances of his birth. Some would argue that his teaching or his ministry would give enough support or that we should be convinced by the reactions of the people Jesus is recorded to have met. However, because of the following reasons, I find the structure to be coordinative.

Regarding (a): although remarkable, a divine birth is not enough to prove that Jesus was the Messiah; antiquity tells of many divine births. Argument (f), his death and resurrection, is also not enough since many people were crucified, and although resurrection is certainly extraordinary, it is not unique in this context: Matthew himself tells of other resurrections (by Jesus, 9: 18-26; 11: 5, and also at his death, 27: 52-53)! Jesus' teaching, (e), although extraordinary, was not unique in the sense that there would not have been other remarkable prophets and teachers; there were many of them. Some of the others also got similar reactions from the crowds, for instance John the Baptist, so (b) is also not enough by itself. The same goes for Jesus' ministry, (d). As for (c), the prophecies are not only applied hundreds of years after they were given, but selected somewhat ad hoc, based on some similarity with what they are supposed to prove, and so not convincing by themselves without other arguments.

Consequently, none of these is enough to support the standpoint that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah. However, the analyst should put his (modern) objections aside and aim for a structure that is as close to the intentions of the author as possible. Even when taking this into account, I do not find it warranted to apply the strategy of maximally argumentative analysis (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, p. 81) here. The impression of the text is that arguments, stories, examples, and formula-quotations[**iii**] are stacked on each other so that, if not at the beginning, at least at the end, the reader would accept the standpoint of the author. If one of the premisses is removed, the whole argument does not collapse, it just weakens. I therefore find the structure to be cumulatively coordinative.

In the following I present a possible argumentation structure for the gospel. Although the structure of the text and that of the argumentation have some similarities, several transformations are needed in order to clarify the argumentation. It is not here necessary to present a complete structure of all the levels. I only number the arguments on the main level (1), and on the first sub-level (1.1a', 1.1b', 1.1c', etc.). I also include arguments on further sub-levels,

unnumbered, to show how almost the whole text can be viewed as supporting the main standpoint. The six sub-standpoints are marked by a prime (') and put in brackets to indicate that they are not explicit in the text. They are reconstructions of what I find to be the six main lines of argument in support of the main standpoint. See the Table for the argumentation structure.

Table: The Structure of Matthew's Argument

1 JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD, THE MESSIAH. (1: 1)

1.1a' [Jesus' birth and early childhood indicate this.]

- Jesus' genealogy shows that Jesus was the son of David. (1: 1-17)
- Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of virgin Mary. (1: 18-25)
- The wise men's visit from the East was testimony that Jesus was king of the Jews.

(2: 1-11): *They came to worship the king of the Jews because they had seen his star rising. (2: 2); They were led to Jesus' location supernaturally by the star. (2: 9-10); They paid Jesus homage worthy of a king. (2: 11)*

- Several circumstances of Jesus' birth and infancy conform to prophecies. (2: 13-3: 1): *That Jesus would be born of a virgin was foreseen. (1: 22-23); The flight to Egypt was foreseen. (2: 1-15); That 'a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel' would be born in Bethlehem was foreseen. (2: 4-6); Herod's slaughter of children was foreseen. (2: 16-18); Jesus' hometown Nazareth conforms with a prophecy. (2: 23)*

1.1b' [The reaction of others indicates this.]

- Herod was afraid that Jesus might be the Messiah. (2: 3-16)
- John recognized Jesus' identity. (3: 13-15)
- At the baptism by John, God supernaturally confirmed Jesus as the Son of God. (3: 16-17)
- Simon Peter, Andrew, and James and John (Zebedee), and Matthew recognized Jesus' authority. (4: 18-22): *They followed Jesus without slightest question when he called them. (4: 18-22)*
- Many who heard Jesus were amazed, astonished or in awe of his ministry. (7: 28-29 et al.)

1.1c' [Several prophecies indicate this.]

(Some prophecies were already mentioned under 1.1a': 1: 22-23; 2: 5-6; 2: 14-15; 2: 16-18, and 2: 23.)

- Jesus settled down in Capernaum. (4: 12-16)
- Jesus healed many. (8: 16-17)
- Jesus was not boastful. (12: 15-21)
- Jesus taught in parables. (13: 34-35)
- Jesus rode in to Jerusalem on a donkey. (21: 2-5)
- Judas' thirty pieces of silver were used to buy the potter's field. (27: 6-10)

1.1d' [Jesus' ministry indicates this.]

- Jesus healed a large amount of people in many places who were sick by birth, illness or demons. (4: 23-24; 8: 2-3; 8: 6-16; 8: 28-33; 9: 20-22 et al.)
- Jesus raised a few dead. (9: 18-26; 11: 5)
- Jesus had command over the elements. (8: 23-27)
- Jesus forgave sins. (9: 1-8)
- Jesus addressed God as 'my Father'.
- Jesus performed miracles: *Jesus fed four thousand*. (15: 32-38)
- Jesus had knowledge of the future. (26: 34; 26: 69-75): *Jesus knew of his death and resurrection*. (12: 40; 17: 9)
- Jesus transfigured, appearing with Moses and Elijah. (17: 2-8)
- Jesus knew things about circumstances that he could not have known naturally: *Jesus knew about the donkey*. (21: 2)

1.1e' [Jesus' teaching indicates this.]

- Jesus' teaching was extraordinary. (4: 23-25; 5: 1-7; 28 et al.): *Jesus taught with authority*. (7: 28-29); *Jesus had an unusual capability to answer questions of the Pharisees and the Sadducees*. (9: 10-17; 22: 15-22; 22: 23-33; 22: 34-36 et al.); *Jesus criticised false worship (Jesus taught sincere prayer and fasting*, 6: 5-8, *Jesus rebuked the religious hypocrites*, 6: 1; 23: 2-37 et al., *Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem*, 21: 12-13).

1.1f' [Jesus' death and resurrection indicate this.]

- There were supernatural events at Jesus' death: *The curtain of the temple tore in two when Jesus died, the earth shook and rocks were split, tombs opened, and many saints rose from the dead and appeared to many*. (27: 51-53)
- Jesus rose from the dead: *Although the tomb was heavily guarded, it was opened*. (27: 63-66; 28: 2-3); *An angel testified that Jesus had risen from the dead*. (28: 4-6); *Jesus was seen after his resurrection by Mary Magdalene and the other Mary*. (28: 1, 9-10); *Jesus was seen by the eleven disciples*. (28: 16-17)

3.4 Example-Analysis of Matt. 1: 18-23, the Virgin Conception

Let us take a look at an important argument (under 1.1a'), which is presented right at the beginning of the gospel, after the genealogy: the virgin conception. The following argument is put before Joseph by an 'angel of the Lord' in 1: 20: 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.' This is a single argument with one unexpressed premiss: *If the child in Mary is conceived by the Holy Spirit, then you (Joseph) should not be afraid to take her as your wife.* Kennedy (1984, p. 103) notes that the angel presents the first enthymeme in Matthew and that '[t]his is a logical angel who wants Joseph to understand and is not content simply to make authoritative announcements.'

When Mary became pregnant, Joseph naturally supposed that she had been with another man. No self-respecting Jew would have married Mary under such circumstances. The angelic visit explains why Joseph did not abandon her but took her as his wife: he was convinced by an angel. Let us take a look at how Matthew convinces the reader. The whole pericope reads (Matt. 1: 18-23):

1: 18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. /19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. /20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. /21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' /22 All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: /23 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' (English translation NRSV 1995.)

First the evangelist gives the reason for the pericope, it is to explain how the birth of 'Jesus the Messiah took place'. At the end we find an explanation - in effect an argument - which places the event into the framework of salvation history: the conception was to 'fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet'. The references are to Isaiah 7: 14 and 8: 8, 10. However, we can assume that Isaiah did not have parthenogenesis in mind, nor the birth of a Messiah several centuries later (Luz 1985, p. 105). The evangelist interprets Isaiah's prophecy in

such a way that it can be used as an argument for the virgin conception.

Joseph's action, the angel's announcement, and Isaiah's prophecy are presented as arguments in favour of the standpoint that Jesus was born by a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit. The argumentation is symptomatic, 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 are all signs: since they witness to the virgin conception, we should accept it, see the Figure.[iv]

Figure: *Matt. 1: 18-23: The Virgin Conception*

1. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born by virgin Mary.

1.1 Joseph did not dismiss Mary when he found she was pregnant.

& 1.1' [A righteous Jew would dismiss his betrothed if she would be found carrying a child conceived by another man.]

1.2 An angel announced that the conception was by the Holy Spirit.

& 1.2' [Angelic announcements are trustworthy.]

1.3 This was foretold by the great prophet Isaiah.

& 1.3' [Isaiah's prophecy applies to this pregnancy.]

A few comments about the arguments are in order.

Premiss 1.1: That Joseph did not abandon Mary is a sign that he accepted that the child was not conceived by another man. Something out of the ordinary would have been needed in order for Joseph to stay with Mary, such as an angelic visit testifying to the divine origin of the child.

Premiss 1.2: For an angel to appear, the reason must have been important. The angel testifies both to Joseph and to the reader. In addition, that Joseph believed the angel incurs also the reader to believe him (the premisses relying on the trustworthiness of angels – and indeed on their existence – would have been perfectly acceptable for the actors in the story, and for most of the early receivers of Matthew's gospel).

Premiss 1.3: Also here is the argument scheme symptomatic: the prophet Isaiah's reliability is used to back up the standpoint.

As is clear from the figure, I see the argument as multiple. For Matthew, Joseph's action, the angel's testimony, and Isaiah's prophecy are three different lines of argumentation in support of the standpoint. Joseph's action is the strongest argument since it is so concrete. The reference to Isaiah is the weakest of the

three since it is so remote, but it seems to add (salvation-) historical support for the standpoint.

Already this brief analysis indicates some of the features that come into play analysing biblical literature. First, the literary nature of the story makes the analysis more complex. For instance, the story functions on three levels: between the characters in the story (Joseph and the angel), between the evangelist and the intended reader ('all this took place to fulfil'), and through the characters (that Joseph believes the angel leads the reader to do so also). Second, contextual information is needed, especially about the make-up of a Jewish-Christian world-view, in which for instance a prophecy and an angel can appear as premisses in an argument. Third, we note that the reader is required to invest a lot of trust in the reliability of the evangelist since no concrete evidence is available (this held true also for readers contemporary with Matthew).

4. Conclusion

In this study I have approached the first gospel as an argument. I have also indicated the valuable contributions of narrative criticism and rhetorical criticism. Together with the traditional historical-critical approach, these methods can help us toward an interpretation that lets us better understand the purpose and the function of the gospel-story.

One purpose is for it to function as an argument in favour of the standpoint that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. I have shown how the gospel of Matthew can be seen as such an argument and how the evangelist presents different parts of the story so as to support this standpoint. The tentative argumentation structure indicates the feasibility of an argumentation analysis. Although the form of the gospel is that of a narrative, it contains indirect argumentation.

Although earlier studies have noted some of the same features of Matthew, the advantage of a specific argumentation analysis approach is that it yields a much more specific description of the argumentative dimension of the text. A comparison between Kennedy's understanding of the argument in Matthew (cf. the quote above, Section 2.3) and my exposition (cf. the Table) is illuminating. An explicit argumentation analysis approach has enabled me to be more thorough and precise.

My treatment of the story of the virgin conception shows how such a story lends itself to an argumentation analysis. It also illustrates some of the features that come into play analysing biblical literature.

The gospel of Matthew is not mainly 'good news', but an argument in favour of the standpoint that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah.

NOTES

[i] Although often occurring in popular arguments, the historicity of Jesus as a person is not a concern. In fact, the textual evidence for Jesus surpasses that of most persons in antiquity.

[ii] Kingsbury identifies the message of Matthew's story to be that 'In the person of Jesus Messiah, his Son, God has drawn near to abide to the end of time with his people, the church, thus inaugurating the eschatological age of salvation.' (Kingsbury 1988, p. 42). I find Howell to be more precise in noting that Matthew is not a history of the beginnings of Christianity, it is 'the unity of Jesus' life and ministry rather than a theological concept of history' that carries the story (Howell 1990, p. 91).

[iii] The formula-quotations typical of Matthew give an OT text as an argument for Jesus, or some particular of his life and ministry, as a fulfilment of an OT prophecy, often introduced by a phrase like 'This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.' (2: 15).

[iv] Referring to the structure presented in the Table, the standpoint here should be 1.1a'.2 or 1.1a'.1b. Since I have not worked out the structure on this level I do not make a decision here about how Jesus' conception relates to 1.1a', coordinatively or multiply, but simply number the standpoint with 1.

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