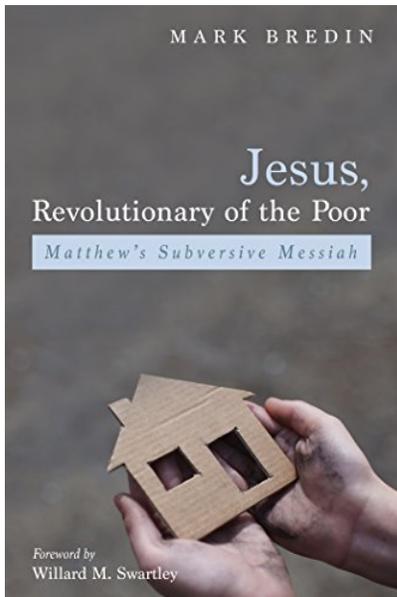


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Mark Bredin

Jesus, Revolutionary of the Poor: Matthew's Subversive Messiah

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Mark Bredin is a Quaker prison chaplain who has taught in the United Kingdom and Africa. His *Jesus, Revolutionary of Peace* and *The Ecology of the New Testament* is crafted to portray Jesus as a subversive Messiah whose message is revolutionary. Its emphasis is on God's preference for the poor and humanity's responsibility for one another. Bredin states, "In Matthew, those who call themselves 'disciples' of Christ must measure their claim in terms of the extent to which they live and give unconditionally and sacrificially" (2).

The book is divided into three parts, bookended by an introduction and an epilogue. In the introduction, Bredin spells out his interpretive assumptions and methodology. The epilogue summarizes that poverty is a challenge to God and a rejection of God's goodness in creation. Reading through the Gospel of Matthew, Bredin emphasizes Jesus's call to the nonpoor to work for the redistribution of creation's abundance, which includes, among other things, material abundance. Each chapter is devoted to a theme related to the care of the poorest of the poor from the Matthean perspective. Each chapter concludes with a "Summary," "Food for Thought," and "Prayer."

Part 1 comprises two chapters with a focus on the themes of creation and poverty. Chapter 1 stresses that creation is an expression of God's goodness and the responsibility to share

it. This is fundamental to Bredin's thesis. God's goodness and generosity are expressed and maintained through *shalom*-living and Sabbath-observing. For Bredin, creation is a generous and nonviolent place. God has ordered creation in a way that *all* are equal, but human beings turn it into a battlefield, a place of scarcity wherein people compete for resources, security, and survival. This results in poverty or the survival of the fittest. Poverty is human-made and is contrary to God's intended design for creation and a rejection of God's goodness. Creation is not a fatherless creation, Bredin contends. Rather, God is the cosmic Father who cares deeply and unconditionally loves all creation. The Father Creator is affected by the abuse of abundance (poverty) caused by selfish individuals and responds with wrath on behalf of those who suffer from the lack of creation's material abundance. The wrathful scenes in Matthew (e.g., 3:10–12; 5:22; 24:28–31) heighten God's message of judgment, aiming at moving people to repentance, reestablishing order in the world, and self-giving love. This is the focus of chapter 2.

Part 2 centers on the internal order of creation as represented in terms of "Covenant," "Righteousness and Justice," "Torah," "Goodness, Mercy, and Love," and "Shalom." Bredin holds that covenant is interlinked with creation (ch. 3). It is the inner order of creation and creation's basic infrastructure. It is a way of life that informs our ethics. It is the life force that enables people to bring forth God's goodness and to live selflessly for others as God desires. To live in covenant with God, according to Bredin, is to live for others so that they can flourish (59). Another structure and fabric of creation is righteousness and justice (ch. 4). Righteousness is a relational concept seen in the context of establishing justice. It entails the restoration of the have-nots to the life of abundance and the encouragement of the nonpoor to behave in accordance with God's goodness in creation. Righteousness (and justice), Bredin contends, is linked to the torah (ch. 5) and is best understood in the context of God's concern for the poor. It is designed to guide people in leading a loving and just life. In Matthew, Jesus is the fulfiller of torah, or torah personified, through his service to the poor. He calls upon believers to fulfill the torah, insisting that no part of the torah should be broken and teaching that the whole torah is summed up in one commandment: love God and neighbor. Moreover, God's goodness is evident in mercy and love, which Bredin defines as "an inward sense of selflessness expressed outwardly in seeking the spiritual and material health and happiness of others" (108; ch. 6). Those who keep torah, show mercy, and embrace goodness are *shalom*-makers (ch. 7).

In part 3 Bredin turns his attention to those on the margins of society and Jesus's message of inclusion. In chapter 8, Bredin examines Matt 5:3 and 25:31–46. He interprets "the poor in spirit" in 5:3 as referring to the economically and physically dispossessed in 25:31–46. He asserts that on judgment day God favors the poorest of the poor and those who care for them. In chapter 9, Bredin focuses on Jesus's address to those culpable of

excluding others, the priesthood. Through the healing of a leper in Matt 8:1–4 and the healing of the lame and the blind in 21:14, Jesus the high priest subverts the priestly elitism by making visible God’s presence and love for the people through healing and forgiving. He works to heal and restore the excluded in society. For Bredin, sacrifice is inverted; that is, sacrifice is showing mercy. Chapter 10 is Bredin’s analysis of Matt 18:1–14 and his illustration of the kingdom of heaven as the domain of the vulnerable (166). In chapter 11, Bredin studies Matt 11:28–30 and emphasizes Jesus’s invitation to the nonpoor to trust God, to bear Jesus’s yoke because it is aligned to God’s order of creation. They would not be weary and heavy-laden from their competition with one another. Instead, they are called to trust God and to be open to a new life rooted in God’s love. In chapter 12, Bredin examines the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matt 19:30–20:16, connecting to God the owner’s generosity and goodness.

The book is not intended for biblical scholars but for a general audience interested in integrating gospel study with confronting the problems of poverty and inequality in the world. This book is Bredin’s attempt at developing and defining a biblical theology or spirituality of social ethics in the context of creation, arguing that care for the poor is integral to Jesus’s proclamation. The nonpoor are called to repent and become channels of God’s goodness and limitless love by working for the redistribution of creation’s abundance. Bredin’s thesis indirectly calls into question the “prosperity gospel” mentality that God blesses those whom God favors most with prosperity, health, and opportunity, whereas the poor are cursed because of their unfaithfulness. Storing up treasures on earth will not lead us into the kingdom of heaven. Generosity and care for God’s people will.

Several chapters are underdeveloped, and many of them could be combined into one chapter (e.g., the chapters in part 2). Bredin’s analysis of Matthean texts could benefit from a more extensive explanation. For example, the chapter on “Covenant” (ch. 3) is seven pages long, two of which are his summary, reflection, and prayer. His treatment of Matt 5:13 in the chapter is a mere two sentences long. Here he claims that “the phrase ‘salt of the earth’ refers to the ‘salt of the covenant,’” but he does not give a thorough explanation before making the connection between the two (62). His explanation of Matt 5:14–16 and its connection to Isaian texts is underdeveloped. Nonexpert readers would be at a loss with such an approach. Many Matthean passages are glossed over in chapter 8, most of which are two or three sentences long and most of which require further investigation. A critical treatment of the chapters and exegesis of Matthean texts may yield a deeper engagement with the book.

Although the book is neither lengthy on insights nor deep in the exposition of key texts, it nonetheless adds another reading to Matthean texts with a creation-centered lens and continues the conversation on caring for God’s people. Bredin’s Quaker beliefs and ethics

illuminate the pages. He frequently cites Quaker writers and incorporates Quaker spiritual texts into his writing. One of Bredin's unstated goals is to make the reader uncomfortable with biblical texts. He succeeds in illustrating God's goodness and challenging us to take the side of God—the side of “the least.” The book's contribution to Matthean scholarship will be the call to care for the poor among us, to stop making creation the place of scarcity where fighting for survival is necessary, and to work on the redistribution of creation's abundance. Despite the shortcomings in Bredin's work, one would hope that readers will see the value of the conversation he and others have begun.