

ECHOES

THE BIBLE MEETS
THE CULTURE OF TODAY

EUGENE H. PETERSON



THE MESSAGE OF **MATTHEW**

WITH CULTURAL REFERENCES FROM MOVIE QUOTES,
SONG LYRICS, CREATIVE WRITING, AND MORE

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MATTHEW

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*A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers*



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HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

A Note from the Editors

The world is haunted by the words of God. The God who spoke all of creation into being, who has called and led and commissioned and confronted and changed people simply by speaking, is the most successful author of all time. Not only has the Bible—the collected canon of God’s words to his people—outsold all other texts in the history of printing, but the Scriptures show up almost everywhere. From wisdom sayings to historic scenes to iconic characters to tropes and archetypes, the ground around us is seeded with God’s words. And the harvest is ongoing.

How the Scriptures show up in our lives—in literature, in music, in film and television, in art and other media—is often pious and occasionally profane. Some people echo the Scriptures as a kind of taunt, supposing that they’re demonstrating how archaic and arcane the idea of God is. Others quote God as a way of sanctifying their own efforts, suggesting that since God is their copilot, you should get on board with what they’re doing.

Each of these extremes bears the scent of desperation, inadvertently demonstrating that God stands apart from us but is nevertheless here in the midst of us. Unperturbed by these acts of

desperation, he remains about his business: confronting us with his righteousness, confounding us with his ineffability, saving us by his grace.

But mostly people echo the Scriptures in good faith. They are faithfully practicing their own craft in service to their faithful audience, and in service to that faithfulness, they rightly draw on the near-universal penetration of the Scriptures into contemporary culture. These stories, these scenes, these characters, these sayings *mean* something to people. They are intelligible, recognizable, evocative, pregnant. They reliably do not come back empty-handed (see Isaiah 55:11).

Sometimes, however, these artists echo the Scriptures unconsciously. They're not even aware that in the stories they're telling, the music or art they're making, they're calling the words of God into the space between them and their audience. That's how Bible-haunted the world has become. We might recall the first image of the first story of the first book of the Bible:

Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

GENESIS 1:2

Substitute “Art” for “Earth”—the canvas, the page, the stage, the unstrummed guitar—and you have a resonant portrait of every artist at the genesis of each creation. All art, consciously or not, reflects back to this primal moment, when the Creator first creates.

The next line: “God spoke.” And God’s words continue to echo.

In *The Message of Matthew: Echoes*, you’ll read the text of the Scriptures in the contemporary language of *The Message* Bible. *The Message* itself is an actualization of the idea of *Echoes*: Pastor-poet Eugene H. Peterson developed this Bible as a medium through which the message of salvation—the story of God, people, and the

redemptive history of all that ever was and ever will be—might land more resonantly on our contemporary ears.

It is always worth noting that Peterson approached this creative work as a matter of craft. He worked from the original languages in which the Bible was written, and he tested his efforts in the proving ground of his congregation as well as against the well-honed instincts of Bible scholars of high repute. As singer-songwriter Bono has written, “Peterson . . . has the heart of a musician, his intellectual rigor and humility saving him from the vicissitudes that have the rest of us banging tambourines as he lays out a feast on the altar.” This version of the Bible is artisanal, born of a creative process intended to honor the Creator.

Alongside the text of *The Message* you’ll find cultural references inspired by particular passages. Some are song lyrics, some are passages from novels or film or television. We expect you’ll be surprised by some of what you find here.

We bring biases with us into our encounters with the arts. Some artists we imagine to be profane to their core, and perhaps some are, but as the story of the Scriptures suggests, while God is set against sin, in Christ God “came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15); God is not soft on sin, but he is tender toward sinners (see Jude 1:22-23). He does not withhold his words from them.

Other artists and art you encounter here may surprise you because you don’t associate certain kinds of culture with the Bible. Some artists, to your thinking, may be so high-minded as to be no earthly good. The Bible is too “low culture” for them, you might think. Other art forms may strike you at first blush as lacking the depth of thought that engaging with the Scriptures might typically entail. They are, in your mind, too “low culture” for the Bible, perhaps.

The Message of Matthew: Echoes is in this respect a “cultural apologetic,” a way of demonstrating both the reach of the Bible as a force of culture and the inherent receptivity of all people to the

God who created them. We encourage you to engage in a kind of “cultural exegesis” of these references as they intersect with the Scriptures:

- What might have made this particular passage particularly resonant for this artist?
- What might they have observed in this passage that related to the story they were telling, the scene they were setting?
- Having moved into this artist’s neighborhood (see John 1:14), where might the transformative power of God’s words be at work there?

Here and there we’ve also drawn your attention to passages of the Bible that have become so embedded in the popular imagination that they are part of everyday speech. We point out these occurrences of “original language” as a reminder: The Scriptures are not just the domain of cultural elites but have pervaded our language all the way down to our imaginations. More often than we expect, we can’t complete our thoughts without resorting to the words of God.

Having seen these references in the context of the Bible passages that inspired them, you’ll likely find yourself noticing more often how frequently God’s words show up in the art, the culture, you interact with on a regular basis. So we’ve left lots of writing space in *The Message of Matthew: Echoes* for you to log these encounters, a kind of running archive of your encounters with the words of God in the cultural artifacts of the world. In this respect you become a kind of missiologist, taking note of the myriad ways that people—from the halls of cultural power to where you live, work, and play—rely on God’s words to speak for them, to speak to their audiences. This exercise in observation conveys an important theological truth: God is never far from us. “He’s not remote; he’s *near*” (see Acts 17:24-29).

A missiological exercise like this is interesting and even gratifying

by itself. We become more confident in the power and authority of the Scriptures by observing their impact on the culture of our world. But God's words are not just working in the world *out there*—they are working in your inner world as well. God's Spirit is hovering over you, as well, stirring the waters of your soul. God is speaking to you, as well, offering you light, inviting you to participate in the creative life he makes possible.

So don't think of the open space in *The Message of Matthew: Echoes* as simply a logbook of Scripture-inspired culture you've consumed. Consider it creative space for you. Having read God's words, now *create*. Here and there we've provided "experiments in echoing Scripture"—prompts for your own creative reflection and expression. But these are only a tool for you to use or lay aside at your discretion. The creative interaction with God's words is the main thing. The way to get the most out of *Echoes* is to get the Message in you and let it echo through you.

Ultimately, anytime you encounter God's words, you face the possibility of transformation. You emerge different from who you were in the beginning. You may be made new. In this respect, as you interact with *The Message of Matthew: Echoes*, you are not only creative; you are *creation*—a work of art brought into being by the Ultimate Artist, out of whose imagination came all that is seen and unseen. You are in good hands.

Enjoy the creation to come.



Use this QR code to access a playlist of songs featured in *The Message of Matthew: Echoes*.

The Message is a contemporary rendering of the Bible from the original languages, crafted to present its tone, rhythm, events, and ideas in everyday language.

INTRODUCTION TO THE MESSAGE

Reading is the first thing, just reading the Bible. As we read we enter a new world of words and find ourselves in on a conversation in which God has the first and last words. We soon realize that we are included in the conversation. We didn't expect this. But this is precisely what generation after generation of Bible readers do find: The Bible is not only written about us but to us. In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.

We aren't used to this. We are used to reading books that explain things, or tell us what to do, or inspire or entertain us. But this is different. This is a world of revelation: God revealing to people just like us—men and women created in God's image—how God works and what is going on in this world in which we find ourselves. At the same time that God reveals all this, God draws us in by invitation and command to participate in God's working life. We gradually (or suddenly) realize that we are insiders in the most significant action of our time as God establishes his grand rule of love and justice on this earth (as it is in heaven). "Revelation" means that we are reading something we couldn't have guessed or figured out on our own. Revelation is what makes the Bible unique.

And so just reading this Bible, *The Message*, and listening to what we read, is the first thing. There will be time enough for study later on. But first, it is important simply to read, leisurely and thoughtfully. We need to get a feel for the way these stories and songs, these prayers and conversations, these sermons and visions, invite us into this large, large world in which the invisible God is behind and involved in everything visible and illuminates what it means to live here—really live, not just get across the street. As we read, and the longer we read, we begin to “get it”—we are in conversation with God. We find ourselves listening and answering in matters that most concern us: who we are, where we came from, where we are going, what makes us tick, the texture of the world and the communities we live in, and—most of all—the incredible love of God among us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Through reading the Bible, we see that there is far more to the world, more to us, more to what we see and more to what we don't see—more to everything!—than we had ever dreamed, and that this “more” has to do with God.

This is new for many of us, a different sort of book—a book that reads us even as we read it. We are used to picking up and reading books for what we can get out of them: information we can use, inspiration to energize us, instructions on how to do something or other, entertainment to while away a rainy day, wisdom that will guide us into living better. These things can and do take place when reading the Bible, but the Bible is given to us in the first place simply to invite us to make ourselves at home in the world of God, God's Word and world, and become familiar with the way God speaks and the ways in which we answer him with our lives.



Our reading turns up some surprises. The biggest surprise for many is how accessible this book is to those who simply open it up and

read it. Virtually anyone can read this Bible with understanding. The reason that new translations are made every couple of generations or so is to keep the language of the Bible current with the common speech we use, the very language in which it was first written. We don't have to be smart or well-educated to understand it, for it is written in the words and sentences we hear in the marketplace, on school playgrounds, and around the dinner table. Because the Bible is so famous and revered, many assume that we need experts to explain and interpret it for us—and, of course, there are some things that need to be explained. But the first men and women who listened to these words now written in our Bibles were ordinary, everyday, working-class people. One of the greatest of the early translators of the Bible into English, William Tyndale, said that he was translating so that the “boy that driveth the plough” would be able to read the Scriptures.

One well-educated African man, who later became one of the most influential Bible teachers in our history (Augustine), was greatly offended when he first read the Bible. Instead of a book cultivated and polished in the literary style he admired so much, he found it full of homespun, earthy stories of plain, unimportant people. He read it in a Latin translation full of slang and jargon. He took one look at what he considered the “unspiritual” quality of so many of its characters and the everydayness of Jesus, and he contemptuously abandoned it. It was years before he realized that God had not taken the form of a sophisticated intellectual to teach us about highbrow heavenly culture so we could appreciate the finer things of God. When he saw that God entered our lives as a Jewish servant in order to save us from our sins, he started reading the book gratefully and believingly.

Some are also surprised that Bible reading does not introduce us to a “nicer” world. This biblical world is decidedly not an ideal world, the kind we see advertised in travel posters. Suffering and injustice and ugliness are not purged from the world in which God

works and loves and saves. Nothing is glossed over. God works patiently and deeply, but often in hidden ways, in the mess of our humanity and history. Ours is not a neat and tidy world in which we are assured that we can get everything under our control. This takes considerable getting used to—there is mystery everywhere. The Bible does not give us a predictable cause-effect world in which we can plan our careers and secure our futures. It is not a dream world in which everything works out according to our adolescent expectations—there is pain and poverty and abuse at which we cry out in indignation, “You can’t let this happen!” For most of us it takes years and years and years to exchange our dream world for this real world of grace and mercy, sacrifice and love, freedom and joy—the God-saved world.

Yet another surprise is that the Bible does not flatter us. It is not trying to sell us anything that promises to make life easier. It doesn’t offer secrets to what we often think of as prosperity or pleasure or high adventure. The reality that comes into focus as we read the Bible has to do with what God is doing in a saving love that includes us and everything we do. This is quite different from what our sin-stunted and culture-cluttered minds imagine. But our Bible reading does not give us access to a mail-order catalog of idols from which we can pick and choose to satisfy our fantasies. The Bible begins with God speaking creation and us into being. It continues with God entering into personalized and complex relationships with us, helping and blessing us, teaching and training us, correcting and disciplining us, loving and saving us. This is not an escape from reality but a plunge into more reality—a sacrificial but altogether better life all the way.



God doesn’t force any of this on us: God’s Word is personal address, inviting, commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, directing—but not forcing. Not coercing. We are given

space and freedom to answer, to enter the conversation. For more than anything else the Bible invites our participation in the work and language of God.

As we read, we find that there is a connection between the Word Read and the Word Lived. Everything in this book is live-able. Many of us find that the most important question we ask as we read is not “What does it mean?” but “How can I live it?” So we read personally, not impersonally. We read in order to live our true selves, not just get information that we can use to raise our standard of living. Bible reading is a means of listening to and obeying God, not gathering religious data by which we can be our own gods.

You are going to hear stories in this book that will take you out of your preoccupation with yourself and into the spacious freedom in which God is working the world’s salvation. You are going to come across words and sentences that stab you awake to a beauty and hope that will connect you with your real life.

Be sure to answer.

Eugene H Peterson

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW

The story of Jesus doesn't begin with Jesus. God had been at work for a long time. Salvation, which is the main business of Jesus, is an old business. Jesus is the coming together in final form of themes and energies and movements that had been set in motion before the foundation of the world.

Matthew opens the New Testament by setting the local story of Jesus in its world historical context. He makes sure that as we read his account of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see the connections with everything that has gone before. In fact, in his account of Jesus' birth alone, Matthew reminds his readers of two Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah.

Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; they will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for “God is with us”).

MATTHEW 1:23, QUOTING ISAIAH 7:14

*“It’s you, Bethlehem, in Judah’s land,
no longer bringing up the rear.*

*From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.”*

MATTHEW 2:6, QUOTING MICAH 5:2

Fulfilled is one of Matthew’s characteristic verbs: such and such happened “that it might be *fulfilled*.” Jesus is unique, but he is not odd.

Better yet, Matthew tells the story in such a way that not only is everything previous to us completed in Jesus; we are completed in Jesus. Every day we wake up in the middle of something that is already going on, that has been going on for a long time: genealogy and geology, history and culture, the cosmos—God. We are neither accidental nor incidental to the story. We get orientation, briefing, background, reassurance.

Matthew provides the comprehensive context by which we see all God’s creation and salvation completed in Jesus, and all the parts of our lives—work, family, friends, memories, dreams—also completed in Jesus, who himself said, “Don’t suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—either God’s Law or the Prophets. I’m not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama” (Matthew 5:17). Lacking such a context, we are in danger of seeing Jesus as a mere diversion from the concerns announced in the newspapers. Nothing could be further from the truth.





MATTHEW

1 **1** The family tree of Jesus Christ, David's son, Abraham's son:

2-6 Abraham had Isaac,
Isaac had Jacob,
Jacob had Judah and his brothers,
Judah had Perez and Zerah (the mother was
Tamar),
Perez had Hezron,
Hezron had Aram,
Aram had Amminadab,
Amminadab had Nahshon,
Nahshon had Salmon,
Salmon had Boaz (his mother was Rahab),
Boaz had Obed (Ruth was the mother),
Obed had Jesse,
Jesse had David,
and David became king.

6-11 David had Solomon (Uriah's wife was the
mother),
Solomon had Rehoboam,
Rehoboam had Abijah,
Abijah had Asa,
Asa had Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat had Joram,
Joram had Uzziah,
Uzziah had Jotham,
Jotham had Ahaz,
Ahaz had Hezekiah,
Hezekiah had Manasseh,
Manasseh had Amon,
Amon had Josiah,
Josiah had Jehoiachin and his brothers,
and then the people were taken into the
Babylonian exile.

12-16 When the Babylonian exile ended,
Jeconiah had Shealtiel,

**Rahab spoke
to Joan of Arc;
never doubt
the power
of a woman's
heart.**

NASOI, "GET YOUR PEACE"

Shealtiel had Zerubbabel,
Zerubbabel had Abiud,
Abiud had Eliakim,
Eliakim had Azor,
Azor had Zadok,
Zadok had Achim,
Achim had Eliud,
Eliud had Eleazar,
Eleazar had Matthan,
Matthan had Jacob,
Jacob had Joseph, Mary's husband,
 the Mary who gave birth to Jesus,
 the Jesus who was called Christ.

- 17 There were fourteen generations from Abraham to David,
 another fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile,
 and yet another fourteen from the Babylonian exile to Christ.

The Birth of Jesus

18-19 The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they enjoyed their wedding night, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

20-23 While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—'God saves'—because he will save his people from their sins." This would bring the prophet's embryonic revelation to full term:

Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son;
They will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us").

24-25 Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

Scholars from the East

1-2 **2** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod’s kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We’re on pilgrimage to worship him.”

3-4 When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

5-6 They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

It’s you, Bethlehem, in Judah’s land,
no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people,
my Israel.”

7-8 Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.”

9-10 Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

11 They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

12 In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

**People marching
through the streets
again,
down into the
city and into the
shopping malls.
Peace on earth and
goodwill to all men.
If we hope to get
there in the end,
this is not the way
to Bethlehem.
Oh, no, we're
following the
wrong star.**