Exploring Matthew’s infancy narrative last time provided a handy means to get an initial measure of this evangelist’s distinctive themes and emphases. Today I want to face more directly the question of his sources and how he redacted them in producing his gospel. The first step in doing that is to gain a sense of how Matthew shaped his gospel, particularly through his redaction of Mark.

I want to begin by saying that I am in strong agreement with Riches’ contention in his first chapter that we need to use all the methods at our disposal in coming to grips with the gospels. And I think he is on target in debunking the notion that somehow purely literary readings represent an advance over the use of source and redaction criticism; we need both. Not surprisingly, I say this to prepare you for a lecture that will be very much steeped in source and redaction critical reasoning, and I do so to argue for the benefit such an approach affords our understanding of Matthew.

Matthew’s gospel is the most highly organized of the Synoptics. The clearest mark of this is the fact that he groups all of Jesus’ teaching into five units of instruction: the Sermon on the Mount, in chapters 5-7; instruction on discipleship in chapter 10; a set of parables in chapter 13; instructions on church order, gathered in chapter 18; and then Matthew’s version of the eschatological discourse in chapters 24-25. So, whereas Mark and Luke have Jesus’ teaching scattered throughout their gospels, Matthew has organized it topically, assembling it into five discourses.

In between these discourses we find blocks of narrative. The first two chapters are, of course, Matthew’s infancy narrative. In chapter three Matthew tells the story of John the Baptist, his confrontation of the Pharisees, and his baptism of Jesus, while chapter four narrates Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness and his call of the first four disciples: Peter and Andrew, James and John. At the conclusion Matthew provides this summary: “23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. 24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. 25 And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” – At that point, of course, we get Jesus climbing a mountain and taking a seat to teach the people in what is dubbed “the Sermon on the Mount.”

Following that discourse, chapters 8 and 9 are organized around 9 miracle stories, which we’ll examine shortly. After the discourse on discipleship in chapter 10, chapters 11 & 12 narrate a series of confrontations between Jesus and the
religious leaders. Following the discourse composed of parables in chapter 13, chapters 14-17 form a set of scenes in which questions are raised about Jesus’ identity, he enters into conflicts with the religious leaders, and he heals those encumbered by illness. Chapter 18 is the discourse about church order, at which we’ll take a look, and then chapters 19-23 present a mixed set of narratives once again. To a certain degree these are determined by geography, with chapters 19-20 narrating discussions and debates Jesus has while passing through Judea on his way to Jerusalem, while chapters 21-22 narrate Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem, his cleansing of the temple, and a series of disputes with its religious leaders. Chapter 23 is a series of woes Jesus pronounces against the religious leaders, and is unique within the Synoptics.

Finally, chapters 26-28 contain Matthew’s Passion Narrative, concluding with his report of Jesus’ appearances to his disciples and his final charge to them.

One thing apparent from this overview is that some narratives have a less evident structure than others. Each of the discourses is highly structured, not least of all because they have a recognizable introduction and conclusion, as you can see from this chart, which has the introductions printed in burgundy and the conclusions in blue. Typically the discourses open with a report of the disciples or the crowds coming to Jesus, although the discourse on discipleship opens in 10.1 with Jesus summoning the twelve.

More remarkable, however, is Matthew’s consistent conclusion of these discourses with the phrase, “When Jesus had finished,” whether complemented by “these things,” “these words, “these parables,” or some other direct object. This phrase is found only in Matthew and only as a summary transition to the next unit. And strikingly, Matthew places it at the end of the one discourse he used fairly much as he inherited from Mark, chapters 24-25.

Chapter 23, Jesus’ woes against the Pharisees, is another highly structured unit in the First Gospel. However it lacks the concluding formula Matthew affixes to his discourses, nor does it really fit into the category of teaching; it comes closer to a harangue.

Also highly structured in Matthew, as we have seen, is his infancy narrative in chapters 1-2, as well as his narrative of John the Baptist and Jesus’ baptism by him, and the story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. These stories constitute a nearly seamless narrative, the only break being between the Magi’s visit when Jesus was a toddler and the report of John’s work some 28 years later.

As I noted earlier, chapters 8 & 9 are given unity by being a collection of 9 miracle stories with a highly developed structure (as we’ll soon see). Similarly, chapters 11 & 12 are unified by their narration of confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders. These chapters also show a carefully developed structure.

Matthew’s Passion narrative largely follows Mark’s, although Matthew gives it
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an even more pronounced structure at points. Similarly, his report of Jesus’ appearances constitutes a well-developed narrative.

That leaves the narrative sections of chapters 14-17 and 19-22, which are difficult to describe well because they contain such diverse materials. I.e. they lack the structure of the discourses and the other narratives. So what happened? Why did Matthew seemingly take such care in structuring everything through chapter 13, as well as the discourse in chapter 18 and the series of woes in chapter 23, but fall so short of success in his other middle chapters? In order to answer that question, we’ll need to consider the kind of unity Matthew has given to his first three discourses and the narratives standing between them.

The fundamental structuring device in all these sections is a triadic pattern. That is, items are grouped in threes. E.g. you’ll recall that the narrative just after the Sermon on the Mount is composed of 9 miracle stories. More important, they are grouped in three pairs of three stories each. Specifically, 8:1-4 narrates Jesus’ healing of a leper, vv. 5-13 the healing of a centurion’s servant, and vv. 14-15 the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law. What marks this off as a triad, rather than just the first three of a string of 9 miracle stories, is the summary interlude with an attached saying by Jesus that Matthew provides in vv. 16-22: “16 That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. 17 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” 18 Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. 19 A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” 20 And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” 21 Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” 22 But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

This summary interlude marks off the first set of three miracles and takes us to the threshold of the next triad. In 8:23-27 Jesus stills a storm at sea that threatens the safety of the boat he shares with the disciples. In vv. 28-34 Jesus exorcises demons from two men who accost him once his ship arrives on shore. The first 8 verses of chapter 9 then narrate Jesus’ healing of a paralytic, whom he commands to take up his bed and walk. Then in vv. 9-17 we find another interlude: the report of Jesus calling a tax collector named Matthew to follow him, after which he dines with tax collectors and sinners, to the accompaniment of the Pharisees’ disapproval. Then Jesus entertains a question about why his disciples do not fast, responding with the pronouncement that you don’t put a new patch on an old garment or new wine into old wineskins; i.e. mixing old practices with the newness Jesus announces would be a bad fit. This saying concludes our second triad of miracle stories.
The final triad of miracle stories begins with Jesus raising from the dead the daughter of a synagogue official, within narrative is embedded (a Markan intercalation Matthew inherited) a story of Jesus healing a woman with a chronic blood flow. Following that is a succinct story of Jesus healing two blind men. Then stands an equally brief story of Jesus exorcising a demon that held a man mute. At the end of this triad we find this summary and concluding statement by Jesus: “Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” This marks the end of the third set and of this narrative unit.

And so, chapters 8-9 are structured as three sets of three miracle stories, each capped with a narrative or summary statement, plus a concluding pronouncement by Jesus.

A similar triadic pattern governs Matthew’s infancy narrative we looked at last time. You may recall that the genealogy at the beginning of that narrative is arranged in three segments, as Matthew points out in his summary: “17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.”

Moreover, recalling the narratives we explored last time, there are essentially three acts to the story. First stands the angel’s appearance to Joseph (in 1.18-25) to reassure him that Mary’s pregnancy is not what he assumes and to tell him the identity of the son they can expect. The narrative of chapter 2 has two components to it: the story of the Magi in vv. 1-12 – their arrival in Jerusalem, the direction of them to Bethlehem, and ultimately their return to the east by a route avoiding Herod’s palace.

The second story is the flight of Jesus’ family and their return, with a report of Herod’s execution of his plot to rid himself of this presaged “King of the Jews.” Matthew’s infancy narrative is thus executed in three stages, another triadic pattern. And we could extend our discovery of triadic patterns into chapters 3 & 4, where both John and Jesus are introduced in a narrative structured triadically.

What’s more, this triadic structure of the narratives carries over into the discourses. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, is given to triads, as in the list of social issues in 6.19-7.12, where we find two groups of three. At the head of each we find a basic principle stated, as in 6.19-21: “19 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth … 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven… 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
That is followed by a parable about the eye, reinforcing the general principle; in this case, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.” (The point here is to have a singular purpose.) Then we find a second, briefer parable reinforcing that point: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

The same pattern is repeated in 7.1-6, where the issue of instruction is laid out in the first verse: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” Then stands another parable about the eye – in this case, a warning against trying to remove a speck from another’s eye, when you have a beam in your own – after which follows a second parable/parabolic statement, this one about not giving “what is holy to dogs” or throwing “your pearls before swine,” since they will only attack you. The connection with the preceding two statements is obscure, but the intent seems to be to limit how far one goes in withholding judgment from others. Not judging others does not mean putting up with shenanigans forever. Some people won’t respond, no matter how graciously you treat them. In any case, this statement is the third in this series.

Now, you’ll recall that each triad in the miracle stories of chapters 8 & 9 is capped by a summary statement or narrative distinct from the miracle stories. A similar device appears in this two set unit. At the end of 6.19-24 we find a statement of encouragement, whose content you might recall from these excerpts: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?… Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’… But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Obviously, this encouragement is an appropriate conclusion to a unit that focuses on avoiding attachment to earthly treasures.

We find another encouragement following the triad of statements about judging others in chapter 7. Again, I’ll present a representative selection of verses: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For every-one who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened…. If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”
There is a difference, however, between this encouragement and that at the end of the first set: there is no obvious thematic link between these words and vv. 1-6 the way there was between 6.25-34 and vv. 19-24. Vv. 7-11 have nothing to do with the theme of judgment. But that perception is the basis for a significant inference: namely, for Matthew the triadic structural pattern was key; it’s what guided his arrangement.

Significantly, this pattern of triads, unique among the Synoptics, finds a parallel in another work of Jewish literature, tractate ‘Abot of the Mishnah, which transmits sayings of the wise in groups of three. And it certainly shouldn’t surprise us that an author who organized his traditions as methodically as Matthew, creating five distinct discourses, should have invested other parts of his work with a pattern.

In any case, the tendency to compose in triads is a distinctive feature of Matthean composition, and (more to the point) had an impact on how he used his source material, particularly the material he drew from the Gospel of Mark.

By-and-large, in chapters 3-13 Matthew follows Mark’s order of presentation. There are, however, five places Matt transposes Markan material to a different point in his narrative.

Matthew’s narratives about John and Jesus, in chapters 2 & 3, follow closely the order of Mark 1.1-21, even if Matthew has included material gained from a source other than Mark. Of course, chapters 5-7 are the Sermon on the Mount, and thus lack a parallel in Mark, although Matthew utilizes Mark 1.22 – the next verse in the Markan sequence after he stepped aside from Mark’s narrative for the Sermon on the Mount – as the conclusion to the Sermon: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Matthew simply prefixes to that his formula for concluding a discourse, “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things….”

The narrative resumes in chapters 8 & 9 with the three sets of triadically arranged miracle stories, capped with summary statements. And it is here that Matthew first (at least so it seems) departs from Markan order. Rather than following on with Mark 1.23, Matthew picks up Mk. 1.40-45 (the healing of a leper), after which he uses a story he shares with Luke about the Centurion who appealed to Jesus to heal his ill servant. Then he retreats in Mark’s narrative to pick up Mk. 1.29-31 (Jesus’ healing of Peter’s mother-in-law), after which he continues with the summary report from Mk. 1.32-34. Matthew then inserts his fulfillment citation of Isaiah 53.4 (“He took our infirmities and bore our diseases”), onto which he tags a saying by Jesus on discipleship, which he shares with Luke (= Q).

The next set of three miracle stories begins with Jesus calming a storm, a story Matthew draws from Mark 4.35-41. Following that he relates the story of the demoniac in the territory of the Gerasenes, which in Mark follows on the heels of
the story of Jesus calming the sea. But then Matthew returns to Mark’s sequence he broke off earlier, picking up Mark 2.1-12, the story of the paralytic healed after his friends lowered him through the roof of the house where Jesus was. He then continues in step with Mark, relating the story of Jesus calling the tax collector, followed by Jesus’ response to charges that he was behaving lawlessly with a pronouncement about not putting a patch of new cloth on an old garment or putting new wine into old wineskins.

What’s conspicuous, then, is the way Matthew jumps around in drawing on material from Mark. What makes this even more striking is that after chapter 13 he changes tactics, following Mark’s order consistently. And this peculiarity coincides with another change of course for Matthew: from chapter 14 on he no longer composes in triads. Why did he stop that method after chapter 13 and follow Mark? Did he simply get tired of doing so, as some have suggested?

To resolve this conundrum, we need to bring back into play a feature of the relationship between Matthew and Luke we have noted previously: namely, Matthew and Luke differ in their placement of “Q” material, inasmuch as Luke collects most of it in two sections of his Gospel, where he interweaves it with his “L” material.

The first bloc of intertwined “Q” and “L” material is in Luke 6.20-8.3, Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain.” The second, and larger, bloc of special material is gathered in 9.51-18.14, the “Lukan travel narrative,” which uses material drawn mostly from Q and L, with little taken over from Mark. Of course, double tradition material is also concentrated in the 3rd and 4th chapters of Matthew and Luke, their stories about John, Jesus’ baptism, and his temptations in the wilderness. Aside from these, there is only one other place Q material appears in Luke: 19.11-27. So Luke’s Q material is clustered in these blocs, largely isolated from Mark’s traditions of Jesus’ sayings.

Before comparing the placement of Q material in Matthew, let’s recall that rather than scattering Jesus’ teaching among accounts of healings or exorcisms, as does Luke, Matthew organizes it into five major discourses, only one of which finds a parallel in Luke: the Sermon. Equally significant is the way Matthew has constructed these units. The Sermon on the Mount incorporates a few fragments taken from Mark, but the bulk of it is Q material, mixed in with some of the material unique to Matthew (“M” material).

Matthew’s remaining four discourses have been composed in a different fashion, but one they share in common. Whereas in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew is predominantly a mixture of Q and M, with the order of Q material parallel to Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, the four other discourses in Matthew are built around Markan material, interspersed with Q material and material from Matthew’s own special source/sources. The use of Markan material as the framework for these
discourses distinguishes them both from the Sermon on the Mount and from Luke’s handling of Q and his special material.

Equally, outside these major discourses, in chapter 23, when Jesus inveighs against the Pharisees, the basic substratum of this tirade is based on Mark 12:38-40, which Matthew expands by interweaving with it Q material and his own special material.

Thus, whereas Luke tends to *interrupt* the Markan narrative order abruptly with blocs of non-Markan (viz. Q & L) material, Matthew (outside of the Sermon on the Mount) takes a Markan passage as his starting point, expanding it with non-Markan material to create a larger discourse.

So, how does this help answer the question of why Matthew composes in triads through chapter 13, rearranging Markan material to suit his purposes, but then follows Mark’s order in chapters 14-27, at the same time ceasing to compose in triads? To answer that, let’s turn to the Sermon on the Mount and make some observations about the material Matthew used in constructing this discourse.

Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount is longer than Luke’s Sermon on the Plain by 460 words (1992 words in Matthew to Luke’s 1532). Even more significantly, Matthew incorporates Q sayings that Luke utilizes elsewhere, and he uses material from the Gospel of Mark, just as he does in his other discourses, while Luke does not regularly incorporate Markan material into his Sermon on the Plain (in fact, he uses only 1 Markan saying).

If I bring the verses of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount alongside the chapters of Luke’s gospel, you can see that all elements of Luke’s Sermon appear in Matthew’s (as marked in blue). And yet, much of Matthew’s sermon derives from Q sayings (identified in red) that are found in other contexts in Luke; and if we look at where they reside in Luke, it is not surprising that all of them are within the Lukan Travel Narrative, where Luke has his largest collection of non-Markan material. The Sermon on the Mount also contains material from Matthew’s own source (3, marked in green) and, just as significant, it contains four unique groups of material from Mark (in black), and one Markan passage it shares with Luke 7:1-5, the only Markan material in Luke’s sermon.

What this means is that Matthew has packed much of his Q material into his Sermon on the Mount, material Luke distributed in later phases of his Gospel. This illustrates on a broad scale what is discernable also from his other orchestration of materials into discourses: as Riches says, Matt is concerned, above all, with Jesus the teacher. However we construe his grouping of teachings into five discourses – and certainly Bacon’s hypothesis is tenuous – it is clear that Matthew constructed his gospel so as to place Jesus’ teaching front-and-center.

But what does all of this have to do with the way Matthew changes his compositional strategy after chapter 13? What I want to propose is that Matthew’s
different treatment of Mark’s narrative, and his shift from composing in triadic structures, are attributable to his having already integrated most of his non-Markan teaching material into the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, of the passages that are typically attributed to Q, we find the greatest concentration in the Sermon, although we also find Q material prominent in Jesus’ teaching on discipleship in chapter 10 and the collection of parables in chapter 13 – all of which stand in chapters Matthew composed in triads. But within the first 13 chapters we occasionally find Q material outside of the discourses, particularly in chapters 8-9, which contain Matt’s set of nine miracle stories. Of course, let’s recall also that chapters 2 & 3, the stories of John and Jesus coming on the scene, contain Q material. Moreover, the majority of chapter 11 is composed of Q material, while at the heart of chapter 12 we again find much Q tradition, so that this section of conflict narratives (again arranged triadically) derives largely from Q.

We again find Q material in the woes against the Pharisees of chapter 23, which likewise exhibits triadic patterns and has close affinities with chapter 6 (as we shall see). We also find Q material inserted as supplements in chapters 24 & 25, the eschatological discourse Matthew inherited from Mark. The only other places we find Q material after chapter 13 are a single verse in chapter 17 (v. 20) and five verses in chapter 18, Jesus’ discourse on church life, where are found the parable of the lost sheep (vv. 12-14) and Jesus’ response to Peter’s question about how many times one must forgive an offender (vv. 21-22). That is where all the Q material is located in Matthew, and it helps answer the question about why Matthew composed in triads and rearranged Mark’s material through chapter 13, but then stopped.

Notice that Q material permeates chapters 3-13: it is found not only in the discourses, but also in the narratives. After chapter 14, however, its greatest concentration is in chapters 23-25, while only three isolated pieces appear in chapters 17 & 18.

The inference to be drawn is fairly obvious, I think: Matthew’s use of the bulk of the Q material in chapters 3-13 led him to shape those chapters more strongly than those from 14 on. Consequently, it was in those 11 chapters that Matthew arranged the material gleaned from all his sources in triads. From chapter 14 on there was no longer a need to rework the narrative as much because he didn’t interject his remaining Q material as frequently. And so from chapter 14 on, Matthew follows Mark’s narrative order more closely.

Of course, we also know that Matthew had his own stock of material at hand, referred to as “M”, which he wove into his narrative. We’re already aware that Matthew incorporated some of his special stock of material into the five discourses and chapter 23, but where is the rest? The striking thing is that, within chapters 3-13, only in 11.28-30 do we find “M” material outside of the discourses. And after
chapter 13, through chapter 22, we find “M” but occasionally outside the discourses. Only in chapters 27-28 do we find “M” playing a major role in Matthew’s composition, although we’ll have to investigate how that is so. In any case, it is apparent that, outside of chapters 27-28, the greatest number of insertions of material into the Markan narrative occurs in chapters 3-13, which accounts for Matthew’s composition in triads and his willingness to reorder Markan material.

With this sense of Matthew’s sources and how he used them in mind, we can explore the distinctive themes Matthew weaves into his gospel, beginning with the way he depicts Jesus’ chief opponents, the Pharisees. We’ll begin with the story of John the Baptist.

All three Synoptics begin their story of John with a report of his activity, the majority of which is verbally identical. And all three include a quotation from Isaiah 40. Notice that Mark’s quotation begins with words absent from both Matthew and Luke. In fact, this part of the citation is drawn from Malachi 3.1, even though Mark attributes it to Isaiah.

Luke alone extends the quotation of Isaiah 40 to include: “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Matthew restricts his citation to just the verse from Isaiah that Mark cites. Why doesn’t he carry either the lengthier citation we find in either Mark or Luke? It’s most likely because of what he alone shares with Mark.

Matthew and Mark provide, at this point, a description of John’s attire and diet, together with a report of the crowds flocking to him, although Matthew has reversed the order, putting the report of John’s attire and diet before the report about the crowds, and just as obviously he has drawn this material from Mark, judging from the verbal overlaps.

But, while Mark concludes his narrative with John’s claim about the one greater than he who will succeed him. Matthew postpones that report, focusing more specifically on one group among the crowds: “7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

This address is absent from Mark, but is paralleled in Luke. Indeed, the verbal agreements are so strong as to signal that Matthew and Luke are either working from the same source or one of them is dependent upon the other. Notice, however, the difference between the way these words of John are introduced in

Luke, who extended the quotation from Isaiah 40, has John addressing these words to “the crowds that came out to be baptized by him.” Matthew, on the other hand, has John addressing a subset of those he reports flock to John for baptism. It is the Pharisees and scribes—rather than the crowds generally— that Jesus castigates as a “brood of vipers,” asking where they got the notion they needed to flee impending divine wrath.

But just when we are convinced that Matthew and Luke are on the same page, he omits the dialogue between John and the crowd that Luke reports next, in which the crowds ask what they must do, and John counsels repentance. Why has Matthew omitted this?

Given our observation that Matthew identified the target of John’s tirade as Sadducees and the Pharisees, he was likely more interested in the Baptist denouncing these groups, and so he omits this exchange with the crowd. And he keeps the focus on their judgment by adopting Q’s “and fire,” as well as the extended images of judgment that follow.

So Matthew’s hatred for the scribes and Pharisees appears early, and then repeatedly there-after. E.g. in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns his disciples, “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Later, in chapter 23, Jesus accuses them not only of refusing to enter the kingdom, but also preventing others from entering it.

Our sources of information about the Pharisees prove less illuminating than we would like, especially since much of it is late and often from sources that have an interest in either praising or denigrating the Pharisees. The only statement we have from a self-confessed Pharisee before 70 is from Paul, who characterizes his pre-conversion life as follows: “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee.”

That final phrase fits with what we know of the Pharisees’ concern for Torah obedience, and is given greater definition by what Paul says at the conclusion of his self-portrayal: “as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Paul can claim so boldly to have kept the Torah because scrupulous obedience to the Torah as a Pharisee meant also conscientiously availing oneself of such means of forgiveness for sins as the Torah offered. This reflects a movement concerned with thoroughgoing piety.

Whatever caricatures of the Pharisees we encounter in the gospels – above all in Matthew – this group, prior to the fall of Jerusalem was a lay movement genuinely intent on reviving Torah observance. We know that some Pharisees became members of the Jesus movement, not only because of Paul, but also because
according to Acts 15, which details events at a meeting on the question of what responsibility Gentile converts had to the Torah, introduces one group lobbying their view this way: “But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.” You’ll notice that the Pharisees are referred to simply as a sect, even as elsewhere in Acts Luke refers to the Sadducees as a sect.

As for the scribes, who are also frequently mentioned in the Synoptics, even though Matthew lumps them together with the Pharisees, in pre-70 Judea they formed a professional class engaged in copying and studying the Torah.

In fact, Mark retains a recollection of this in this report: “When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” – Notice that these are the scribes of the Pharisees, even as Luke’s parallel phrases this as “the Pharisees and their scribes.” In Matt’s parallel, however, we find the group reduced simply to “the Pharisees,” and elsewhere he lumps the scribes together with the Pharisees, who figure very prominently in Matthew.

In fact, if we look at a simple count of the number of times the word “Pharisees” appears in the Synoptics, we find only 11 references to them in Mark, over against 29x in Matthew and 26x in Luke. While Luke’s number is close to Matthew’s, in his gospel the Pharisees are simply components of a larger group interacting with Jesus or dinner hosts of Jesus; they are not given the prominent role the way they are in Matthew.

Matthew gives them that role by introducing them into scenes where they are not present in Mark and Luke. E.g. in Mark 3.22 we find the following assessment of Jesus’ ability to exorcize demons: “And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” The same statement appears in Matthew 9.34, although it is not attributed to the scribes: “But the Pharisees said, “By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons.”

Moreover, Matthew depicts the Pharisees as Jesus’ mortal enemies. In Mark 3.12, after a dispute with Jesus, “The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him,” – Matthew, however, ascribes this conspiracy to a single group: “But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.” Whereas Mark’s report recognizes the Pharisees lacked a position to act unilaterally and needed official sanction, Matthew depicts them as able to execute their own plans, without the help of the aristocrats Mark refers to as “the Herodians.”

Similarly, in 21.45, following Jesus’ parable about those in charge of a vineyard being judged for killing the son of the vineyard owner, Matthew reports, “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was
speaking about them.” – Matthew’s assumption is that the Pharisees were, like the “chief priests,” power brokers in Jerusalem, whereas what evidence we have for the Pharisees’ role before Jerusalem’s fall indicates that they were a relatively small group with little power.