Otto Dix (1891-1969) is one of the greatest German Expressionist artists of the first half of the 20th century. He was known for his work in the 1920s that focused on the margins of society. He was deeply impacted by his service in World War I and his early work reflects those experiences. His post-World War II work was largely religious in nature, and during that time he produced an important series of expressionist lithographs that depict the book of Matthew.

Otto Dix was born the son of a railway worker, and as a teenager served apprenticeships in both painting and decorative arts before attending the Dresden School of Arts and Crafts. He served in the German army during World War I and was observed drawing when a battle had begun. His visual legacy, including his Der Krieg cycle, with its relevant contemporary echoes, is one of the most powerful documents of the human community’s inhumanity that we have available to us today.

He was appointed professor of art at the academy in Dresden (1927) and was elected to the Prussian Academy (1931). After the war he was leading exponent and founder of Die Neue Sachlichkeit (The New Objectivity), which was a pseudo-Expressionist movement characterized by a realistic style combined with a cynical, socially critical stance. In the early 1930s the Nazi regime, incensed by his anti-military works, branded his art “degenerate,” confiscated 260 of his paintings and dismissed him from his teaching post at Dresden Academy.

Dix retreated to Lake Constance in southern Germany where he painted landscapes. But after World War II most of his art was devoted to religious themes. Dix had an outstanding knowledge of the Bible and he never tired of the scriptures. He had intermittently created several important biblical paintings even as early as 1912 (Pieta), then he referred back to those works, perhaps as away to
heal from all that he had witnessed. These works became the visual source for several of the thirty-three lithographs in the 1960 Matthäus Evangelium, printed by the Berlin publisher Klibor.

When asked about the Bible he is quoted to have said, ‘you have to read every single word. For the Bible is a wonderful history book. There is great truth in all of it. Most people don’t read the Bible, but reading the Bible, reading it as a book, you might even say it is the book of books...simply magnificent!’ A year before his death in 1965 Maria Wetzel asked him in an interview if “his roots were in religion after all.” He responded, “In the history of the Bible, there are such wonderful images in it; when I was a boy, when we had ‘Bible Study,’ I always imaged to myself exactly where that might have happened in my homeland.”

This intense knowledge of the scriptures is evident in his expressionist drawing for the Matthäus Evangelium. He beings the cycle, not with the birth of Christ, but with a look back to the story of Abraham and Isaac, understanding that the reason for the coming of the Messiah was to be a sacrifice for all humanity. The Sacrifice of Isaac points to Christ's sacrificial work and atonement.
Then Dix begins the Matthew narrative with the Adoration of the Maji, capturing the moment when the learned men entered to worship the Christ Child. This is not a sentimental view of the scene but reflects the artist’s full commitment to realism. The three wise men are not kneeling, but come with a sense of inquiry to see “this thing which has come to pass.” Like so many artists over the centuries, Dix has chosen to depict the Holy Family at rest on the Flight to Egypt, but this interpretation also seems to be a kind of nativity, with Mary and Joseph gathered around the child as they contemplate “these things which have come to pass.” However, the tone changes immediately, as it does in the scriptures, to that of horror, as Dix has so graphically represented in the Massacre of the Innocents. These are not Roman soldiers, but executioners dressed in German military uniforms. From Dix’s perspective the Bible makes sense only if it sheds light upon the present.
One of the most outstanding lithographs of the entire suite, *Baptism of Jesus*, is an exceptional piece of expressionist art. The baptizer, dressed in shaggy animal skins is contrasted with the pale and fragile body of Jesus, who is shrouded in water as he is baptized with water and the Spirit. In the book of Matthew the work of Christ’s ministry begins with the *Calling of Peter* from his fishing occupation to that of following Jesus, and quickly moves to the *Sermon on the Mount* in which Jesus stands above the crowded that is clustered together eager to hear his words.

The next few lithographs pick up on the sequence of miracles performed in Jesus’ early ministry; *Stilling the Storm, Healing of Jarius’s Daughter*, and *Healing of the Blind*. It is interesting to note that Dix included a rather obscure passage in which Jesus answers a request for a sign that he is indeed the Messiah. He replies “no sign shall be give them except the Sign of Jonah.” Dix has composed a rather playful way to illustrate this Old Testament event, with waves swirling around a frolicking whale, just as Jonah is swallowed whole.
The narrative then moves to the *Beheading of John the Baptist* with King Herod sitting behind Salome as she flaunts John’s head on a platter. With visual clarity Dix then chooses to illustrate another series of miracles, *Feeding the Five Thousand*, *Healing of the Lepers*, the *Coin in the Mouth of the Fish*.
At this point in the suite the images turn to the central focus of Dix’s biblical work, the Passion of Christ, recognizing redemption with its suffering and Christ’s unconditional acceptance.

Following the Matthew story, he begins Holy Week with the *Entry into Jerusalem*—Christ riding a donkey in the foreground and the palm-waving crowd faintly sketched against the distant buildings. To reference the Passover as written in the first few verses of Matthew 26, Otto Dix interestingly chose to feature the haunting image of the *Sacrificial Lamb* with feet tied together ready for the slaughter. Rather than show Jesus and his disciples behind a long table, Dix gathers the group in a circle similar to other renderings from medieval times, creating an atmosphere of intimacy and companionship. In the *Last Supper*, Jesus is breaking the bread, a symbol of the reconciliation that his broken body and death will bring. At this point the images take on a voice of darkness: Christ struggles in *Gethsemane* with is fate; the *Capture of Jesus* provides another opportunity for Dix to blend two worlds with the soldiers wearing German helmets as they arrest Jesus; and then in the deeply wrenching scene of *Betrayal*, Peter shrinks in shame from the bottom of the picture. The actual events of the Passion of Christ begin to really come into focus as He is presented to the people as *King of the Jews* with crowds jeering in *Scorning*. Then Christ stumbles and falls while *Carrying the Cross* and is beaten this time by what appears to be the common person, perhaps you or I.
The focal point of the suite is the haunting "Crucifixion" which reflects Dix’s emotional despair and horror related to the torturous war. Dix was very interested in the physical suffering of the crucifixion and death and not in some sentimental view of the event:

“Then he’s hung up there, he’s put up there on the cross looking like a ballet dance, you know, pretty and polished and pretty, wonderfully anointed and pretty...And then when you read a detailed description of the crucifixion, well, that is something that is so horrible, awful. How the limbs swell up...How the person can’t breathe. How the face changes color. How he dies a horrible, utterly horrible death. Then he’s portrayed up there as a wonderfully beautiful youth. Well, that’s all fraud...And if he was a great man, then he was in the most horrible pain. He was tortured so much. He collapsed and fell unconscious, having to carry the cross like he did...It was worse than it was in the way of the war.”
But the story does not end with the death of Christ, it is really only the beginning. Dix now combined two events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus: the moment during an earthquake when the *Angel at the Tomb* bursts onto the scene, rolls away the barriers to the tomb, and frees Christ as he rises from the Dead, combined with the arrival of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as they find the tomb opened and empty. Matthew's gospel ends with a note that challenges all of us to go and tell the story again. It is the mission of all who believe to “Go therefore into the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”