



The Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew - Introduction

The Gospel of Matthew has long been the most popular of the four canonical Gospels: consistently placed first in the canonical lists, it was widely used in early Christian communities, and for some time was thought to be the first Gospel written (though now we believe Mark was written first). Indeed, even today, people are often most familiar with Matthew's Gospel. For example, over the next eight weeks, you'll be encountering some of Jesus' most famous teachings: "Love your enemies," "Turn the other cheek," "Do not be anxious about tomorrow," "Let the children come," "Go make disciples of all nations," and the Lord's prayer in the form most churches use today (as opposed to Luke's version in Lk. 11:1-4). As the most Jewish of the four canonical Gospels, Matthew also provides a nice bridge between the two testaments of the Christian Bible.

Author and Provenance

According to tradition, this Gospel was written by Matthew (also called Levi), a former tax collector and one of Jesus' twelve disciples (Mark 3:18; Matt 9:9; 10:3; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). The author implied by the text itself was clearly an early Jewish Christian who was well-educated and multilingual (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). He was also an interpreter of earlier traditions, adopting and adapting several sources in the telling of his tale (the Gospel of Mark, a hypothetical sayings-source scholars call "Q," the OT, oral tradition, and possibly a "special source" scholars call "M" or "special Matthew"). Most scholars believe the Gospel of Matthew was written from Antioch in Syria during the 80's C.E., after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E.

Several details suggest that Matthew was written after the destruction of the Temple. For example, Matthew 17:24-27 refers to "collectors of the double drachma." This could be a reference to a two-drachma tax levied by the emperor Vespasian on the Jews in the aftermath of the Jewish War; on the other hand, it could simply be a general tax paid to the Jerusalem Temple prior to the War. In addition, some scholars argue that the parable in Matthew 22:1-14 (especially v.7) is too close to the reality of Jerusalem's destruction to have been written before 70 C.E. In the parable, a king whose invitation to a wedding is spurned sends armies to destroy the city (which does not happen in the parallel version in Luke 14:15-24).

Addressees

Matthew's intended audience was probably a relatively well-to-do city church made up mostly of educated Jews who already believed Jesus was the Messiah, but who disagreed amongst themselves about the import of the Law. Several features of the Gospel suggest that it was written for a Jewish audience. For example, unlike Mark, Matthew does not explain Jewish customs (compare Matt. 5:1-9 to Mark 7:1-13); he portrays Jesus as a new Moses and Jesus' teachings as a new Torah; he cites the Hebrew Scriptures and refers to OT figures often, usually in order to demonstrate that Jesus fulfills Jewish prophecy. For instance, in the birth narrative, Matthew describes Joseph taking Jesus and Mary to Egypt, and back out to Nazareth. Matthew then quotes Hosea 11:1: "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son'" (Matt. 2:15). Other examples include Matt. 3:3 (quoting Isa. 40:3), Matt. 4:4-10 (quoting Deut. 8:3; Psalm 91:11-12; Deut. 6:13, 16), Matt. 12:17-21 (quoting Isa. 42:1-4), and Matt. 21:4-5 (quoting Isa. 62:11), to give just a few of many. By one count, Matthew includes 61 quotations from the Old Testament, compared to 31 in Mark, 26 in Luke, and 16 in John. Underlying these quotations is the conviction that God actively works, accomplishing the divine purposes foretold in the Jewish Messianic prophecies.

Structure

Matthew's is the most clearly organized of the four canonical Gospels. Matthew adheres fairly closely to the structural outline of his source, the Gospel of Mark, although he clearly found Mark's beginning and ending to be insufficient, since he added the infancy narrative and post-resurrection scenes to his version of the story. Alternating between blocks of narrative and blocks of discourse, Matthew's Gospel is built around five major speeches of Jesus, each of which concerns the Kingdom of Heaven:

- 5-7 Sermon on the Mount (The Ethics of the Kingdom)
- 10 Commissioning the Twelve (The Mission of the Kingdom)
- 13 Parables (The Nature of the Kingdom)
- 18 Community Instructions (The Governance of the Kingdom)
- 23-25 The Olivet Discourse (The Future of the Kingdom)

Each of these sections ends with a similar formulation:

- "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching..." (7:28)
- "Now when Jesus had finished teaching his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim..." (11:1)
- "When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place..." (13:53)

- “When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee...” (19:1)
- “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples...” (26:1)

The overarching geographical progression of the narrative depicts Jesus moving from his homeland in Galilee, to his rejection in Jerusalem, and triumphantly back again to Galilee at the end.

Distinctive Features

This a theologically mature piece, dealing with complex topics like eschatology (i.e., what followers of Jesus might hope for), a mission to all nations, salvation history, ecclesiology (i.e., how followers of Jesus should behave in community), and how the commandments of Jesus relate to the Mosaic Torah (was Jesus a lawmaker, or a lawbreaker?).

Matthew’s Jesus is a king, set against the “kings of the earth” (Matt. 17:25). The word “Christ” means “Anointed One.” In the Old Testament, anointing signified a divine covenant between God and the king of Israel (e.g., Saul, David, and Solomon; see especially the account of Jehu’s anointing in 2 Kgs 9:1-13). In Matthew, Jesus is repeatedly called the “Son of David,” a phrase that carries overtones of royalty (9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15); and he is even greater than David in Matt. 22:41-45. As a “Son of David” in the promised everlasting Davidic dynasty (2 Sam. 7:11-16), Jesus brings about the kingdom of heaven – the blessing for which the Jewish nation had been waiting a very long time.

Matthew’s Jesus is a king; he is also a teacher – a rabbi – and his disciples are learners (in Greek, the word is *mathetos*, “one who is trained/taught”). In Matthew, Jesus is a master storyteller: he often tells parables as a teaching tool, especially to describe the kingdom of heaven (notice how six of the eight parables in Matthew 13 begin with the phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is like...”). Matthew also tends to provide allegorical interpretations to explain the parables. For example, chapter 13 starts with Jesus telling the well-known parable of The Sower and the Soils (13:1-9), then he describes the reason for parables (13:10-17), and finally, he explains the Parable of the Sower allegorically (13:18-23).

Still, even as Matthew’s Jesus is a teacher, he is *more* than a teacher. For Matthew, Jesus is the embodiment of Wisdom. Matthew 11:19 speaks of Wisdom being justified by her deeds (cf. Luke 7:35, where she is justified by her children); the context of Matt. 11:1-19 suggests that Jesus himself does Wisdom’s deeds. In Matthew 11:28-30, we find a version of a wisdom saying found in Sirach, an apocryphal Old Testament writing. In Sirach, Wisdom calls people to come close and dwell with her, where they will find rest (Sir 51:23-27). In Matthew, Jesus speaks these words in Wisdom’s place.

Matthew polishes the portrait of the disciples, who are dull and uncomprehending in Mark’s Gospel. Peter plays an especially prominent role in Matthew: this is the only place we find the story of Peter trying to walk out to Jesus on the water (14:28-31), the only mention of Peter’s question about how many times to forgive (18:21-22), and the only place we are told that Peter

is the “rock” upon which Jesus will build his church (Matt. 16:17-19). Peter’s depiction in Matthew has led many to associate this Gospel with Christians who had a special regard for leadership of Peter, who was later revered as a prominent leader of Christian communities both in Antioch and Rome.

Matthew also (in)famously vilifies the leaders of the Jewish people, particularly the Pharisees. It is important for us to remember that for Jews, Pharisees are positive. They sought faithful adherence to God’s law, and offered sophisticated, learned interpretations of the Torah; many consider them to be the spiritual fathers of modern Judaism. In Matthew, however, they are Jesus’ opposition; he condemns their “hypocrisy” and includes a long list of “woes” and unfavorable comparisons (Matt. 23:1-39). The prediction that there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” at judgment time is repeatedly directed at the religious leaders. Especially troubling is the “blood curse” of Matt 27:25, which, as we shall see, reflects Matthew’s attempt to make sense of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Some scholars have taken this harsh polemic as evidence that Matthew’s community had been expelled from the synagogue. Though the specific situation is difficult to know with absolute certainty, we can see clearly that there was serious tension between Matthew’s community of Christ-followers and the Jewish leaders with whom they interacted.