

M E E T I N G

St. Matthew

T O D A Y

*Understanding the Man,
His Mission, and His Message*

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The Evangelist and His Gospel

We know St. Matthew principally (if not entirely) from the Gospel that traditionally bears his name. The Evangelist seems to have been Jewish in his background and interests. He delights in showing how Jesus fulfills Israel's Scriptures. He not only quotes several biblical passages explicitly but also provides many allusions to and echoes of Scripture. The many ethical teachings of Jesus that this Gospel writer conveys were at home in first-century Judaism and are reflected in the later rabbinic writings. Matthew stands in opposition to certain other Jews whom he calls "hypocrites" and who control "their synagogues." He is especially concerned to portray Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Mosaic Law (Torah) and one who opposes the interpretations of it put forward by the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew's major theological themes (kingdom of heaven, righteousness, eschatology) and titles for Jesus (Messiah, Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord) have deep Jewish roots.

And yet nowhere in the Gospel does the Evangelist identify himself by name or claim to be an eyewitness. The title "According to Matthew" seems to have been added in the second

century when the connection was made between this Gospel and Matthew the tax collector, who became one of the twelve apostles. This ascription raises more questions than it answers. Why was this same tax collector called Levi the son of Alphaeus in Mark 2:14? Where did a tax collector get such an extensive Jewish education as this Evangelist clearly received? Why did he rely on written sources such as Mark's Gospel and the Sayings Source Q in writing his own Gospel? But even if the traditional ascription is dubious, why then was this Gospel associated with Matthew the tax collector? Had he done missionary work in the area in which the Gospel was composed? Was he regarded as that community's patron saint? Was he responsible for handing on some of the special traditions found only in this Gospel? Scholars have wrestled with these questions for centuries. For our purposes it is enough to refer to the Evangelist behind this Gospel as "Matthew" and to try to learn as much as we can about him from a careful reading of the text that has borne his name for many centuries.

The community in which and for which Matthew originally wrote appears to have been predominantly (if not exclusively) made up of Jewish Christians. The Evangelist assumes that they keep the Jewish Law as interpreted by Jesus (5:17–20) and observe the Sabbath rest (12:1–14; 24:20). He has no need to explain to them the Jewish practices of ritual purity (15:2) and the customs of wearing prayer shawls and phylacteries (23:5). He situates Jesus' views on marriage and divorce in the context of contemporary Jewish debates about the grounds on which a Jewish man might divorce his wife (5:32; 19:9). During

his earthly ministry Matthew's Jesus insists that he has been sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24; see 10:5–6), and only after his resurrection does he send his disciples to "all nations" (28:19).

From what we can learn about the Evangelist and the community for which he wrote, it seems fair to describe this Gospel as the most Jewish of the four Gospels. This is probably why it eventually was placed first in the New Testament—because it provides the perfect bridge between the Old and the New Testaments. However, it soon circulated in Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world, became a Gospel for all Christians, and has exercised such enormous influence throughout the centuries that it has been called the most important book ever written.

On the basis of possible allusions to Matthew's Gospel in 1 and 2 Peter and in early patristic writings (*Didache*, the letters of Ignatius), it appears that Matthew's Gospel was composed before A.D. 100. The earliest date would be around A.D. 70, since there seem to be references to the destruction of Jerusalem that occurred then (21:41; 22:7; 27:25). These allusions plus the Evangelist's use of Mark's Gospel (which was written around A.D. 70) indicate that this Gospel was composed around A.D. 85 or 90.

The Jewish character of Matthew's Gospel suggests a place of composition in the eastern Mediterranean area. It must have been a city where Greek was spoken and read, with a large Jewish population and a substantial Jewish Christian community. The best candidate is Antioch in Syria, though Caesarea Maritima in Palestine and Damascus in Syria are also possible.

Matthew set out to produce a revised and expanded version of Mark's Gospel. As a careful editor, Matthew often corrected and improved Mark's Greek and omitted what apparently he considered unnecessary details. He also wanted to include more of Jesus' teachings that were available to him (and to Luke also) through what modern scholars have designated as the Sayings Source Q, as well as the many other traditions unique to this Gospel and now designated as M (for Matthew). This Evangelist has been correctly described as both a transmitter and an interpreter of traditions. While most of his material was already traditional by his time, Matthew edited it and gave it a distinctive shape in order to address the historical crisis that all Jews experienced after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70.

The three great pillars of Judaism in Jesus' time were the Jerusalem temple, the land of Israel, and the Mosaic Law (Torah). But after the disastrous Jewish revolt of A.D. 66–73, the temple and the city were in ruins, and the land was even more firmly under Roman control than before. And so all Jews had to face the question, How best can the Jewish heritage be rescued and preserved? Some Jews (Zealots) prepared for another military rebellion. Others (apocalypticists) looked for divine intervention in the near future, while faithfully observing the Torah in the present. Still others (scribes and Pharisees, the forerunners of the rabbis) gathered the traditions surrounding the Torah in order to make possible a more perfect observance of it. In this context Matthew put forward Jesus of Nazareth as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah, and the movement gathered around him as the best way of carrying on Israel's heritage as God's people. Matthew

sought to address the new situation and the new questions that had arisen for Jewish Christians like himself in the late first century. He did so by emphasizing Jesus' place in the Jewish tradition and community.

Matthew's Gospel is a revised and expanded version of Mark's Gospel. Almost everything in the sixteen chapters of Mark is included, though often in a somewhat compressed form. In the first twelve chapters Matthew does not follow Mark's sequence very closely. But from chapter 13 onward he is more careful in observing Mark's outline. On the whole, his geographical outline is taken from Mark. After movements in various places are described in 1:1–4:11, the Marthan Jesus exercises his ministry in Galilee (4:12–13:58), around Galilee and on the way to Jerusalem (14:1–20:34), and in Jerusalem (21:1–28:20). To Mark's outline Matthew has added the infancy narrative in chapters 1 and 2 and the climactic appearance of the risen Jesus in chapter 28.

Matthew has also greatly expanded the teaching material found in Mark through the inclusion of many sayings found in the Q source and in traditions special to Matthew. He has shaped these materials into five great speeches: the Sermon on the Mount, the Missionary Discourse, the Parables of the Kingdom, the Advice to the Community, and the Eschatological Discourse. For each block of teaching, Matthew has furnished a narrative introduction and a formula marking the conclusion: "when Jesus had finished saying these things . . ." According to Matthew, Jesus was and is the wisest teacher of all because he is also the Son of God (see 11:25–30).

Between the speeches, Matthew provides short narratives or stories, which in their own way serve as vehicles for the wisdom of Jesus. Matthew even turns the miracle stories into encounters with Jesus and examples of “praying faith.” Also, certain key words and phrases (“pay homage” or “worship,” “righteousness,” “little faith”) move the plot along and provide a sense of unity to the overall story. All these elements combine to produce the following outline of Matthew’s Gospel:

- The “who” and “where” of Jesus (1:1—2:23)
- The beginning of Jesus’ activity (3:1—4:25)
- The Sermon on the Mount (5:1—7:29)
- Jesus’ powerful deeds (8:1—9:38)
- The missionary discourse (10:1—42)
- The rejection of Jesus (11:1—12:50)
- The parables of the kingdom (13:1—53)
- Miracles, controversies, and the cross (13:54—17:27)
- Advice to the community (18:1—35)
- More opposition to Jesus (19:1—23:39)
- The eschatological discourse (24:1—25:46)
- Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection (26:1—28:20)

While Matthew may well be the most Jewish Gospel, for some it is also the most anti-Jewish. Its emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament and as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah can give the impression to some that the Jewish tradition has been exhausted and is no longer meaningful. It also contains a blistering attack on the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites

in chapter 23, and throughout keeps up a polemic against “their synagogues.” In 27:25 we are told that in response to Pilate’s wavering over whether to have Jesus executed “the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’” This text has often been used as a theological justification for the persecution of Jews and for the charge that they are a decide (God-killing) people.

Some scholars have even argued that there is so much anti-Jewish material in Matthew’s Gospel that it could not have been written by a Jew. However, I (and most scholars today) am convinced that Matthew was a Jewish Christian and that he has written what is both a Jewish book and a Christian Gospel (to be treated in detail in chapters 8 and 9, respectively). I contend that the ways between Judaism and Christianity had not yet definitively parted, and that Matthew and his community viewed themselves as within Judaism and indeed fighting for its survival as best they knew how. The problem came in the second century onward, when the majority within the church were non-Jews who read the problematic passages in Matthew’s Gospel through Gentile eyes—not as part of a family quarrel within Judaism but rather as reflecting a battle between two separate and hostile religions. While I do not consider Matthew’s Gospel to be anti-Jewish in its origins and in itself, I do acknowledge its anti-Jewish potential when read apart from its original historical setting and with hostile intent. It is important that Christians today, especially preachers and teachers, be sensitive to this Gospel’s anti-Jewish potential while appreciating what seems to have been the Evangelist’s real aim: to place Jesus in his context of Judaism and

to show how thorough Jesus the Jewish heritage may be preserved and made even more fruitful for all who call upon the name of the Lord God of Israel.

The six chapters that follow provide a narrative analysis of Matthew's Gospel. A narrative analysis attends to the characters and their interactions, the plot or structure of the story, the viewpoint of the narrator, and the times and places. Since this is a religious text, the analysis also considers the theological terms, concepts, and themes that are developed as the story unfolds.

There are, however, some other concerns that might contribute to a fruitful study of this particular Gospel:

- Keep in mind that Matthew's story has at least two levels—the time of Jesus' public ministry (A.D. 30), and the time of the Evangelist and his community (ca. A.D. 85).
- Since Matthew's Gospel is a revised and expanded version of Mark, look at the parallel passages in Mark (or Luke, for Q) and pay particular attention to what is unique or different in Matthew.
- Pay special attention to Matthew's uses of the Old Testament, and try to discern what authority it has in his theology.
- Try to understand why a Jewish reader today might take offense at Matthew's Gospel, and ask yourself whether this concern is justified.
- Having immersed yourself in the subtle literary expression and rich theology of Matthew's Gospel, ask yourself what special message it might have for the church and the world today.

- And reflect on how the wisdom of Jesus, preserved in the Sermon on the Mount and other parts of Matthew's Gospel, might affect how you look at your own experience and how you conduct yourself in everyday life.

For Reflection and Discussion

As you embark on this intellectual and spiritual journey, take stock of your own life and ask where you now stand. What is your goal in life, and how do you expect to get there?

What do you hope for from your serious engagement with Matthew's Gospel this year?

Do you think that anti-Judaism is a serious problem for Christians today? Why or why not?