



Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

A Guide to the Gospel of Matthew

Gary Brady

Introduction

The focus of Matthew's Gospel is Jesus, Divine Son of God and Messianic King. Today we more readily turn to John or Mark, perhaps, but for early Christians Matthew was a liturgical favourite – perhaps because, compared with Mark, its narrative style is generally more concise. It is also quite orderly in structure. Maybe we should give it more attention than we do.

Authorship

The Gospel itself gives no indication of authorship but has traditionally been ascribed to Matthew. Many early church fathers held that Matthew or Levi the tax collector, the disciple and apostle, was its author. Around AD 325 Eusebius quotes Papias to the effect that Matthew had composed the oracles of the Lord, probably a reference to the Gospel. About 150 years earlier Irenaeus (c 175) wrote that 'Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the church.' (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1). Several early manuscripts are headed *According to Matthew*.

Matthew was not prominent among the Apostles and so it is likely that this assertion is true. It would be a strange choice of pseudonym. Surely the name of a more prominent apostle would have been preferred.

There are some possible internal indicators to support this. Mark and Luke both refer to him as Levi and use his more familiar name (Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27) – perhaps it is omitted from the first Gospel because the original readers already knew it. Mark and Luke both refer to the banquet he held for the Lord being at 'his house' whereas Matthew simply says it was 'in the house' – again perhaps because he had already told those to whom he wrote where the meal was held.

Words for money appear in Matthew that are not found elsewhere in the New Testament, possibly reflecting the author's contact and financial involvement with Gentiles. Also, it is the only Gospel to record the Lord's payment of the Temple Tax (17:24–27) and the parable of the unforgiving servant where the servant owes 10,000 talents (18:21–25). Also observe the distinctive way it deals with the parable of the master entrusting wealth to his servants before heading off on a journey (cf Luke 19:11–27, Matthew 25:14–30) and the specific 'no gold, or silver or copper' of Matthew 10:9. He is the only evangelist to use the expression 'to settle accounts' (18:23, 24; 25:19) or refer to 'debt' (18:32), 'bankers' (25:27). Such details help confirm traditional authorship.

The account of his call to follow Christ is in Matthew 9:9; Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32. He was a tax collector – more like a modern day customs officer – collecting tolls on trade caravans passing through the district centred on Capernaum on Galilee's northern shores. These were a largely despised group, reviled for their close contact with Gentiles, service to an alien occupying force and their common dishonesty. Nevertheless, the Lord called Matthew to follow and he immediately obeyed, a decision that probably cost Matthew more than most. He was the least

able to go back on his decision. The banquet for the Lord, his disciples and friends, that followed included, to the Pharisees' disgust, notorious sinners (Luke 5:29–30).

As a tax collector he would have been used to taking notes in the course of his work, a habit he may have continued as a disciple. It would have helped in compiling his Gospel.

Beyond his name and occupation little is known. He is listed among the Twelve in the Gospels, and among the Apostles in Acts 1:13, after which Scripture records nothing more. Tradition says he preached in Judea for about 15 years, then in Ethiopia, Persia and Parthia. This may be mere legend.

Original language?

The idea that Matthew originally wrote in Aramaic was first put forward by Papias (see above). He is quoted in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* (3.39.16). The view has been rejected because no trace of the original remains. Papias says many attempted to translate into Greek, 'as they are able', which does not suggest polished results, whereas the Greek of the Gospel is fine. The book contains no *aramaisms* but does explain customs, such as Pilate releasing a prisoner at the Feast of Passover (27:15). This would surely be unnecessary for Aramaic readers in Palestine. It is possible that, having written in Aramaic, Matthew himself produced not a translation but a Greek version of his work. Demand for written information about the life of Christ from Gentile churches would have increased as the first century wore on. Gentile churches soon outstripped Aramaic speaking ones as the gospel spread across the known world.

It is important to remember that this is speculation. Most early Church Fathers seem to know only of a Greek Gospel. Only Papias suggests a Semitic original.

Date of writing

It is impossible to be certain on this but limits can be set and tentative conclusions reached. It was not written after 70 AD, the year the Temple was destroyed. Matthew relates at length the Lord's teaching on Jerusalem's destruction (24:1–28). It seems highly unlikely that he could have written this after the event without referring to it explicitly. (Liberal scholars reject predictive prophecy and so readily assign dates after 70 AD).

It is unlikely to have been written before the first dispersal of Christians from Jerusalem (Acts 8:4) when the church was all together with the Apostles in the city. Their presence meant there was no need for a written account of Christ's life. To some extent, dating will depend on whether we believe Matthew wrote before Mark. Hendriksen narrows down to AD 63–67, which fits Irenaeus's statement that it was written while Peter and Paul were in Rome. It is as good an estimate as any, though some go for AD 45–55.

It may be that it was written in Syrian Antioch, or at least for the Antioch church, which had a large Gentile element speaking both Aramaic and Greek. The Gospel itself shows signs of having been written for Jews, although it also relates to Gentiles. This would suit a church like Antioch.

Material unique to Matthew

Narratives

- Vision of Joseph 1:20–24
- Visit of the magi 2:1–12
- Flight into Egypt 2:13–15
- Massacre of the infants 2:16
- Pilate's wife's dream 27:19
- Judas's death 27:3–10
- Resurrection of saints 27:52
- Bribery of guards 28:12–15
- Great Commission in this form 28:19–20

Parables

- Weeds 13:24–30
- Hidden treasure 13:44
- Pearl of great price 13:45–46
- Dragnet 13:13:47
- Unmerciful servant 18:23–35
- Labourers in vineyard 20:1–16
- Two sons 21:28–32
- Marriage of King's son 22:1–13
- Ten virgins 25:1–13
- Talents 25:14–30

Miracles

- Two blind men 9:27–31
- Mute demoniac 9:32–33
- Coin in fish's mouth 17:24–27

Matthew uses miracles more as proof of Jesus's Messiahship than to advance the narrative, even when he duplicates what is in Mark and Luke.

Purpose and Features

The opening phrase: 'The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham' is similar to the repeated phrase in Genesis 'the generations of ...' Christ's genealogy follows. Matthew wants to show that all he relates about Jesus goes back to God's covenants with Abraham and David of a great nation and an eternal house. These are fulfilled in him. Matthew portrays Christ as teacher but especially as king. The phrase *kingdom of heaven* occurs 33 times; *kingdom of God* five times; the royal, messianic title *Son of David* nine times.

Use of the Old Testament

Matthew often speaks of the fulfilment of prophecy, frequently quoting or alluding to the Old Testament. There are some 53 quotations, easily more than in any other Gospel. Matthew shows, for example, that Messiah would:

- Be born of a virgin 1:23 Isaiah 7:14
- Go down into Egypt 2:15 Isaiah 59:7
- Reside in Nazareth 2:23 referring (probably) to prophecies about Messiah being despised by men.
- Be announced by a forerunner 3:3 Isaiah 40:3
- Minister in Galilee 4:15,16 Isaiah 9:1
- Do healing miracles 8:17 Isaiah 53:40
- Be humble 12:18–21 Isaiah 42:1–3
- Speak in parables 13:35 Psalm 78:2
- Come as a lowly King 21:5 Zechariah 9:9
- Be arrested 26:56 Several prophecies
- Be crucified 27:35 Psalm 22

These are not random or incidental but are chosen because they suit Matthew's purpose. They confirm that he is writing for a Jewish audience familiar with these texts and interested in their fulfilment.

Structure

In 4:17 and 16:21 we have the phrase 'From that time ...' Seemingly insignificant, it marks major turning points. In 4:17, the opening of the Lord's public teaching ministry. Having established the Lord's identity from Scripture, Matthew relates that when the Lord heard that his forerunner John was in prison, 'from that time' he began to teach and preach, saying 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'. In 16:21, after Peter's confession, we read 'From that time Jesus Christ began

to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer', etc.

Another distinctive is the way major blocks of teaching occur, including the largest such block in all the Gospels, the Sermon on the Mount. As much as 60% of the work is teaching. To some extent the placing of these blocks gives the book its structure. Matthew obviously wanted to stress the content of the Lord's teaching, especially in regard to his relationship with God's Law, so that the full implications of the long awaited coming of Messiah might be clarified. These significant blocks of teaching are marked by a recurring concluding phrase 'When Jesus had finished these words'. It marks the close of the five sermons Matthew records. The five major blocks are located thus

- Chapters 5–7 Sermon on the Mount
- Chapter 10 Commissioning disciples
- Chapter 13 Parables of the Kingdom
- Chapter 18 Humility and forgiveness
- Chapter 24, 25 The last things (Chapter 23 could be included here)

Characteristics

Some have seen in these five major sections a parallel to the Five Books of Moses, the Torah. A new Moses gives a new Law for his disciples, a law written on the heart. Certainly fulfilment is a theme and it could be said that the New Testament people of God, Christ's followers, are to fulfil what the Old Testament people failed to do. The Lord fulfils all that Scripture foretells. He also makes clear (eg Chapters 5–7) their true meaning, which had been obscured by Pharisaic legalism. But Jesus does more than simply complete the old ways, he inaugurates a new way, with new and distinctive teaching.

Some see 13:52 as a key verse. First Century Teachers of the Law never said anything new. They always went back to the traditions. The Lord himself had authority to build on what was given, not rejecting it but bringing out what was old, developing it and taking it consistently further to the fulfilment of God's purposes. This is one reason why his teaching came to the people with authority and freshness.

Another feature is an apparent love for the number three. Examples include the threefold division of the genealogy (Chapter 1), three temptations (Chapter 4), three illustrations of righteousness, three prohibitions and three commands (Chapters 6, 7), three groupings of three types of miracle (Chapters 8, 9). It is unlikely that Matthew attached symbolic significance to the number. It is more likely that he had in mind the Jewish requirement that truth be established by testimony from two or three witnesses. It is suggestive of how his mind worked.

Finally, it has been noted that, for some reason, the Sadducees are mentioned more times in this Gospel than in any other.

Matthew shows Jesus is the one the prophets foretold, the Messiah. He shows that he came to his own but they would not receive him. He also shows from the start, with the account of the Magi, that Gentiles would be drawn to him. He includes biting denunciations of the Jews for rejecting Messiah. For instance, the woes on the cities that rejected him (11:20-24). Such a statement must have staggered the Teachers of the Law and priests. Also note the lengthy discourse (Chapters 24, 25) on Jerusalem's overthrow.

Study Plan

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| <i>Discussion 1 Navigating the narratives</i> | Dealing with the stories unique to Matthew and how to preach them as described above. |
| <i>Discussion 2 Teaching the teaching</i> | Dealing with the teaching sections in Chapters 5–10 and 18 and how to preach them. |
| <i>Discussion 3 Preaching the parables</i> | Dealing especially with Chapter 13 and the unique parables in Chapters 20–22 and how to preach them. |

- Discussion 4 Meditating on the miracles* Dealing especially with Chapters 8, 9 and 17:24–27 and how to preach them.
- Discussion 5 Learning from the law* Dealing with the Old Testament as it is employed by Matthew and how to preach these sections – see the appropriate section above. Especially the Messiah prophecies.
- Discussion 6 Expounding eschatology* Dealing with Chapters (23?) 24 and 25 and how to preach them.