

Introduction

Gospel of Matthew



The Gospel According to Matthew

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

A Bible Study by Dr. Scott Hahn and Mark Shea
Edited by Jennifer Phelps

Gospel of Matthew Introductory Material

Apostolic Authorship

A curious feature of the four canonical Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—is that none of them are signed. Many other works written roughly the same time but not accepted by the Church as divinely inspired make explicit claims to authorship by famous persons, such as the so-called “Gospel of Nicodemus” or the “Gospel of Thomas.” The Greek title *Kata Matthaion* (According to Matthew) was given to the first Gospel by the early Church. Some readers get nervous when they learn this, assuming that the Church has no idea whether the four Gospels included in the New Testament actually were written by their attributed authors. Signatures were unneeded on these Gospels because the Christian community preserved the memory of the author of each of the canonical Gospels and afforded special honor to these four Evangelists. In the same way, the community preserved the awareness that, whatever the name on the label said, the alleged “Gospel of Nicodemus” was fraudulent. The verification of Matthew’s Gospel, as of all the canonical Gospels, was based on the testimony of the apostles and the entire Christian community. Attribution of this Gospel to the apostle Matthew was unanimous within the ancient Church.

This attribution is remarkable precisely because the Evangelist Matthew isn’t a particularly notable character in Scripture. Very little is known of him except that he also went by the name “Levi” (*Mk* 2:14 and *Lk* 5:27) and that he once worked as a tax collector before he was called by Jesus (*Mt* 9:9). From this, scholars speculate that he may have been a scribe. Many scribes used their literacy skills to work as tax collectors or publicans. Scripture records that Matthew once held a great feast for Jesus (*Lk* 5:29) and that he became one of Jesus’ disciples (*Mt* 10:2-3). Finally, it’s known that Matthew was present at Pentecost (*Acts* 1:13). Beyond this, he’s utterly obscure. It’s highly unlikely that the Church would fix on Matthew as the author of the first Gospel unless he is indeed its author.

Since the rise of the historical-critical method of biblical criticism, it’s become commonplace to fudge the apostolic authorship of Matthew by saying that the ancients understood authorship

Matthew Introduction

differently than contemporary readers. This theory holds that followers or the “school” of a particular writer could produce works that then could be attributed to the writer himself. Scholars who subscribe to this thinking assert that the Gospel of Matthew is the work of a “Matthean community” and not directly written by Matthew’s hand.

Church teaching is clear about the authorship of the Gospels, and *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation from the Second Vatican Council, specifically states that these four biblical books were written by apostles or by men directly associated with the apostles. Traditional opinion holds that two of the Evangelists—Matthew and John—were apostles. Mark traveled as St. Peter’s companion, and Luke was a companion of St. Paul’s. The Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church, echoes an unbroken tradition that goes back to the Church Fathers of the early 2nd century.

Date of Composition

Matthew’s Gospel is the first of the three synoptic Gospels (the other two are Mark and Luke). “Synoptic” means “seen with one eye.” These three Gospels long have been noted for their remarkable similarities, not only with respect to the events reported but even in the very language used to report them. On the basis of this similarity, some Scripture scholars argue that Matthew used the Gospel of Mark and another document called “Q” (from *quelle*, the German word for “source”) as sources when he composed his Gospel. A difficulty arises because accepting this theory would mean accepting that Matthew, an eyewitness to the events of Jesus’ life recorded in the Gospel attributed to him, relied on the writings of a non-eyewitness. Numerous patristic writers (for example, Sts. Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Jerome) argue that Matthew recorded the earliest Gospel, that he did so in Hebrew or the closely related language of Aramaic, and that his work later was translated into Greek. Evidence strongly indicates that the Gospel of Mark originally was written in Greek. Textual analysis confirms that there is indeed an underlying Hebrew basis for sayings found in Matthew, many of which contain puns that are only intelligible in Hebrew. In fact, St. Jerome writes that he saw a Hebrew text of Matthew’s Gospel in the library at Caesarea. Early sects preserved the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew under the title “According to the Hebrews.”

Other scholars, taking for granted the assumption that Matthew’s Gospel is dependant on Mark’s Gospel, argue that the Gospel of Matthew therefore was written well after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Generally, the rationale for this argument is that Matthew records Jesus clearly prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem. The assumption here is that true prophecy doesn’t ever occur, so Matthew must be placing this “prophecy” into the mouth of Jesus after the event. The problem with this theory is that neither Matthew’s Gospel nor any other Gospel clearly describes the destruction of the Temple as an event that has occurred. If the Gospel writers could have done this, they most certainly would have.

The entire thrust of the New Testament is that the Old Covenant has passed away and the New Covenant has arrived. There are endless arguments to the effect that circumcision no longer is required, that the Levitical priesthood no longer is necessary, that animal sacrifices must give way to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Not one of the Gospel writers claims: “See! We told you!”

This surely is because none of them were writing after the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In his Gospel, Matthew takes particular pains to point out occasion after occasion where prophecy is fulfilled. His mysterious silence in the case of the destruction of the Temple is best explained by assuming that, when Matthew composed his Gospel, the prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem hadn't yet been fulfilled. This idea gains greater force when readers note that other documents known to have been written after the destruction of the Temple do indeed refer back to that event as "Exhibit A." The fulfillment of the prophesied destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem was a strong argument used against the Judaizers in the early Church who demanded conformity to the Levitical system as a prerequisite for becoming a Christian.

According to the unanimous testimony of the early Church Fathers, the beginning book of the New Testament was written by the apostle Matthew in Hebrew or Aramaic sometime between 50 and 70 A.D. and was translated into Greek by some unknown person or persons shortly thereafter. The apostolic origin of this Gospel repeatedly has been confirmed by the Church.

Jewish-Christian Audience

Textual and patristic evidence indicates that Matthew's Gospel primarily was addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience living in Judea. Matthew assumes that his readers will be familiar with Jewish customs, and he makes little effort to explain their meaning. Mark, on the other hand, is believed to have been writing his Gospel to Roman Gentiles. Matthew quotes many more passages from the Old Testament than do the writers of the other three Gospels. One of the principal burdens of Matthew's mission is to prove that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of messianic prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew also is attempting to show that Jesus is the author of the new and final covenant that all the previous Old Testament covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David anticipate. There are more than a hundred references to the Old Testament in Matthew's Gospel, and they range from direct quotations to paraphrasing to allusions. Many of these are taken from the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) and a few come directly from the deuterocanonical books (those found only in the Catholic Bible, which is based on the Septuagint). The bulk of the Old Testament Scripture references in Matthew's Gospel come from the collection of books that are included in both the modern canon of Hebrew Scriptures and the Protestant Old Testament. One example is the famous "Immanuel" prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14. One of the most notable of the allusions from the deuterocanonical books is found in Matthew's account of the crucifixion (*Mt* 27:41-43), which very clearly appears linked to the inspired account of the sufferings of the "just righteous man" in Wisdom 2:12-20.

Significance of Geography in Matthew's Gospel

In Jesus' day, Israel was divided into three areas—Galilee in the far north, Samaria in the central region, and Judea in the extreme south. The entire region was about the size of the state of New Jersey. In his Gospel, Matthew is interested in the Messiah's restoration of the descendants of all 12 tribes of Israel and not just the salvation of the inhabitants of Judea living in and around Jerusalem. The Jews primarily are descendants of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Matthew's Gospel, however, focuses a great deal of attention on Jesus' activities in Galilee, where many descendants of the other 10 tribes of Israel still lived.

Matthew Introduction

This can be confusing to readers who mistakenly assume that the words “Jew” and “Israelite” are synonymous. In the course of their long history, the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel were joined as part of a single kingdom only very briefly for a period of about 80 years during the reigns of David and Solomon. After that, civil war split the kingdom. Descendants of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin formed the southern kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as their capital. Descendants of the 10 remaining tribes formed the northern kingdom of Israel. In 722 B.C., the northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians, who deported and dispersed the inhabitants among the Gentiles. These descendants of the northern kingdom sometimes are referred to as the “10 lost tribes of Israel.”

Only the kingdom of Judah survived, but not without its inhabitants also undergoing a period of deportation known as the Babylonian Captivity. A Jew is a person who practices the religion of Judaism, which developed after the Babylonian Captivity. The term “Jew” historically has been applied to members of the surviving tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The word “Israelite” is used to refer to descendants of all 12 of the tribes of Israel. Jews in Jesus’ own day referred to the descendants of any of the 12 tribes of Israel living in Galilee as “Israelites.” The vast majority of the Israelites living in Galilee were descended from the 10 tribes who originally had inhabited the northern kingdom of Israel.

The long-awaited Messiah was prophesied to come from the house of David and the tribe of Judah. Despite the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, God had promised to restore the descendants of all 12 tribes of Israel. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah wrote: “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (*Jer* 31:31). God’s intention is clear to include the lost and dispersed tribes of the northern kingdom in his New Covenant.

Just how God plans to do that greatly interests Matthew. In Matthew 4:12-16, the Evangelist records Isaiah’s famous prophecy to the “land of Zebulun and Naphtali,” two of the lost tribes of the northern kingdom. Matthew also devotes a great deal of time focusing on Jesus’ activities in “Galilee of the Gentiles,” the geographical region formerly occupied by the northern kingdom. Matthew’s aim is to show that God is beginning his work of restoring the descendants of all 12 tribes of Israel in the exact location where the catastrophic deportation of the northern kingdom had taken place.

Form and Basic Theme

The principal theme of Matthew’s Gospel is fulfillment of the Old Covenant. Jesus explains this himself: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (*Mt* 5:17). Matthew is intensely interested in Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, Moses, and David. Matthew’s Gospel focuses on how Jesus’ new law fulfills and completes the old. The covenant of circumcision with Abraham gives way to the covenant of Baptism in Jesus Christ; the blood sacrifices of Moses give way to the Eucharistic sacrifice of Jesus Christ; and the ruins of David’s kingdom are now restored in a new and spiritual kingdom governed by the son of David who is the true king of the Jews. The Church repeatedly is contrasted with earthly Israel. The disciples function as a sort of cabinet of

royal ministers, and Peter's prime-ministerial authority in the Church is drawn directly from Old Testament imagery: "And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (*Isa 22:22*). Peter is the "Rock" upon which the new Temple of the Church is founded.

The Gospel of Matthew, because it's written to Christians of Jewish background, models itself on the Pentateuch, or the Law of Moses found in the first five books of the Old Testament. Matthew's Gospel also can be divided into five main sections, or "books." Jesus is portrayed as a new Moses ascending a new mountain to deliver his New Covenant (*Mt 5:1-7:29*). These five "books" are bracketed between a prologue and a conclusion that act as bookends. Each of the five "books" consists of a narrative section recounting the acts and miracles, followed by a sermon or discourse by Jesus. This alternation of narrative and discourse highlights the relationship between Jesus' words and his works.

Only Matthew's Gospel explicitly mentions the Church: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it" (*Mt 16:18*). The Evangelist's overarching theme is that the Church is Jesus' kingdom of heaven on earth, and his focus is on preserving Jesus' teaching and guarantee of the Church's stability throughout history.

Outline of the Gospel of Matthew

- 1. Prologue Narratives (1:1—2:23)**
 - A. Genealogy (1:1-17)
 - B. Infancy Narrative (1:18—2:23)
- 2. Book One (3:1—7:29)**
 - A. Narrative: Ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus (3:1—4:25)
 - B. Discourse: Sermon on the Mount (5:1—7:29)
- 3. Book Two (8:1—10:42)**
 - A. Narrative: Miracles of Jesus (8:1—9:38)
 - B. Discourse: Missionary Sermon (10:1-42)
- 4. Book Three (11:1—13:58)**
 - A. Narrative: Confrontation of an Evil Generation (11:1—12:50)
 - B. Discourse: Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven (13:1-58)
- 5. Book Four—Instructions to Peter and the Apostles (14:1—18:35)**
 - A. Narrative: Travels and Miracles (14:1—17:27)
 - B. Discourse: Sermon about the Church (18:1-35)
- 6. Book Five—Teaching in Judea and Jerusalem (19:1—25:46)**
 - A. Narrative: Events in Judea and Jesus' Teaching in the Temple (19:1—23:39)
 - B. Discourse: The Olivet Discourse (24:1—25:46)
- 7. Conclusion Narratives (26:1—28:20)**
 - A. Anointing at Bethany (26:1-16)
 - B. The Last Supper (26:17-29)
 - C. Betrayal and Trials (26:30—27:26)
 - D. Crucifixion and Burial (27:27-66)
 - E. Resurrection (28:1-15)
 - F. The Great Commission (28:16-20)

Voices of the Saints

Since the Evangelists wrote what Christ stated and declared, it ought by no means be said that he wrote nothing himself, when in fact his members accomplished that which they had knowledge of by the statements of the head. For whatever he willed that we should read of his deeds and sayings, he commanded to be written by those Evangelists, as if they were his own hands.

—Saint Augustine, doctor of the Church

Catechism Connections

- To learn the three criteria the Church teaches for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit, see paragraphs 112-114 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*.
- For more information about how the Church was foreshadowed from the beginning of the world, see CCC 760.
- It was Jesus' task to accomplish the Father's plan of salvation in the fullness of time. To learn how the Church is the kingdom of heaven on earth, see CCC 763.

Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II called the Bible the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are: knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that ‘all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us; and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this Revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

—speaking to the 2004 assembly
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

No portion of these materials may be reproduced in any form without written permission from Catholic Scripture Study, Copyright 2007.