



THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Matthew's Position Among the Gospels

As a Gospel, Matthew is an ancient biography, and the information treated in the introduction to the Gospels in general also applies to Matthew. But just as other ancient biographies differed from one another even when they described the same person, so do the four Gospels. Of the four Gospels, Matthew is the most carefully arranged by topic and therefore lends itself most easily to a hierarchical outline. Along with John, Matthew is also an emphatically Jewish Gospel; Matthew moves in a thought world resembling that of the emerging rabbinic movement (the circle of Jewish sages and law-teachers) more than do the other Synoptic Gospels. (Our sources for rabbinic Judaism are later than the NT, but later rabbis avoided early Christian writings, so the frequent parallels—sometimes even in sayings and expressions, for which see, e.g., Mt 7:2; 18:20; 19:3, 24; 21:21; 22:2; 23:25—presumably stem from concepts, customs and figures of speech already circulating among sages in the first century.)

Authorship

As noted above, the traditions of the Gospels' authorship are very early. Works as large as Matthew's Gospel were major literary undertakings. As suggested for the Gospels generally, in a work this size, authorship would be one of the last matters forgotten. That observation would surely be particularly relevant for Matthew's Gospel, which seems to have enjoyed popularity right from the start. Matthew was the early second-century church's favorite and most-cited Gospel.

Some raise questions about the ancient tradition in the case of Matthew. One reason for these questions is that the earliest tradition about Matthew's Gospel (from a very early second-century church father named Papias) is that he wrote in Hebrew and that other Gospels, probably including Mark, drew on this work. Most scholars agree that our current Gospel of Matthew was not written in Hebrew, nor does it appear to be mostly translated from Hebrew. Most scholars, moreover, believe that our current Gospel of Matthew makes use of Mark's Gospel, casting doubt on Papias's apparent suggestion that Matthew wrote first (although it is possible to interpret Papias differently).

QUICK GLANCE

AUTHOR:
Matthew, also called Levi

AUDIENCE:
Greek-speaking Jewish Christians

DATE:
Between AD 50 and 90, perhaps in the 70s

THEME:
Matthew presents Jesus as the Jewish Messiah sent by God to fulfill OT prophecy.

If Papias was wrong about some details, why should we trust him on others? This is a legitimate concern. Nevertheless, some other factors may mitigate the concern. First, some scholars believe that even if Papias does not properly describe our current Gospel of Matthew, he preserves some genuine information; possibly Matthew wrote a collection of Jesus' sayings (fitting the meaning of Papias's word here) in Hebrew or Aramaic, on which others (including Matthew's later Gospel in Greek) drew. Second, people are usually more apt to be correct about the simple fact of a document's authorship than about the circumstances of its writing. So even if Papias was partly or largely wrong, if he knew anything at all about these works written just a generation before him, he likely knew about their authorship.

Another objection that some raise against the traditional belief that Matthew wrote this Gospel is that Matthew, who was one of Jesus' disciples (9:9; 10:3; Mk 3:18), would not need to depend on Mark's Gospel, since Matthew was an eyewitness of most of Jesus' public ministry. Ancient approaches to eyewitness sources differed somewhat from modern approaches, however. Thus when the historian Xenophon writes an account of events in which he participated, he nevertheless depends heavily on an earlier-published work by another author, because the other work was already in wide circulation. By the same token, Matthew could have been an eyewitness and nevertheless used Mark because its wide circulation (or its association with Peter) made it a standard work. None of this proves that Matthew wrote this Gospel. It does, however, call into question the conviction with which some scholars dismiss that early tradition.

Provenance and Date

There is no consensus and no certain means of resolving Matthew's precise setting or date. Some general considerations may be relevant. Because Matthew, more than any other NT document, addresses Jewish concepts closely paralleled in the emerging rabbinic movement, the common scholarly view that he wrote from the Roman province of Syria (which included Judea and Galilee) makes good sense. Some scholars also find similarities between Matthew and other documents from early Syrian Christianity.

Because Matthew wrote in Greek, which dominated in Syria's urban centers, rather than Aramaic, which dominated in rural areas, Matthew's core audience might have been located in an urban setting. Many scholars thus suggest that Matthew writes especially for Antioch in Syria. Antioch had a large Jewish community, one of the few Jewish communities not devastated by the Judean war; it also was an early Christian center of mission to Gentiles (Ac 11:20; 13:1–3; Gal 2:11–12).

Ultimately, what we can be sure of is that Matthew wrote especially to Jewish believers in Jesus in the eastern Mediterranean world. Whatever specific "core" audience he may have envisioned, as the author of a major literary work Matthew probably hoped that his Gospel would circulate as widely as possible.

Matthew's date is also a matter of much debate. If Matthew was the first Gospel writer, he probably wrote before Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70. A larger number of scholars, however, believe that Matthew made use of Mark's Gospel, and many thus date Matthew after 70. On this view, it is not surprising that Matthew must urge his Jewish Christian audience to bring the message of the kingdom to Gentiles—many Jewish followers of Jesus at that time would have felt little love for the people who destroyed their holy city and enslaved many of their people. Nevertheless, even before 70, tensions were building toward that climax, so a similar background could be relevant on either dating.

A majority of scholars think that Matthew writes after 70 also because of allusions to the

The Magi Visit the Messiah

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea,^a during the time of King Herod,^b Magi^c from the east came to Jerusalem^d and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" We saw

2:1 ^aLk 2:4-7
^bLk 1:5
2:2 ^cJer 23:5
^dMt 27:11
^eMk 15:2; Jn 1:48; 18:33-37
^fNu 24:17

his star^e when it rose and have come to worship him.^f

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.
⁴When he had called together all the

^a Traditionally wise men

of the groom's parents. Most people in antiquity supposed that a man and woman together alone for even a short time (less than an hour) would give way to sexual temptation. This would be all the more the case with those who were young; young men were considered particularly prone to passion. On average Jewish men married when about 18 to 20, with their brides in their mid-teens (sometimes even as young as 12 to 14). Yet Joseph and Mary abstained from intercourse before Jesus' birth. On the first night of a wedding feast, intercourse would normally rupture the bride's hymen, and the bloody sheet could be displayed as proof that she had entered marriage as a virgin. By making love on the first night of their wedding, Joseph and Mary could have proved that she had a virgin conception. Yet God's plan was not merely a virgin conception, but a virgin birth (v. 23). Joseph and Mary chose God's honor above their own.

2:1-2 *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.* It was common for dignitaries to come and congratulate a new ruler. Magi undoubtedly came with a significant caravan. Magi. These were a famous class of astrologers and dream-interpreters who served the Persian king. Their title appears in the most common Greek version of the OT only in Daniel, where it applies to Daniel's enemies; this is not surprising, since astrology, as a form of divination, was forbidden in Scripture. Yet these Magi come to worship the new king (vv. 2,11) as Matthew often emphasizes. God calls followers from unexpected places (cf. 3:9; 8:10-12; 12:41-42; 21:31).

2:2 *star.* Some scholars think this is a conjunction of the heavenly sign that Persians associated with Judea together with the one they associated with kingship. Others associate it with other reported celestial anomalies about this time.

2:3 *he was disturbed.* Although Scripture forbade astrol-

ogy, most of the ancient world had come to believe in astrology from the east, considered the "science" of its day. Jewish people generally doubted that the stars controlled Israel's future, but they granted that the stars predicted the Gentiles' future. It was also widely believed that comets and other heavenly signs predicted the demise of rulers; for this reason some rulers reportedly executed other members of the elite, so that the other deaths, rather than their own, could fulfill the predicted demise. Herod undoubtedly respected foreign ideas. Besides honoring Israel's God, Herod built temples for Caesar in Gentile cities.

6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

2:5 ^gJn 7:42

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."^g

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time

2:6 ^hZsa 5:2; Mic 5:2

ⁱ Micah 5:2,4

of the Messiah was to be born ... in Judea ... Bethlehem. If the star specified a king born in Judea, the Magi naturally expected to find him in Jerusalem's palace. But it is Scripture that specifies the new king's exact birthplace, and for this Herod consults his own wise men. (There is a parallel to this in one Jewish tradition, in which a scribe warned Pharaoh about the birth of Moses, Israel's deliverer.) Probably most of the "chief priests and teachers of the law" (v. 4) Herod gathered were members of the Sanhedrin, Jerusalem's municipal aristocracy. Herod had reportedly killed members of the Sanhedrin that opposed him and replaced them with his own political supporters. These Bible experts know precisely where the expected king should be born: in David's hometown of Bethlehem, as prophesied in Mic 5:2. Although everyone knows the Magi's mission (vv. 2-3), there is no indication that the Bible experts join them in their quest. Knowing the Bible is not always the same thing as obeying it.

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MATTHEW 2:1



HEROD THE GREAT

Herod the Great achieved power in Judea with Roman backing; he brutally suppressed all opposition. Herod was a friend of Marc Antony but, unfortunately, an enemy of Antony's mistress Cleopatra. When Octavian (Augustus) Caesar defeated Antony and Cleopatra, Herod submitted to him. Noting that he had been a loyal friend to Antony until the end, Herod promised that he would now be no less loyal to Caesar, and Caesar accepted this promise. Herod named cities for Caesar and built temples in his honor.

Ethnically Herod was an Idumean (an Edomite); his ancestors had been forcibly converted to Judaism, and he built for Jerusalem's God the ancient world's largest and most magnificent temple. Politically astute, however, Herod also built temples honoring the divine emperor Augustus and made lavish contributions to Gentile cities in or near his territory. Among his other reported politically savvy acts was the execution of members of the old Sanhedrin who opposed him; he replaced those council members instead with his own political supporters. He did not usually tolerate dissent. When some young disciples of religious teachers took down the golden eagle that Herod had erected on the temple, he had them executed.

Most of our sources about Herod focus on his acts in Jerusalem, but the character of Herod that they reveal fits what Matthew says about him. So protective was Herod of his power and so jealous of potential rivals that his more popular brother-in-law, a very young high priest, had a drowning "accident"—in a pool that archaeology shows was very shallow. When his favorite wife Mariamne, a Maccabean princess, was falsely accused of adultery he had her strangled, though he later named a tower in his palace in her honor. He executed two of his sons who were falsely accused of plotting against him. Five days before he died he executed another son (the one who had falsely framed the other two).

continued on next page

people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵"In Bethlehem^g in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

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are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."^g

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So much did Herod crave honor it is said that when he was on his deathbed he ordered many nobles arrested. He thought that if many people were executed on the day that he died, he could ensure that there would be mourning rather than celebration at the time of his death. When he died, however, the nobles were released and the people celebrated. ♦



A model of Herod's palace in Jerusalem. The towers were named after important people in Herod's life: Hippicus (a friend), Phasael (Herod's brother), and Mariamne (Herod's wife).

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God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."¹⁶

¹⁷Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'¹⁷"

4:6 ¹⁶Ps 91:11, 12
4:7 ¹⁷Dt 6:16

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan!¹⁰ For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'¹¹"

¹²Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.¹²

4:10 ¹¹1Ch 28:2
¹²Dt 6:13
4:11 ¹⁰Mt 26:53;
Lk 22:43;
Heb 1:14

⁸ 6 Psalms 91:11, 12 ⁹ 7 Deut. 6:16 ¹² 10 Deut. 6:13

the devil quotes Ps 91:11–12 out of context. The psalm refers to God's protection if one falls; it does not refer to jumping.

4:7 Continuing the general context of his previous quotation, Jesus quotes Dt 6:16, which in context warns against Israel's dissatisfaction with God's provision in the wilderness.

4:10 Still following the context, Jesus cites Dt 6:13, which prohibited idolatry (Dt 6:14), recognizing the one true God (Dt 6:4–5, 12).

4:11 angels ... attended him. Trusting the Father rather than creating bread (vv. 3–4) or presuming on angels (vv. 6–7), Jesus here receives angelic help after his fast (cf. 26:53).

MATTHEW 4:17



KINGDOM

In Biblical languages, the term translated into English as "kingdom" usually meant "reign," "rule," or "authority." Jewish people recognized that God reigned as king over the world he created (Ps 22:28; 145:12–13; Da 4:3, 34). Some believed that they affirmed this whenever they recited the *Shema*, acknowledging that there was just one true God (Dt 6:4).

But while Jewish people acknowledged God's present rule, most looked for God's unchallenged reign in the age to come (Da 2:44–45; 7:14, 27). Many prayed regularly for God's future kingdom—for him to reign unopposed, to fulfill his purposes of justice and peace for the world. One familiar prayer that came to be prayed daily was the *Kaddish*, which in its ancient form began: "Exalted and hallowed be his great name ... May he cause his kingdom to reign."

By Jesus' day, many were familiar with Daniel's prophecy about four kingdoms and believed the fourth and final kingdom to be the current Roman Empire (Da 2:37–43). Daniel prophesied that in the time of that fourth kingdom, God would establish an eternal kingdom, overthrowing the other ones (Da 2:44). This kingdom belonged to a "Son of man," a human one, whose rule was associated with the deliverance of God's people and contrasted with the preceding empires that were compared with beasts (Da 7:12–14, 17–18, 21–22). Daniel spoke of these truths as "mysteries" (Da 2:28–29; cf. 2:47). Thus it is not surprising that the Gospels speak of the "secret" or "secrets" of the kingdom (Mt 13:11; Mk 4:11; Lk 8:10).

Jesus' first followers in the New Testament, who believed that the coming Messianic king had already come once and that the first fruits of the future resurrection had occurred, often treated the future kingdom as also present. We recognize that just as the king has both come and will come again, his kingdom has already invaded this world but remains to be consummated. Where the other Gospels use "kingdom of God," Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven" with just four or five exceptions. This Jewish expression appears elsewhere and reflects the Jewish use of "heaven" at times as a respectful and roundabout way of saying "God." ♦

Jesus Begins to Preach

¹²When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison,¹² he withdrew to Galilee.¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum,¹⁴ which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—¹⁵to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵"Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—¹⁶the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."¹⁷

¹⁷From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven¹⁸ has come near."

Jesus Calls His First Disciples

4:18–22pp — Mk 1:16–20; Lk 5:2–11; Jn 1:35–42

¹⁸As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee,¹⁸ he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter¹⁹ and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.¹⁹ "Come, follow me,"²⁰ Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his

4:12 ¹²Mt 14:3
¹³Mk 1:14
4:13 ¹³Mk 1:21;
Lk 4:23, 31;
Jn 2:12; 4:46, 47
4:14 ¹⁴Isa 9:1, 2;
Lk 2:32
4:17 ¹⁷Mt 3:2
4:18 ¹⁸Mt 15:29;
Mk 7:31; Jn 6:1
4:19 ¹⁹Mt 16:17, 18
4:19 ¹⁹Mk 10:21;
28, 52

brother John.²¹ They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them,²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus Heals the Sick

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee,²³ teaching in their synagogues,²⁴ proclaiming the good news²⁵ of the kingdom,²⁶ and healing every disease and sickness among the people.²⁷ News about him spread all over Syria,²⁸ and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed,²⁹ those having seizures,³⁰ and the paralyzed;³¹ and he healed them.³² Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis,³³ Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.³⁴

Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount

5 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,² and he began to teach them.

The Beatitudes

5:3–12pp — Lk 6:20–23

He said:

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹

¹⁶ 16 Isaiah 9:1, 2 ²⁵ 25 That is, the Ten Cities

4:13 Capernaum. A fishing town of perhaps 1,000 or 2,000 on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is never mentioned as ministering in the two largest cities in Galilee, Sepphoris or Tiberias, but Capernaum was well situated for contact with the rest of Galilee. Later sources show that Capernaum became a stronghold for Galilean followers of Jesus.

4:15–16 The context of the cited passage (Isa 9:1–2) is clearly Messianic (Isa 9:6–7). This passage also allows Matthew to connect Jesus again (cf. 13:5–6; 21:2–3) with mission to the Gentiles. Despite the historic connection with Gentiles in Galilee, however, its Jewish cities and towns observed the Law of Moses.

4:17 the kingdom of heaven has come near. See the article "Kingdom," p. 1616.

4:18 they were fishermen. Family businesses were common. Many scholars argue that commercial fishermen were better off economically than peasants, who comprised the majority of the empire's (and Galilee's) population. Most people could not usually afford meat, but fish was more available, and fishing was a major occupation on the Sea of Galilee. Note that the sea was actually a lake; only Galileans called it a sea. The Gospels' usage of this word reflects their dependence on Jesus' original Galilean setting.

4:19 Come. Respectable teachers usually waited for disciples to choose them; only the most radical sages were reputed to choose their own disciples. follow me. A disciple would come "after," or walk behind, his teacher. fish

for people. In Scripture, God sometimes used people's backgrounds, e.g., as shepherds (Ex 3:1; 1Sa 17:15; 2Sa 5:2; Isa 63:11).

4:22 immediately they left the boat and their father. Leaving one's family and livelihood was a rare and serious commitment. Disciples were usually in their teens, and many of Jesus' disciples may have been in this range.

4:24 all over Syria. Judea and Galilee belonged to the Roman province of Syria; even Syria's major Gentile cities (such as Damascus and especially Antioch) included many Jewish residents. The Decapolis, a group of Hellenistic cities in Syria near Galilee, included such towns as Gadara, Gerasa, Hippos and Pella. The primary feature of these cities that connected them was their Hellenistic (Greek) character, but many Jewish residents lived there in this period, all who were ill. Sickness was pervasive and people gathered at hot springs or any place they hoped to find a cure.

4:25 Large crowds. That crowds would follow one reputed to work miracles is to be expected. Even hot springs with apparent curative properties drew large numbers of ailing people.

5:1 sat down. Senior teachers of the law would sit to explain it. Some scholars compare Jesus' teaching from a mountain here to Moses' giving the law from a mountain (cf. Ex 24:12).

5:3 Beatitudes constitute a common literary form (e.g., Ps 1:1). See note on Lk 6:20.