

Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew

The word “gospel” is used frequently in the OT; the Hebrew word (*bsr*) is found 24 times, notably in Isaiah: 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1. For purposes of the gospel according to Matthew, Isaiah 61:1 anticipates One anointed by the Holy Spirit who would bring the “good news” (*bsr*; the “gospel”) to the afflicted. The prophet Nahum echoes Isaiah 52:7 in 1:15: “Behold! On the mountains the feet of him who brings good news (*bsr*, the “gospel”), who announces peace!” Mark begins his biography, identifying it as the “beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1). Jesus identifies His message as the “good news” or “gospel” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 11:5; 24:14; 26:13). Apparently that designation, “gospel,” came to be a title for the lives, or biographies, of Christ written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second century, was the first to use the designation “gospel” for the written record of Jesus’ life (*Apol.* 1.66; *Dial.* 10.2).

The gospels as a literary genre is unique to the New Testament. There are some parallels in some forms to other genres but the gospel genre is unique. That would be appropriate for the Man who is unique in Himself. While the gospels tell the story of Jesus, generally chronologically, from His birth to His death, the focus is on the last week of Jesus on earth. Indeed, Mark devotes 1/3 of his gospel to Jesus’ last week.

AUTHOR:

The manuscripts of Matthew, as well as the other gospels, were circulated, as far as the evidence shows, with their current designations: “According to Matthew,” etc. The earliest such manuscripts date to around 125 AD. Early Christian writers are unanimous that the author was Matthew, the tax collector (9:9). A tax collector should have been fluent in Greek, literate, and accustomed to taking notes, which would not have been necessary for an apostle (see below under “Inspiration”). Mark (2:14) and Luke (5:27, 29) identify the tax collector by the name “Levi.” According to Luke, as soon as Matthew / Levi began following Jesus, he threw a dinner and invited his friends and family to meet His new Master. He was an evangelist at heart.

Matthew was an apostle (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13) who gave a banquet for family and friends as he introduced them to Jesus (Matthew 9).

Patristic writers who attributed the gospel to Matthew are: Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome.

Papias lived about 130 A. D., was a bishop in the church of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, roughly a generation after the apostles (John) quit writing. The church historian, Eusebius (4th century), quotes Papias relative to Matthew and Mark (*H. E.* 3.39.14-16; 127):

“And John the Presbyter also said this, Mark being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy but not however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord, for he neither heard nor followed our Lord, but as before said, he was in company with Peter, who gave him such instruction as was necessary, but not to give a history of our Lord’s discourses: wherefore Mark has not erred in any thing, by writing some things as he has recorded them; for he was carefully attentive to one thing, not to pass by any thing that he heard, or to state any thing falser in these accounts.’ Such is the statement of Papias, respecting Mark. Of Matthew he has stated as follows: ‘Matthew composed his history in the Hebrew dialect, and every one translated it as he was able.’”

Some suggest that patristic writers after Papias were dependent on Papias, but that is not obvious.

There are various ways to interpret Papias’ statement:

1. He could be referring to Jesus’ sayings in some kind of Aramaic writing, which does not exist now. The suggestion has barely been made that Matthew actually wrote two gospel

accounts, one in Aramaic (referred to by Papias but now lost) and one in Greek, which we still have.

2. Papias was mistaken as to the language of Matthew's gospel. A similar understanding suggests Papias meant "Jewish language" rather than "Hebrew language." Perhaps he refers to *style* (Semitic style) rather than language.

3. Matthew used some other Aramaic writing or gospel (rather than his own).

Matthew reads like it was originally written in Greek. He was a Jewish Christian with a good understanding of the OT, so that he was bilingual. Greek was widely used in Palestine in the first century.

Why did early Christians append Matthew's name to the gospel if he was not the author?

Matthew leaves some Aramaic words untranslated, such as "corbanas" (Matt. 27:6) and "raca" (5:22). These words might not be evident in the English translations. There are also Jewish customs which are not explained, such as washing the hands (15:2) and wearing phylacteries (23:5).

"Matthew" is found 5 times in the NT: 9:9; 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15. The last time Matthew is mentioned in the NT is Acts 1:13.

THE "SYNOPTIC" PROBLEM:

J. J. Griesbach, a German living at the end of the eighteenth century, assigned the designation "synoptic" to the first three gospels since they were easily "viewed together," the literal translation of "syn (together) optic (seen)."

You do not have to be particularly observant to notice that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are extremely similar. Only about 1/3 of Matthew is unique to him. Matthew has a total of 1,068 verses and encompasses about 80% of Mark's gospel. Matthew and Luke have about 220-235 verses in common, but distinct from Mark. Mark has only about 30 verses that are unique to him, material found neither in Matthew nor in Luke. This similarity is reflected in chronology, content, and vocabulary.

That common material between Matthew and Luke is often identified as "Q," abbreviated from *Quelle*, German for "Source." While many see literary dependence between the three gospels, one might also simply recognize strong similarity. If they are quoting Jesus exactly, wouldn't they have verbal similarities? If they are closely describing Jesus' actions, wouldn't they describe His action with verbal similarities? If they were guided by the Holy Spirit (see below), wouldn't they be very similar? Isn't it possible that Jesus could say the same thing, even repeating Himself in the same sermon, yet use different wording in each sentence that could explain differences in the gospels? Yet, at the same time, there are very great differences in each gospel, in their forms and content. It would not deny inspiration to say that each author wrote for a specific audience; yet, that does not mean he fabricated anything.

Q is a completely hypothetical document with no evidence for its existence except the preconceptions of scholars. Yet, many scholars completely fabricate a "Q" community, a history, theology, and leadership, built entirely from their notion that there even was a "Q" document which the author of Matthew used.

We have not found the "priority of Mark" view compelling, no more than a "priority of Matthew" view. There is far too much speculation and far too less knowledge about the early process of moving from the preached word to the written word. For example, did Mark choose to leave out the "virgin birth narrative" for his own purposes or did Matthew add the narrative for his own purposes? We have no idea. Did Mark summarize Matthew or did Matthew elaborate on Mark? We have no idea.

DATE:

For those who assume that Matthew used Mark, and who assume a date for Mark around the mid-60s, then Matthew would be sometime, perhaps in the mid-70s or later. There are references to the destruction of Jerusalem (22:7; 23:38; chapter 24) which most scholars

assume is considerably in the past from the writing of Matthew, which is why he doesn't refer to the destruction as having happened. We prefer to see the references as prophecies, which is how they are presented by Matthew. With that being true, the book was written sometime before 70 AD. The discussion of the temple tax in 17:24-27 would not be appropriate after AD 70, since by that point, the tax was supporting Jupiter's temple in Rome.

For many scholars, Matthew's use of the word "church" (Matt. 16:18; 18:17) reflects a date in church history late enough for an ecclesiology to develop. Yet, that ignores the fact that Jesus could have actually used the word Himself, in anticipation of His organized group of followers!

The earliest references or allusions to Matthew's gospel in early church history are by Ignatius, in *Epistle to the Smyrneans* in AD 110 and the *Didache* at the beginning of the second century.

PROVENANCE:

This designates the place from which Matthew wrote the gospel. The most suggested location is Antioch of Syria. Some of the earliest patristic writers who quote Matthew are from the area of Antioch, such as Irenaeus (second century). A potential coincidence which might support that location is the use of a stater for two drachmas in Matthew 17:24-27 (see commentary there). Outside of that text, it seems that Antioch is the only location where that equality is also found. Matthew himself seems to have been from Capernaum. That's where he was when he was called (9:9). Jesus was in "His own city" (9:1), which at that time was understood to be Capernaum (4:13). This city was located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

INSPIRED:

One serious disadvantage of the "Synoptic Problem" research is that it leads scholars to reject the inspiration of the Scriptures. Some deny the evangelists were eyewitnesses. They deny the authors wrote from memory. Some do not believe the gospel are literal records but that the stories developed and evolved.

Jesus Christ Himself, and His character is impeccable, and He said that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles and they would not have to worry about remembering what they had seen and heard (John 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:13-14). Because the gospel message was so important (Rom. 1:16) that modification of that message carried an anathema from God (Gal. 1:6-9), we are on safe grounds that the Holy Spirit would have inspired the *writing* of the gospel just as much as He inspired the *preaching* of the gospel. That inspiration would have reached both the apostles, who were direct recipients of the promise, to John and the Christian prophets, such as Mark and Luke.

The writers, like the writers in the OT, share insights into the minds and hearts of people, which only an inspired writer could do (or a writer of fiction which Matthew clearly is not).

As we have already indicated, patristic writers accepted the Gospel of Matthew as inspired of God, on the same level as the OT writings accepted by the Jews. It is quoted frequently as inspired writing. These men lived within one hundred years of the inspired writers and were well-placed to detect fraud.

The apostles and other NT writers (except Luke) were Jews and within the Jewish faith, the written word of God was held in very high regard. The prophets, such as Jeremiah, warned strongly against speaking on behalf of God if He has not spoken. The NT writers would have inherited that respect for the word of God and would not have fabricated words and actions and put them into the mouth and life of Jesus Christ. Rather, their writings show that they had a quite negative view of adding something to Christ's gospel message.

Based on the understanding that Matthew was inspired by the Holy Spirit, technically, there is no reason why he could not have immediately sat down on the Day of Pentecost and wrote out the gospel! He could have even written out a gospel in Aramaic on one day and one

in Greek on the next day! Our guess is that Matthew did not write the gospel until sometime after Cornelius was converted, partly to justify sharing the gospel with the Gentiles. If the text had been written before Cornelius was converted, there would have been a much stronger argument and support for the Jewish Christians to share the gospel with the Gentiles before God had to send Peter a special vision in Acts 10.

Of course, when anyone produced any written work in the early years of the church, there were many eyewitnesses who could have refuted anything that had been produced that was false or embellished. We have no record of any such refutation of the current canonical books. Yes, the Holy Spirit was the "Omniscient Narrator."

In addition to the guiding by the Holy Spirit, the fact that three of the gospel writers were eyewitnesses (Matthew, John) or probably an eyewitness (Mark), argues for its historical accuracy. Again, two of the four gospel writers were apostles (Matthew, John) and two were closely connected to apostles (Mark, Luke) argue for their connection to those involved in the work of Jesus. Additionally, we have confidence in the God of love (1 John 4:8) that He would have made sure an accurate record of the life and teachings of Jesus would be preserved since the gospel is, in fact, God's power to save man (Rom. 1:16).

MATTHEW'S USE OF THE OT:

There are about 65 citations and clear allusions to the OT, primarily from the LXX. Some are from the Hebrew text. For example, just in the first verse, "David" is found and he is mentioned 17 times total in Matthew; "Abraham," 7 times. Ten times Matthew gives a quotation from the OT with a formula "this took place to fulfill" (1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 21:4-5; 27:9-10). Five times, Matthew gives the prophet's name: Isaiah (3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14; 15:7), Jeremiah (2:17; 16:14; 27:9), Daniel (24:15), Jonah (12:39-41; 16:4). The heavy use of the OT and Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT may explain why the early Christians put Matthew first in the list of gospels.

Jesus fulfills these OT predictions in various ways. Some are exact prophecies, such as Jesus being born in Bethlehem (2:6). Many are typological, such as Jesus being called out of Egypt (2:15). Jesus is like the piece of a puzzle, the last piece to be placed into the picture in order to make the puzzle complete. Not only do the pieces have to fit into their respective places, but the picture itself has to be whole. Jesus fulfills the OT in both the "shape, size" and the picture as a whole.

Jesus is called "Christ" (which is Greek for "Messiah") 13 times. Matthew will inform us what it means to call Jesus the "Messiah," or "Anointed One." Once Jesus applies the term to Himself (23:10). He is designated "Son of David" 10 times and "Son of Man" 31 times. While "son of man" was a common Hebrew idiom for a human being, and was used by Ezekiel 93 times, there is no evidence that "the Son of Man" was used in Jewish literature. It seems Jesus used the designation as a fulfillment of the prophecy in Daniel 7:13-14. "Son of God" is used 8 times, by God (3:17; 17:5), by Satan (4:3, 6), by demons (8:29), and by His disciples (14:33; 16:16-17), even by a Gentile (27:54). Jesus is also "King:" 1:1-17 (His ancestors); 2:2; 20:21; 21:4-5; 27:11, 29, 37, 42; 28:19 (ruling with all authority). "Kingdom" is found 56 times in Matthew; most often in the phrase "kingdom of heaven" (32 times). It is also described as "kingdom of God" (4 times).

It is not incidental that Jesus is worshiped as Deity in Matthew, eight times: 2:11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9; 28:17.

STRUCTURE:

Matthew's gospel is largely chronological but not strictly. However, Matthew does introduce his gospel (1:1) with the words: "the book of the genealogy" (βιβλος γενέσεως), which echoes Genesis 5:1.

The phrase "when Jesus had finished these sayings" is found in 7:28-29; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1 which might suggest a natural division in the structure. Some see five major speeches in Matthew, mirroring the five books of Moses, but that connection is weak. It does

not seem that Matthew is making that parallel. While Jesus is presented as the new law giver, He is not presented as a “new Moses” in the sense that John is presented as “Elijah.”

Parables Only in Matthew:		Miracles Only in Matthew	
Weeds Among Wheat	13:24-30	Two Blind men	9:27-31
Hidden Treasure	13:44	Mute Demoniac	9:32-33
Pearl of great value	13:45-46	Peter walks on water	14:28-33
Net full of fish	13:47-50	Coin in Fish’s mouth	17:24-27
Treasure New and Old	13:52	Resurrection of saints	27:52-53
Unmerciful Servant	18:23-35		
Workers in the Vineyard	20:1-16	Blocks of Sermons in Matthew	
Two Sons	21:28-32	Sermon on the Mount	Chapters 5-7
Wedding Banquet	22:2-14	Missions Discourse	Chapter 10
Ten Bridesmaids	25:1-13	Parables	Chapter 13
Goats and Sheep	25:31-46	Community Sermon	Chapter 18
		Eschatological Sermon	Chapters 24-25
Other Passages Only Found in Matthew			
This specific genealogy	1:2-17	Prediction of persecution	10:21-23
The birth of Jesus	1:18-25	Statement on the yoke	11:28-30
The wisemen	2:1-12	Peter’s confession	16:17-19
The fulfillment of the Law	5:17-20	Discipline in the church	18:15-20
Teaching on anger	5:21-24	Statement on Forgiveness	18:21-22
Teaching on adultery	5:27-29	Prohibition of titles	23:2-12
Teaching on divorce	5:31	Woes against Pharisees	23:15-22
Teaching on oaths	5:33-37	Suicide of Judas	27:3-10
Teaching on loving enemies	5:38-39, 43	Pilate washes his hands	27:24-25
Alms, fasting, prayer	6:1-19	Guards at the tomb	27:62-66

Pearls before swine	7:6	Report of the guards	28:11-15
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One can easily see that, to get five blocks of sermons, one has to ignore chapter 11 and chapter 23, unless one adds it to chapters 24-25, at which point it really does not relate to “eschatology.”

CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST:

Luke is very precise in his dating of the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-2). We know He lived and died under the rulership of Herod the Great (Matt. 2), Caesar Augustus, Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-12), and Governor Pontius Pilate (Matt. 27).

King Herod died in the spring of 4 BC. Thus, Jesus was born around that time, perhaps as early as 6 BC, since Herod killed baby boys two years old and younger (Matt. 2:16). Augustus reigned 31 BC to AD 14. There was a star which (miraculously?) appeared at the birth of Jesus (Matt. 2:1-12). Some have suggested, but we doubt, that the star was a comet which appeared in 5 BC That would fit chronologically. It seems from the evidence that Jesus was born between 6 and 4 BC.

Jesus began His ministry in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1). Tiberius began his sole emperorship in AD 14, which would put the beginning of Jesus’ ministry at 29 AD, yet He was baptized at the beginning of His ministry, at *about* 30 years old (Luke 3:23) that would put His birth at 1 BC, which would be too late to reconcile with Caesar’s death, yet Tiberius also reigned with Augustus in AD 11 or 12. Then, Jesus’ ministry would have started in 27 or 28 AD and, subtracting the 30 years, would have put His birth around 3 BC, closer to Herod’s death. Boring estimates that only about 65 actual days of Jesus’ 33 years on earth are recorded.¹ Lewis puts the days at roughly 40.²

It is estimated that the record of Jesus’ daily activities could be compressed into about 65 days. In other words, with only the synoptic gospels, it would easy to think that His ministry was only two months long! However, John clarifies the duration of His ministry by suggesting the passing of three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 11:55). That would suggest a ministry of two years, perhaps three.

The Lord’s death and resurrection would have occurred, then, in the year 30 AD up to 33 AD Jesus was crucified on a Friday (Mark 15:42), the “Day of Preparation” for the Sabbath within the week of Passover. The month was Nisan. The dates proposed most generally are April 3 (Nisan 14), 33 AD and April 6 or 7 (Nisan 15), 30 AD

TEXT:

Matthew quotes extensively from the OT, as we have noted. The standard Hebrew text we have is the Masoretic Text (MT). There was also available for Matthew the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), the Septuagint (LXX), and fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). We also have to recognize the possibility that Matthew could have made his own translation into Aramaic, or Hebrew into Greek, or vice versa.

The MT is the Hebrew text passed down by the rabbis known as the Masorettes who lived in the Medieval times. The SP originates from ancient Shechem and can be compared to the MT. It has roughly 6,000 minor differences. The LXX is the Greek translation, made by 70 Jewish scribes, for the library in Alexandria, Egypt around 300 BC The LXX came to be used by NT writers more often than the Hebrew text. There are a few other Greek translations as well: Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. The DSS are a library of scrolls found in the Qumran community which date to the intertestamental period. Every book of the Bible has been found, in some form, except Esther. Its Hebrew texts date, obviously, before Jesus but are remarkably consistent with the MT.

¹ Boring, 475.

² Lewis, 7.

THE GREEK TEXT:

The gospel of Matthew is the length of a standard scroll, as is Luke. John is roughly 1/3 of a scroll while Mark is half. The Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew are relatively stable, showing little variants, compared to other NT books. The earliest manuscript, or manuscript fragment, of Matthew dates to the second century, containing 21:34-37, 43, 45. It is known as P. Oxy 4404. We are using the United Bible Societies Greek text, 4th edition, for our translation. This text was made by scholars who compared the 5,800 existing Greek manuscripts and pieces of manuscripts and, based on criteria developed over the centuries, compiled an extremely reliable and consistent text.

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