

*An Overview of Matthew's Gospel*¹

The gospel according to Matthew is the first document we see when we open our New Testaments. We really do not know which New Testament document was the first to be written. The general epistle of James and Paul's letter to the Galatians are considered by many biblical scholars to have been among the earliest New Testament documents written. No one knows for sure when the gospels were written or the order in which they were written.

Although most modern biblical scholars think Mark wrote his gospel before any of the others, I'm inclined to think that priority belongs to Matthew. My conclusion comes largely from an analysis of Matthew's gospel, although other evidence, which will be mentioned later, tends to support this conclusion. After presenting an overview of Matthew's gospel and considering this other evidence, I'll then present some reasoning why many modern biblical scholars think Mark wrote first. With the evidence before you, you may then choose for yourself what you prefer to believe. The issue of which gospel was written first, in itself, is not really worth considering. What is important is what Matthew wrote and why he wrote it.

That Matthew wrote the gospel that bears his name is declared by tradition, not by scripture. However, an indication of the author's name is given in the record of a tax collector that gave a feast for Jesus. The Greek expression for "in the house" in Matthew 9:10 would be more correctly rendered "in his home." It would therefore refer to the fact that Levi, the tax collector, in his own home, gave a feast for Jesus. Since both Levi and Matthew are designated as a "tax collector" and since the incident described seems to be the same one, then Matthew and Levi are but two names of the same person. This then would identify Matthew as the author of the book which bears his name (Matthew 9:9-10; Mark 2:14-15; Luke 5:27-29).² Other than the writing of this book, very little is known of the Matthew's apostolic work after Jesus' ascension into heaven.

The fact that Matthew was a tax collector and an Israelite, however, tells us something about him. He would have been wealthy. He would have been able to speak several languages because he collected taxes at a city along the major route of the *Via Maras* where people passed who spoke various languages. He had been, in fact, what we might in our times designate as a wealthy bureaucrat. Moreover, as an Israelite with a profound knowledge of the Old Testament, he must have been well educated. Finally, having been an apostle of Jesus, he was well qualified as an eye-witness to write an account of the gospel story.

That Matthew wrote his gospel for Jewish readers is evident. Both the content and tenor of Matthew's gospel relate to Jewish ideals and values. He begins by giving the Jewish genealogy of Jesus since the time of Abraham, the father of Jewish people. His designations of the person of Jesus are designed to appeal to Jewish readers. He appeals to Jewish prophecy as having been

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²See Basil F. C. Atkinson, "The Gospel According To Matthew: Introduction," *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. by F. Davidson, A. M. Stibbs and E. F. Kevan, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2nd ed. 1954, 771.

fulfilled in Jesus. He describes the kingdom long awaited by the Jews. His theme is consistent with Jewish theology. Even the structure of Matthew's gospel is in keeping with Jewish thinking processes.

Matthew apparently writes to prove to Jewish readers that Jesus is the Christ. "The apologetic aim of the evangelist can be summed up in the sentence 'Jesus is the Messiah, and in Him Jewish prophecy is fulfilled.'"³ The term "Christ" comes to us from the Greek language, whereas the term "Messiah" comes to us from the Hebrew language. Both Christ and Messiah mean "the anointed one." To use the names "Jesus" and "Christ" together - i.e. "Jesus Christ" - is really to say that Jesus is the Christ. Matthew himself twice declares that Jesus is "Jesus Christ." This he does at the outset of his document in chapter one, verse one and also eighteen. And he not only records but also highlights Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (Matthew 16:16).

Especially significant for Jewish audiences is that fact that Matthew designates Jesus as royalty. Matthew presents Jesus "first and foremost as the messianic King, the Son of the royal house of David, the Lion of the tribe of Judah."⁴ Ten times in Matthew, Jesus is designated as "Son of David" (Matthew 1:1; 20; 9:20; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42). Matthew records that Jesus himself challenged the Pharisees to tell him how the Christ could be the Son of David, but they refused to answer him (Matthew 22:41-45). While Mark and Luke also designated Jesus as the Son of David, Mark does so only three times and Luke only four times (Mark 10:47, 48; 12:35; Luke 3:31; 18:38; 39; 20:41).⁵

Matthew's emphasis upon the Davidic royal ancestry of Jesus is balanced with a similar designation of the Divine origin of Jesus. Matthew records that two demon-possessed men, the disciples, and the centurion all declare their belief that Jesus is the Son of God (Matthew 8:29; 14:33; 27:54). A voice from heaven declared Jesus to be "My beloved son" at both his baptism and also at his transfiguration (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). Two of Satan's temptations of Jesus in the wilderness were specifically for Jesus to prove himself to be the Son of God (Matthew 4:3, 6). The high priest challenged Jesus to declare whether he was the Son of God (Matthew 26:63). While Jesus hung on the cross, those who passed by blasphemed him, wanting him to prove that he was the Son of God by coming down from the cross. Likewise the chief priests, scribes and elders mocked him, recognizing that Jesus had designated himself as the Son of God (Matthew 27:40, 43).

Matthew's use of names to designate Jesus and Matthew's appeal to Old Testament prophecy are significant to Jewish readers. Matthew uses over sixty Old Testament prophecies to prove that Jesus is the Christ, not counting echoes of single words and phrases. All these give Matthew's style a decisive Old Testament coloring.⁶ These prophecies cover a

³R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According To Matthew, An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961, 18.

⁴Tasker, 20.

⁵John does not even once designate Jesus as the Son of David.

⁶F. C. Grant, "Matthew, Gospel of" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962, III, 306¹. These are **1:23** (Isaiah 7:14); **2:6** (Micah 5:2); **2:15** (Hosea 11:1); **2:18** (Jeremiah 31:15); **2:23** (Isaiah 11:1 or 53:2?); **3:3** (Isaiah 40:3); **4:4** (Deuteronomy 8:3); **4:6** (Psalm 91:11-12); **4:7** (Deuteronomy 6:16); **4:10** (Deuteronomy 5:9; 6:13); **4:15-16** (Isaiah 9:1-2); **5:5** (Psalm 37:11); **5:21** (Exodus 20:13; 21:12); **5:27** (Exodus 20:14); **5:31** (Deuteronomy 24:1); **5:33**

wide range - extending from the nature and place of Jesus' birth, his boyhood residence and his temptation by Satan in the wilderness, to his ministry of teaching and healing, his supernatural abilities and his compassion for the poor and suffering, to his rejection by the people, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his betrayal for thirty pieces of silver, the casting of lots for his garments, and the people's mockery of him while he hung on the cross – to name but a few of the incidents mentioned. The nature and the extent of these prophecies are all designed to persuade Jewish readers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of David, the Son of God.

It is obvious that Matthew's "collection and arrangement of the OT oracles" ... is much fuller than that of any other evangelist – or any other writer in the NT, including Paul and the authors of Hebrews and Revelation. Not limited to a dozen or fifteen well-known "proof texts," it is by far the fullest and most complete collection of passages bearing on the theme "Christ in the OT"- chiefly in the book of Isaiah, the "evangelical prophet," and in the Psalms, but also representative of the OT as a whole: the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:27, 44).⁷

Another line of evidence that Matthew's gospel was written for a Jewish audience is that Matthew, more than any other writer, discusses the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. While the expressions "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" may be used interchangeably, Matthew uses the "kingdom of God" five times and the "kingdom of heaven" thirty-two times. Neither Mark nor Luke use the expression "kingdom of heaven," although Mark uses "kingdom of God" fifteen times, while Luke uses it thirty-two times. Used interchangeably with "kingdom of heaven" is the term "church," which is used only by Matthew, although on two different occasions (Matthew 16:18, 19; 18:17).

The use of these expressions is significant because the Jews were expecting the restoration of the kingdom of Israel.⁸ While Gentiles may also have known of this expectation because of their having heard the Old Testament prophecies read in the Jewish synagogues, the expectation of a

(Deuteronomy 23-22); **5:38** (Deuteronomy 19:21); **5:43** (Leviticus 19:18); **5:48** (Deuteronomy 18:13; Leviticus 19:2); **8:17** (Isaiah 53:4); **9:13** (Hosea 6:6; I Samuel 15:22); **10:35** (Micah 7:6); **11:5** (Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1); **11:10** (Exodus 23:20; Malachi 3:1); **12:7** (Hosea 6:6); **12:18-21** (Isaiah 42:1-4); **12:40** (Jonah 2:1); **13:14-15** (Isaiah 6:9-10); **13:35** (Psalm 78:2); **15:4** (Exodus 20:12; 21:17; Deuteronomy 5:16; Leviticus 20:9); **15:8-9** (Isaiah 29:13); **18:16** (Deuteronomy 19:15); **19:4-5** (Genesis 1:27; 2:24); **19:18-19** (Exodus 20:12-16; Deuteronomy 5:16-20; Leviticus 19:18); **21:5** (Isaiah 62:11; Zechariah 9:9); **21:9** Psalm 118:25-26); **21:13** (Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11); **21:16** (Psalm 8:2); **21:33** (Isaiah 5:1-2; 27:2); **21:42** (Psalm 118:22-23); **22:24** (Deuteronomy 25:5-6); **22:32** (Exodus 3:6); **22:37** (Deuteronomy 6:5); **22:39** (Leviticus 19:18); **22:44** (Psalm 110:1); **23:39** (Psalm 118:26); **24:7** (Isaiah 9:12); **24:15** (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11); **24:21** (Daniel 12:1); **24:29-31** (Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Zechariah 12:10ff; Daniel 7:13; Isaiah 27:13; Zechariah 12:10-14; Deuteronomy 30:4); **26:15** (Zechariah 11:12); **26:31** (Zechariah 13:7); **26:38** (Psalms 42:6, 11; 43:5); **26:64** (Psalm 110:1; Daniel 7:13); **27:9** (Zechariah 11:12-13; Jeremiah 18:2-12; 19; 32:6-9; Exodus 9:12); **27:34** (Psalm 69:21); **27:35** (Psalm 22:18); **27:39** (Psalms 22:7; 109:25); **27:43** (Psalm 22:8); **27:46** (Psalm 22:1); **27:48** (Psalm 69:21). Cf. III, 306¹-310² for a brief analysis of these prophecies in their original settings.

⁷F. C. Grant. 310-311.

⁸Illustrative of that expectation is the question of Jesus' disciples to him after his resurrection, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

coming kingdom was not as significant to Gentiles as it was to Jews. Thus, if the number of times these expressions are used indicates significance to their readers, they were most significant to the readers of Matthew, then to readers of Luke, and last of all to readers of Mark. While the number of times these expressions are used is no proof of which gospel was written first, it may be suggestive.

Another feature of Matthew's gospel that would have had special significance to Jewish people would have been recognition of the fact that God was with them, although four hundred years had passed since God had revealed himself to them through a prophet.

Kingsbury notes that Matthew brackets his story with two key passages: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us)" (1:23), and "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (28:20). "... Matthew intends with his kerygmatic story ... to proclaim the truth that in the person of Jesus Messiah, God has drawn near with his end-time rule to dwell with his people, the church, until the consummation, thus inaugurating the final age of salvation."⁹

That God is with his people Israel is well demonstrated in the person of Jesus, from the beginning to the end of his life. Jesus identified with their needs by healing all manner of sickness among the people (Matthew 4:24; 14:14; 15:30; 17:17), including casting demons out of those possessed (Matthew 8:16, 29). This he did because he was moved by compassion (Matthew 9:36; 14:14). Compassion also moved him to feed the hungry (Matthew 15:32).

Not only was God with them through the healing ministry of Jesus, but also through his teaching. Unlike others, Jesus taught with authority (Matthew 7:29). He taught daily in the temple (Matthew 26:55). He associated with sinners and tax collectors (Matthew 9:10). He was even crucified between robbers (Matthew 27:38, 44). When asked why his disciples did not fast, he said it was inappropriate while the "bridegroom" was yet with them (Matthew 9:15). And he assured his disciples that he would feast with them anew in his Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:29). God was with His people in the daily life of His son.

Matthew's gospel is especially valuable for instructional purposes because it is arranged according to subject matter rather than in strict chronological sequence. "Ropes regards this as the primary task that the writer set himself – a task which he most successfully achieved. 'A well-educated man of distinguished literary ability, he undertook to provide for the instruction of Christians a systematic compendium or handbook of what was known about the deeds and words of the Founder of the Christian Church.'"¹⁰

The structure of Matthew's gospel may be observed in several ways. The simplest arrangement suggests that following introductory matters (1:1 - 4:11), Matthew's gospel is divided into two major parts – Jesus' ministry in Galilee (4:12 - 18:35) and Jesus' ministry in Judea and Jerusalem (19:1 - 28:15). A three-fold division of Matthew's gospel is suggested by the statement

⁹Kingsbury, *Int 33* (1979) 367, cited by Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and The Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching The Ancient Text*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988, 282.

¹⁰Tasker, 19, citing J. H. Ropes, *The Synoptic Gospels*. 1934, 35.

“From that time Jesus began to preach [to show his disciples],” which occurs in Matthew 4:17 and 16:21. The first division is on the figure of Jesus as Messiah (1:1 - 4:16), the second is on the ministry of Jesus and Israel’s repudiation of him (4:17 - 16:20), and the third is about Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and his suffering, death, burial and resurrection (16:21 - 28:20).¹¹ A more generally realized structure of Matthew, however, is that the book consists of five basic divisions, each having two sections. This five-fold division is indicated by the statement “It came to pass when Jesus had finished these sayings” at Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1. The first section of each division is in narrative form, while the second is that of a speech given by Jesus.

Each of these five speeches says something about the kingdom of heaven. The sermon on the mountain describes laws of the kingdom (5-7). Jesus charge to his disciples indicates acceptable behavior in the kingdom (10:5-42) Jesus’ parables about the kingdom describe the nature of the gospel (13:1-52). Jesus’ lessons on humility, correction of an erring brother and forgiveness describe what life in the kingdom should be (18:1-35). And Jesus final speech indicates need for readiness when Jesus comes to gather his kingdom with him for eternity (24:1 – 25:46). Following the last speech is a narrative section about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Building on this idea of five divisions, one biblical scholar has also suggested that Matthew’s material is arranged in a chiasmic form with the focal point coming at chapter thirteen where Jesus presents parables about the kingdom of heaven.¹² However one may view the structure of Matthew’s book, one cannot help but note that its contents are so designed to be easily remembered. Instruction for easy remembrance was also a characteristic of Jewish people. All of these features combined – the genealogy of Jesus, the titles of Jesus, Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the person of Jesus, emphasis upon the kingdom of heaven, the theme that God is with us, and even the overall structure of the gospel – tend to demonstrate that Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience.

But someone might ask, what does that have to do with the priority of Matthew’s gospel? The answer is that, historically, the gospel of Christ came first to the Jews in Jerusalem, then to the Gentiles (Acts 1:8; Romans 1:16; 2:10). From Jerusalem, the gospel went to Jewish persons in Judea and Samaria. Only later did it come to Gentile believers, such as Cornelius and the

¹¹Jack Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 38, cited by Greidanus, 282.

¹²The chiasmic pattern below is suggested by H. Bernard Combrink, *TynBul* 34 (1983) 71, cited from Sidney Greidanus, 281-282.

A	1:1-4:17	<i>Narrative:</i> The birth and preparation of Jesus.
B	4:18-7:29	Introductory material, <i>First Speech:</i> Jesus teaches with authority
C	8:1-9:35	<i>Narrative:</i> Jesus acts with authority - ten miracles
D	9:36-11:1	<i>Second Discourse:</i> The twelve commissioned with authority
E	11:2-12:50	<i>Narrative:</i> The invitation of Jesus rejected by “this generation.”
F	13:1-53	<i>Third Discourse: The parables of the kingdom</i>
E’	13:54-16:20	<i>Narrative:</i> Jesus opposed and confessed, acts in compassion to Jews and Gentiles.
D’	16:21-20:34	<i>Fourth Discourse within Narrative:</i> The impending passion of Jesus, lack of understanding of the disciples.
C’	21:1-22:46	<i>Narrative:</i> Jesus’ authority
B’	23:1-25:46	<i>Fifth Discourse:</i> Judgement on Israel and false prophets, the coming of the kingdom.
A’	26:1-28:20	<i>Narrative:</i> The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Hellenists in Antioch of Syria (Acts 10:1 - 11:20). Matthew's gospel was probably written for the Hebrew Christians of Palestine who constituted the earliest Christian communities. The internal evidence that it was written for them is strong and lies in such facts as references to Jerusalem as 'the holy city' (4:5; 27:53) and references to the Sanhedrin and synagogue courts (5: 21-22). Special respect is paid to the Mosaic Law (5:17-19), use of rabbinical language (16:19, 18:18), and above all the use made of Old Testament prophecy.¹³

Since Matthew's gospel was written for a Jewish audience and since the gospel came first to the Jews (Romans 1:16; 2:9-10) for a gospel to have been written to the Jews prior to having been written to the Greeks (via Luke) or to the Romans (via Mark) seems reasonable. Moreover, "by the second century, Matthew's Gospel had taken its place as the first of the four" gospels. This is only natural inasmuch as it "forms a connecting link with the Old Testament and thus a fitting introduction to the New." The "natural inference is that at that time Matthew's gospel was considered to have been the first written."¹⁴

This conclusion is consistent with what we know about the earliest form of Matthew's gospel. The church historian, Eusebius, who wrote about 325 AD, in his book, *Ecclesiastical History*, quoted from Origen to the effect that Matthew published his gospel "for Jewish converts, and that he wrote it in the Hebrew."¹⁵ Since there is no ancient copy of Matthew's gospel in Hebrew, it is supposed that it was later translated into Greek, from which it has come down to us. Even so, there is no absolute internal or external evidence regarding the date when Matthew actually wrote his gospel, either in Hebrew or in Greek.

Likewise, there is only circumstantial historical evidence pointing to possible dates when the gospels of Mark and Luke were written. Inasmuch as Luke wrote his account of the Gospel before he wrote Acts of Apostles, and inasmuch as Acts is generally presumed to have been written about the time Paul left his Roman imprisonment, which was about 63 AD, then Luke's gospel would have pre-dated that. Church tradition indicates that the Gospel of Mark was written by Mark in Rome near the end of Peter's life. While we know not just when Peter died, nor that he actually died in Rome, the general supposition is that it was in the last of the sixth or seventh decade of the first century. Therefore, the circumstantial historical evidence is that the order in which the gospels were written was first, Matthew, second, Luke, third, Mark, and fourth, John.

Scholarly thinking about when each of the gospels was written began to change in the nineteenth century, however. As a result of attempts to harmonize the gospels, in hope of separating the Christ of faith from the historical Jesus of Nazareth, biblical scholars noted that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke "have much material in common, as also a considerable amount of material that is common to only two of them and some that is peculiar to each of the three."¹⁶ This fact raises the question of why they have so much in common and yet so much that is different.

¹³Basil F. C. Atkinson, 772.

¹⁴Atkinson, 771.

¹⁵Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI, XXV, 3, (via popular ed.) Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962, 245.

¹⁶Henry Clarence Theissen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943, 102.

Modern biblical scholars do not agree on their answers to this question. While they note that oral stories circulated about Jesus and that these stories were collected and written down by different people (which is also certified by Luke¹⁷) they also assume that the gospel writers copied some of their materials from these other writings and also from one another. If they copied from each other, then the questions are what other documents might they have copied from, and who copied from whom?

While modern biblical scholars have many variations in their answers to these questions, they are usually inclined to conclude that since both Matthew and Luke have much material the same as Mark, and that since both Matthew and Luke have much of the same material that is different from Mark, then Matthew and Luke must have copied much of their material from Mark, and also much of their material from some other unknown prior source. This manner of reasoning demands that Mark be considered the first to have written his gospel, and that Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels only after Mark had been written.

However, this manner of reasoning not only fails to consider the historical circumstantial evidence, but also fails to consider the biblical doctrine of inspiration, which generally prevailed for over eighteen hundred years. As long as the doctrine of inspiration prevailed, the four gospels were viewed as of equal value and no one challenged the priority of Matthew's gospel. However, when higher criticism arose which denied the biblical doctrine of inspiration, then ideas came into vogue among influential biblical scholars that the gospel records we now have are the result of literary evolution.

This is but a brief statement of arguments for and against the priority of Matthew's gospel. If you accept the so-called "assured results" of higher criticism which denies the inspiration of scripture, you will probably claim that Mark wrote first, and that Matthew and Luke copied from Mark and from one or more other prior sources. However, if you believe, as I do, the internal evidence that Matthew wrote his gospel to a Jewish audience, that the Jews were intended by God to receive (did in fact receive) the gospel before the Gentiles received it, and that the external historical evidence indicates that Matthew wrote his gospel first in Aramaic Hebrew before it was translated into Greek, then you may claim that Matthew wrote first, that each of the gospel writers wrote independently of the others, and that all of them are equally inspired.

¹⁷"Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed." Luke 1:1-4.

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