

MATTHEW

(1)

Jesus began his public ministry from “his own city” of Capernaum (Matthew 4:13), a small fishing village along the shores of Lake Galilee. Tax collectors such as Matthew set up their posts near the lake to collect customs, port duties and fishing tolls. In this area Jesus called Matthew: **“As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him”** (Matthew 9:9). Note: in Mark’s gospel Matthew is called “Levi” (Hebrew, Mark 2:14). As with Mark or (John Mark), Matthew was known by either name.

Author: The early Christian testimony is virtually unanimous that St. Matthew, the tax collector and later disciple of Jesus, is the author of the Gospel of Matthew.

Collecting taxes was an issue long before the Roman occupation of Israel. In fact, taxes were the reason Israel split into two kingdoms after the death of King Solomon in 922 B.C. Solomon taxed heavily the people’s lands, produce, and labor to build the Temple of Jerusalem and the king’s palace. When Solomon died, the people expected some relief from his successor. But Solomon’s son and heir, Rehoboam, told the Jews, **“My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpion-thorns”** (1 Kings 12:11). As a result, the ten tribes in the north (Israel) broke with the south (Judah) and set up their own kingdom. By the first century A.D., animosity toward all tax collectors was long established, not only because they typically collected more than was necessary and pocketed the difference, but because they were seen as traitors to Israel for colluding with Rome.

Date of composition: A.D. 80-90.

Place of composition: Antioch region (Turkey).

Audience: Matthew wrote largely for Jewish Christians who had fled to Antioch to escape persecution in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen, one of the first deacons of the Church: **“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen, traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews”** (Acts 7:60-8:1; 11:19-20).

However, there was tension within the larger Jewish-Christian community in Antioch. A number of the new converts from Judaism took pride in their Old Testament traditions, while other former Jews now Christians outright rejected the Jewish establishment. These new Jewish Christians believed the kingdom of heaven lay not in the traditional institutions of Judaism, but in the newly formed people of God—the Christians. They believed that it was not a matter of ancestry (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) but of allegiance to Jesus the Messiah. They recognized Jesus as the true Messiah of Israel and searched the Old Testament Scriptures for evidence of God’s will for his new people.

Matthew quotes extensively from the Old Testament—more so than any other gospel—using forms of speech that would have been familiar to his audience. Matthew is trying to show that Jesus



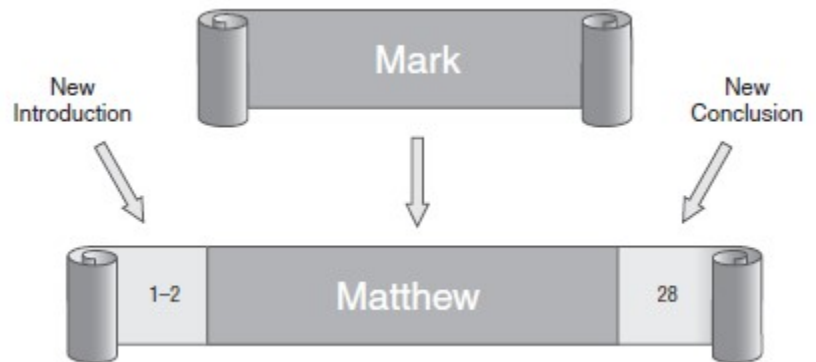
The “Divine” man symbolizing Christ’s human nature and genealogy rooted in human history.

of Nazareth was the messiah foretold by the prophets; that the Messiah would be of the house of David (Matthew 1:6; Ruth 4:6-17) and be born of Mary, a virgin (Matthew 1:22-23, Isaiah 7:14). Matthew's central theme therefore is promise and fulfillment; that God's promise to bring salvation to Israel and to the whole world was fulfilled in Jesus. Indeed Matthew's gospel is called "the gospel of the fulfillment."

Sources: In addition to a collection of other sayings, 80% of Matthew's gospel is composed of material from Mark. Using Mark as a framework, Matthew is as faithful as a scribe copying from a primary source. Nevertheless, there are subtle differences between Matthew and Mark.

Matthew writes better Greek than Mark; but Matthew is also careful in how he portrays Jesus. Matthew omits Mark 3:21 (where Jesus' family thinks he is beside himself). Matthew also substitutes James and John for the mother of Zebedee's sons, when in Mark these brothers ask Jesus about sitting on his right and left in the kingdom (Mark 10:35; Matthew 20:20).

Matthew also avoids what might seem to limit Jesus in some way or make him appear naïve or superstitious. For example, in Matthew 8:25-26, Matthew changes the disciples' reproach of Jesus, **"Teacher, do you not care that we perish"** (Mark 4:38)? to **"Save, Lord; we are perishing"** (Matthew 8:25-26). And as the storm rages, Mark writes that Jesus **"rebuked the**



wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still" (Mark 4:39)!" But in Matthew, Jesus simply **"rose and rebuked the winds and the sea"** (Matthew 8:26). Finally, Matthew removes Jesus' question in Mark 5:30, when the woman with the hemorrhage touched him: **"Who touched me?"** In Matthew's gospel, to avoid any notion that Jesus did not actually know who touched him, Jesus says, **"Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well"** (Matthew 9:22). Matthew expands Mark's account of the five thousand witnesses of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes to **"... five thousand, not counting women and children"** (Matthew 4:21).

As such, Matthew is more than 50% percent longer than Mark. This is due to the addition of Matthew's infancy narrative (including the genealogy), Jesus' sermons, and the events following the Resurrection that Matthew includes but which are missing in Mark. And the only miracles in Matthew that are not also in Mark are the healing of the centurion's servant and the account of the blind and mute demoniac (Matthew 8:5-13; 12:22-23). Overall, Matthew's organization and additional teachings of Jesus—especially the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer—gave Matthew's gospel a foundational status among the early Christians.

Why include the genealogy of Jesus?

Twelve hundred years after Abraham, God made a covenant with King David and promised that one of his descendants would reign on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:11-16). A thousand years after King David, **"... Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the City of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child"** (Luke 2:4-5).

Israel greatly valued her ancestry. Matthew respects this and through his genealogy introduces Jesus as the "son of Abraham" and the "son of David." And as if to ensure a mathematically precise calculation—given whose birth is being recalled—Matthew includes three

lists of fourteen generations that culminate in the birth of Jesus, Israel's messiah. Matthew groups the genealogy into groups of fourteen generations to emphasize Jesus as the heir of King David (14 was also the numerical value of "David" in Hebrew (D=4, V=6, D=4 → 14).

Matthew's genealogy also includes two women in the first fourteen generations: **"... and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king"** (Matthew 1:5-6). But Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute, someone who under the Law of Moses would have been banned from the Jewish community. And Ruth was a Moabite, a tribe of people who were notorious for their sexual immorality and idol worship: **"While Israel dwelt in Shittim the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods"** (Numbers 25:1-2). So why did Matthew include Rahab and Ruth in the family tree?

Such family "irregularities" serve Matthew's point, which is that Jesus intends to confound the Jews' expectations of the Messiah. Jesus is going to challenge their thinking, not only about the messiah but also about the Sabbath, obedience, and the kingdom of heaven. For example, as Jesus commissions the Apostles before his Ascension, Matthew's genealogy shows that the Good News is to be heralded to all nations: **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"** (Matthew 28:19).

Finally, in Matthew's genealogy the pattern **"... the father of ..."** is broken when Matthew writes, **"... and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ"** (Matthew 1:16). Mary conceives of the Holy Spirit. Joseph is of the house of David, and therefore the Child Jesus is also the kingly son of David.

Temptation, Baptism, Proclamation

After being baptized by John, Jesus is led into the desert to be tempted by the devil. In the desert the **"ruler of this world"** demands that Jesus **"fall down and worship me"** (John 14:30; Matthew 4:9). The devil wants to continue to rule the earthly kingdom and prevent the proclamation of God's heavenly kingdom. Afterwards Jesus goes to Galilee to proclaim the kingdom and call his first four disciples. Note: in contrast to Mark, Matthew adds greater precision by referencing the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali where Jesus began his ministry.

As a former tax collector, Matthew is well-organized in arranging his gospel in five sections or discourses. Each section is marked by, **"When Jesus finished these..., "** followed by a major sermon (Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29)

Unlike any rabbi or scribe at the time, Jesus himself taught with authority, demanding a deeper, more genuine observance of the law. For example, Jesus prohibits not only killing but anger; not only adultery but lust. With such authority Jesus "legislates" at will with all the assurance of the God of Mount Sinai who first gave the law to Moses.

Instructions on behavior for the kingdom (6:19-7:27)

In this section God's generosity in answering prayers is assured and the Golden rule is proposed. There are cautions about the narrowness of the gate to the kingdom, and the danger of false prophets.

Regarding pious exercises such as almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, the Beatitudes express succinctly the values which Jesus prioritizes. Jesus says that those who have the same attitude are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Yet Jesus also warns against taking pride in one's piety; a warning that will be repeated when Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees

for their hypocrisy (Matthew 23:1-27). Such harsh critique of the scribes and Pharisees was not untypical in the first century. In their debates Jewish groups would commonly criticize each other. Matthew's point is that Christians should not follow the example of the scribes and Pharisees.

Ministry and mission (8:1-10:42)

Here Matthew concentrates on a series of three miraculous healings involving a leper, a centurion's servant, and Peter's mother-in-law. There are also warnings about the severe requirements of discipleship (Matthew 8:18-22). In fact, to follow Jesus is more necessary than burying one's father. In other words, *let those who refuse to accept the kingdom (the spiritually dead) bury the actual dead*.

As the disciples are sent out with authority to expel demons and heal the sick, Matthew pauses to list the names of the Twelve and stresses the hostile judgment on those who refuse to accept the Good News. Matthew also anticipates the kind of persecution the Apostles will meet after the Resurrection (Matthew 10:26-33).

Opposition & questioning of Jesus

As Jesus moves about and teaches in the synagogues, the disciples return from their mission. Together again Jesus reveals who John the Baptist is: he is Elijah sent to prepare the way of the Lord (Matthew 11:10; Malachi 3:1, 23-24). Jesus warns that Galilean cities which have not believed in his miracles will suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24-28). A series of controversies follow, such as when the disciples pick grain while walking through a field on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8). Such controversies end on an ominous note as the Pharisees plot to destroy Jesus.

Finally, the Pharisees attribute Jesus' healing power to Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Jesus warns that such blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (i.e. obstinately attributing to the devil the power of God) will not be forgiven.

The unexpected arrival of Jesus' mother and brothers raises the issue of his family (Matthew 12:46-50). The answer is that with the proclamation of the kingdom, all who do the will of the heavenly Father are brother, sister, and mother to Jesus.

Sermon parables (13:1-52)

These parables are a commentary on the rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees. The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23) points to the different kinds of obstacles that confront the proclamation of the kingdom. The Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat raises the question about evil: why not just eliminate it? The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven illustrate the initial beginnings of the kingdom and its later fulfillment.

Again, as the "gospel of fulfillment," the purpose of the parables is to fulfill the Scriptures (Matthew 13:34-35). The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price parables stress the great value of the kingdom and the necessity to do all to attain it. The Parable of the Dragnet of Fish and the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat shows that God postpones the separation of the good and the bad for the kingdom until the close of the age.

Jesus' sermon ends with a summary Parable of the Householder and the new and old treasure (Matthew 13:51-52). The listeners who have understood the parables can now better appreciate both the old revelation of Moses and the new revelation in Jesus.