

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

Matthew's gospel presents Jesus in a very rich, many-sided way. He is the messiah of Israel, the king who will rule and save the world. He is the teacher, greater even than Moses. And he is the son of humanity/son of God, giving his life for us all.

Date and Authorship of Matthew:

No gospel was originally written with the author's name attached to it. Indeed, every gospel is a collection of material, sayings, stories, parables, and written collections incorporated into the larger story. Thus, the gospel of Matthew has material copied word for word from Mark or slightly edited to make it read better. It also has material word for word also found in Luke beyond what Mark has included. Then there is material that is found only in Matthew. The first gospel written is Mark, probably about 65-70 AD. Next comes Matthew at about 75-80 AD. Luke comes after (85AD) because he has edited some of the material also found in Matthew. John is the last, written probably at about 90-95 AD. For being ancient texts, the gospels are written fairly close in time to the actual events and within the lifetimes of some who would have seen, heard and walked with Jesus.

Matthew was identified as the author of the gospel after the 1st century by early theologians of the church. Why Matthew? This is the one gospel where he is mentioned by name as the tax collector whom Jesus calls. Also, in the way some of the parables and other sayings of Jesus are narrated, there seems to be an interest in financial matters and figures. Whether Matthew is the actual author is hard to know.

Themes unique to Matthew

Each of the gospels emphasizes different aspects of Jesus' teaching. This is because each author hears things in certain ways and finds certain things particularly significant, important and captivating. There is the unique person Matthew is, as well as the community of faith for which he is writing the gospel. What issues were they struggling with and what questions and concerns were they preoccupied with?

Clearly, Matthew has a concern to engage the Jewish faith out of which Christianity emerges. Jesus has much to say about the law and the prophets. He is a teacher like Moses, except greater. He argues with the teachers of religion and law, and he has much to condemn about the religion of his day. Matthew also goes to great pains to show how Jesus fulfills the law and is the fulfillment of the messianic hopes of the law and the prophets. Matthew has Jesus refer to

the kingdom of “heaven” as opposed to the kingdom of “God” found in the other gospels, and draws out teachings of Jesus on heaven, hell and the last judgment. As we shall see, such teaching of Jesus is meant to overturn the conventional view represented by the dominant religious views of the teachers of the law. Even though Matthew is concerned with Israel and Jesus being the messianic fulfillment of God, he also emphasizes how Jesus is the king not only of Israel but of the whole world. There is a universal thrust in Matthew, just like the other gospels.

Matthew’s gospel contains material that is unique and well known - The sermon on the mount, a version of which is also found in Luke; A version of the Christmas story unique to Matthew; parables of Jesus found nowhere else such as the ten bridesmaids and the judgment to the nations.

Organization of Matthew:

Given the concern of Matthew to engage the Jewish religion and to show Jesus as the new and greater Moses, as well as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, some scholars have seen the gospel organized according to a grouping of 5 sections, patterned after the 5 books of Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy).

Prologue – Birth and Infancy (1:1 – 2:23)

- 1) Narrative: Proclamation and Appearance of the Messiah (3:1 – 4:25)
Teaching: The Sermon on the Mount (5:1 – 7:29)
- 2) Narrative: Miracles in Galilee (8:1 – 9:34)
Teaching: The Mission of the Twelve (9:35 – 11:1)
- 3) Narrative: Growing Hostility (11:2 – 12:50)
Teaching: The Kingdom of Heaven (13:1 – 52)
- 4) Narrative: The Shadow of the Cross (13:53 – 17:23)
Teaching: The Church (17:24 – 18:35)
- 5) Narrative: The Way to Jerusalem (19:1 – 23:39)
Teaching: The End of Things (24:1 – 25:46)

Epilogue: Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus (26:1 – 28:20)

MATTHEW 3-4

3: 1-12 – Proclamation of John the Baptist

In Luke's gospel we have more of a background on John the Baptist. Evidently, he was a cousin of Jesus and six months his senior. In Matthew's gospel, John first appears as a fire and brimstone prophet/preacher living beside the river Jordan in the wilderness. His message is simple, but to appreciate it, we have to understand the background of the Jewish nation at the time.

Since the exile of Israelites into distant lands, the people had not experienced independence for long periods. For many, they were still living in exile. The prophetic hope was that God would send a Messiah who would lead the people through a new exodus out of slavery into their rightful place as God's chosen people and as a light to the nations. But when would God do this? What conditions had to be met by the people for God to do this? John prophesized that the time was ripe for God to send the Messiah, so ripe, in fact, that he would be coming any day. But the conditions for his coming required that people repent and get right with God. If the nation of Israel got right with God, God would send the Messiah and the relationship between God and God's people would be re-established.

But John also has clear ideas as to what genuine repentance is all about. The religious leaders of Israel are a major stumbling block. John denounces them as especially self-righteous, hypocritical and hard-hearted. He warns them that God doesn't need them, and their lineage as Jews will not save them. While Luke and the other gospels describe other aspects of John's message, Matthew focuses on the wickedness and moral failure of the religious elite, a theme to be found throughout this gospel.

But John also predicts that the Messiah to come will come in judgment. Many of the Old Testament prophecies included the element of judgment. God had to clean house in order to prepare Israel to be a holy nation, deserving of God's blessing again.

3: 13-17 – Baptism of Jesus

Jesus is a surprise to John, and he will be a surprise to Israelites. He doesn't fit the profile of a Messiah. The dove descending on him is not only a symbol of God's Spirit, but also a symbol of peace. The judgment John anticipates the Messiah would bring is not quite the approach Jesus takes. He comes in humility to receive baptism, and the message he will bring will be one not of military/ political victory for Israel, but the victory of love, the healing of forgiveness, and peace in a world of rivalry, revenge, brokenness and violence.

4: 1-11 – Temptations of Jesus

Matthew sees in Jesus the fulfillment of Israel. The baptism of Jesus is like Israel passing through the Red Sea. Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days is like Israel journeying through the wilderness 40 years before coming to the promised land. Jesus will fulfill the journey in a way Israel never did. And through his baptism (crossing the Red Sea) and temptations (testing in the wilderness for 40 years/40 days), Jesus is discerning his call as Messiah of God.

The temptations of the devil strike at the heart of Jesus' acceptance and recognition that he is God's son. "If you are the Son of God..." the devil says in effect, prove it. The problem is the way for Jesus to prove it is to use power the way a military/political leader would use power. To amass wealth, security and power for himself, to prove his greatness through spectacle and intimidation, this is what the devil is pushing Jesus to choose. By producing bread, he would be producing wealth. By taking the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, he would be a true king of the world. By proving God could save him from every threat, he would prove that he is God's chosen one. But Jesus clearly chooses early on to be a different kind of Messiah. His way is the way of servanthood.

4: 12-17 – Jesus begins his Ministry in Galilee

Jesus begins with a similar message to John, yet the accent of his message is different. To repent is about repenting of the desire for military/political conquest over one's enemies. The people of Israel want to fight darkness with darkness. Jesus has come to reveal and walk the way of light. Will Israel follow him?

The kingdom of "heaven" (in the other gospels it is kingdom of God) is a Jewish way of avoiding using the name of God too much. It's a form of reverence and respect. Heaven is not so much a place as a dimension of reality. The Lord's prayer (later in Matthew) looks forward to the time when "God's kingdom will come and God's will, will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God's dimension of reality must invade the world's dimension of reality until the two become one. But God needs receptive hearts for that to happen.

4: 18-22 – Jesus calls his first disciples

Fishing doesn't seem to be great background for spiritual leadership, yet Jesus sees the link between catching fish and catching people. He also recognizes qualities in those he calls that they don't necessarily recognize in themselves. They are drawn to Jesus' magnetism and healing power. But the full significance of who Jesus is and what his vision is about will not dawn on them till much later.

4: 23-25 – Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People

Jesus knows how to draw a crowd. His message alone cannot do it. Coupling his message of forgiveness of sins through repentance with physical and mental healings gives people a tangible demonstration of what it means for Israel to experience the healing forgiveness of God.