

Brief Introduction to Matthew

Notes by Ferrell Jenkins ❖ Internet: www.biblicalstudies.info

The apostles were to be witnesses of Jesus (Jn. 15:27; Acts 1:8) and at first they did this in person (e.g., Acts 2:32). As the gospel was preached throughout the Roman empire and the church grew, it became necessary for them to put their teaching in written form. Written records were needed for teaching people and instructing new converts about Jesus.

Gospel and Gospels Distinguished

Jesus came preaching the *gospel* (Greek, *euangelion*) (Mt. 11:5), a term which means “good news.” In this sense there is only one gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). The first reference to a group of books called **Gospels** is found in the First Apology of Justin Martyr (c. AD 152). He says “the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them” regarding the Lord’s Supper (*Apology* 66.3).

The Synoptic Gospels

Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem first to have been designated as *Synoptic Gospels* by J. J. Griesbach in 1774 because they look at approximately the same period of the life of Jesus. These gospels can be arranged in three columns for *synoptic* study. The gospel of John takes a different approach and devotes more attention to the last week of the ministry of Jesus. We should consider the four gospels as independent accounts of one gospel — the “good news” about Jesus.

Gospels as Literary Genre

There is no known literary genre such as the gospels outside the New Testament. Clark

Pinnock comments on the literary character of the gospels.

These works constitute a new literary phenomenon. They are not biographies as such, for they omit much material normally found in a biography, such as character development, background facts, and chronology. They are more like biographies than anything else. They are historical in form; their primary aim is to present the data in such a way that the Good News will be very apparent. This accounts for the heavy emphasis in each gospel upon the closing days of Jesus’ earthly life and His resurrection. The gospels are not literary productions; their writers were not literary men. They followed no conventional pattern or form. Each sought to give a portrait of Christ as he saw Him from his perspective (Pinnock. “Gospels.” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* II:784).

D. A. Carson provides a more detailed analysis:

Thus our Gospels are made up of many pericopes, some belonging to recognized genres, others with close affinities to recognized genres. Each must be weighed, but the result is a flexible form that aims to give a selective account of Jesus, including his teaching and miracles and culminating in his death by crucifixion and his burial and resurrection. The selection includes certain key points in his career (his baptism, ministry, passion, and resurrection) and aims at a credible account of these historical events. At the same time the material is organized so as to stress certain subjects and motifs. The writing is not dispassionate but confessional — something the evangelists considered an advantage. Some of the material is organized along thematic lines, some according to a loose chronology, still other pericopes are linked by some combination of catchwords, themes, OT attestation, genre, and logical coherence. The result is not exactly a history, biography, theology, confession, catechism, tract, homage, or letter — though it is in some respects

all these. It is a “Gospel,” a presentation of the “good news” of Jesus the Messiah” (D. A. Carson. *Matthew in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* VIII:38-39).

The Author

The author of the first Gospel is Matthew (also called Levi), the son of Alphaeus. He was a publican or Roman tax-collector. In general, these men were much despised by the Jews of the day. After being called by Jesus to be a disciple, Matthew made a feast for Jesus at his own house (Lk. 5:27-29). Matthew says that Jesus “was reclining *at the table* in the house” (Mt. 9:10), but does not say that it was his house. Read also Mk. 2:14; Mt. 9:9; 10:3; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15; Acts 1:13.

The early church writers always ascribed this Gospel to the apostle Matthew. Eusebius quotes Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia about AD 130, as saying that “Matthew wrote the oracles in [the] Hebrew dialect, but everyone interpreted them as he was able” (*Church History* III.39.16). Several other writers say something about the book having been written in the Hebrew language or dialect (i.e., Aramaic). This poses a problem because the early manuscripts of Matthew are in Greek. There is no completely satisfying solution, but the student may examine the discussions of this problem in the various introductions.

The tax-collector. The term tax collector or customs officer is preferable to the term publican which is used in the King James Version. Under Roman rule wealthy men bought the privilege of collecting taxes in certain localities. These men were “tax farmers” who employed local Jews to do the actual collecting of the taxes. Revenue collected in Palestine went to the emperor. This prompted the question, “Tell us therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” (Mt. 22:17).

Attitude toward the tax collectors. Ralph Earle describes the attitude of the Jews toward the tax collectors.

As a class, the tax collectors were hated by their fellow Jews. This was almost inevitable. They represented the foreign domination of Rome. Their methods were necessarily inquisitorial. That they often overcharged people and pocketed the surplus is almost certain. In the rabbinical writings they are classified with robbers. In the synoptic gospels they are bracketed with ‘sinners’ (Matt. 9:10; 11:19; Mark 2:15; Luke 5:30; 7:34). This shows the common attitude of the Jewish people toward them. They were considered to be renegades, who sold their services to the foreign oppressor to make money at the expense of their own countrymen (R. Earle. “Tax Collector.” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* V:606).

The Date and Place of Writing

The date of the writing of Matthew is unknown, and of little importance. Scholars have suggested dates as early as AD 40 and as late as AD 80. It seems most certainly to have been written before AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed. The place of writing is unknown, but the first clear evidence of the use of Matthew is in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch about AD 110.

The oldest extant fragment of the gospel of Matthew is kept at Magdalen College in Oxford. The three pieces of papyrus contain portions of Matthew 27:7, 10, 14-15, 22-23, 31, 32-33. Until fairly recently the manuscript was dated to about AD 200. Carsten Thiede, a distinguished German papyrologist, announced in late 1994 that evidence indicates these fragments should be dated to the last quarter of the first century (*Rekindling the Word* 27). Other scholars disagree and the discussion continues.

The Theme of Matthew

Matthew presents Jesus as the *Messiah* (*Christ*), and His Kingdom, as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Jesus is shown to be a descendant of Abraham and David according to the promises of God. Numerous related themes are developed in Matthew.

Points and Peculiarities

Thiessen lists several points and peculiarities which appear in the gospel of Matthew.

Various points and peculiarities appear in Matthew that accord with the general purpose of the writer.

(1) Matthew is the Jewish Gospel, dealing with the King and the Kingdom. In Greek, the term “kingdom of heaven” occurs thirty-three times, and the term “kingdom of God,” four times. Jesus is called “Son of David” nine times (three times in Mark, three times in Luke, and never in John). Matthew quotes from or alludes to the Old Testament about sixty five times, sometimes using the Hebrew Old Testament and sometimes the Greek Septuagint.

(2) The first four chapters of Matthew are chronological; chs. 5-13 are topical; and chs. 14-28 are again chronological, with the exception of 21:18, 19.

(3) The words “righteous” and “righteousness” occur more often in Matthew than in all the other three Gospels combined.

(4) The Greek word *tote* (“then”) occurs 90 times (six times in Mark, fourteen times in Luke, ten times in John). It is probable that the frequency of its occurrence in this Gospel is due to Matthew’s thinking in Aramaic.

(5) Matthew is the only Gospel in which the word “church” occurs. It appears three times, 16:18 and 18:17 (twice).

(6) Matthew has six great addresses: The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), the address to the Twelve (chapter 10), the seven great parables of the kingdom (chapter 13), the discourse on humility, stumbling-blocks, and forgiveness (chapter 18), the denunciation of the scribes and the Pharisees (chapter 23), and the Olivet discourse (chapters 24, 25).

(7) There are fifteen parables and twenty miracles in Matthew. Of these, ten parables and three miracles are peculiar to this Gospel.

(8) Matthew’s interest in the Gentiles is shown in his mentioning two Gentile women in Christ’s genealogy (1:5); in his story of the wise men (2:1-12); in his reproduction of the saying that many from the east and the west will sit down in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be cast out (8:11, 12) ; and in his

quoting the prophecy that Messiah would proclaim judgment to the Gentiles and that the Gentiles would hope in Him (12:18, 21).

(9) Matthew alone tells of Judas’ “repentance” (27:5-10); of the Jews’ request that Christ’s blood be upon them and upon their children (27:25); of the sealing of the stone, the setting of the guard, and the fabrication of the story that the disciples came and stole the body while the guard slept (27:62-66; 28:11-15); and of the rising of many of the saints after Christ’s resurrection (27:51, 52) (Introduction to the New Testament 138-39).

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