

The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew is considerably longer than Mark and uses approximately 90% of Mark's text. It is generally believed that Matthew was written sometime between 85-90 A.D., and tradition has it that it was composed in the city of Antioch (in modern day Turkey). Matthew uses a shared source with Luke called "Q" (none of which appears in Mark) and his own unique source of material commonly referred to as "M" source.

Matthew has long been a favorite of the Christian church and, somewhat surprisingly, is the only one of the four Gospels to use the word "ecclesia" translated as "church." Its phrasing and construction have made it ideal for use in Christian liturgy i.e., it is the Gospel that presents the Lord's Prayer in the way we commonly say it. It is also the case that it was often used for catechetical purposes to train new disciples. Matthew's Gospel is very interested in having Christians share the message of Jesus Christ with others as can be seen in its familiar final words often called "The Great Commission" (28:16-20).

The Gospel employs good use of the Greek language and is very well organized. There is an alternating pattern throughout the Gospel between narrative and discourse, that is, between stories about Jesus' ministry and his actual words and teaching. His sayings are arranged in a largely topical manner, and each discourse typically ends with a summary transition statement like "When Jesus had finished saying these words..." (7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, and 26:1) that leads the reader back into narrative about his life and ministry.

It is critically important to recognize that Matthew is writing with concerns for a Jewish audience. This can be seen in a variety of ways. For example, he begins the Gospel with a genealogy that connects Jesus to the Davidic line and on back to Abraham. While this would not mean much to a Gentile (non-Jew), it was tremendously important for Jews who understood the Messiah to be from the "house of David" and who knew Abraham to be the person with whom God first established covenant. Interestingly, there are four women listed in the genealogy, all of whom are non-Israelites and all who have suspect sexual histories. Could this be Matthew's way of helping early Christians accept Mary and the virgin birth?

Furthermore, Matthew quotes or makes reference to O.T. scripture some 57 times. This is best seen in his 6 antithetical statements in the fifth chapter which are presented by Jesus first saying, "You have heard that it was said..." and then followed by his saying, "But I say to you..." thus demonstrating his reinterpretation of Torah (Jewish Law). This would have been meaningless to a Gentile but very meaningful to a Jew.

Matthew contains an infancy narrative that is drastically different from Luke's. In Matthew, Joseph is the main character rather than Mary. He is given instruction by an unnamed "angel of the Lord" who tells him to take Mary as his wife (even though she's already pregnant) and later tells him to flee with the child to Egypt and eventually tells

him to go back to the land of Israel. The magi appear in Matthew with gifts for the child but there is no mention of shepherds in the field. Five separate references to Old Testament scripture are cited in the infancy narrative thus supporting Matthew's claim and concern that Jesus be seen as the true fulfillment of prophecy.

One of the most beloved teaching sections of Jesus is presented by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). It is likely that this discourse is really a compilation of Jesus' sayings that Matthew fit together rather than an actual sermon. Included in the Sermon on the Mount are the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, the six antithetical statements, the "ask and it shall be given" statement, and many others. It is an absolutely glorious collection of Jesus' words.

Though Matthew basically concurs with Mark's understanding of Jesus' mission, the parables in Matthew are not quite so confounding as they are in Mark. Though still confusing to those outside the fold, it is the case that insiders can make some sense of them. Matthew wants to teach the church, and the parables are a primary teaching tool. Some of the parables come from Mark, some from "Q", and some from Matthew's special source. The disciples are also portrayed in a more favorable light in Matthew since they have the important task to pass on the message once Jesus is gone.

There is a more pronounced distinction between insiders and outsiders in Matthew than Mark. In Mark, everybody calls Jesus "Teacher" (Rabbi) as if he were just another religious figure. In Matthew, only outsiders call him "Teacher." Disciples call him "Lord" (Kurios) with the exception of Judas who calls him "Teacher" (cf., 26:25 and 26:49). Thus, Judas is seen as an outsider.

Peter plays a very prominent role in Matthew. He demonstrates the disciples at their best and their worst. He is renamed by Jesus as "Peter" from "Simon" following the recognition by Peter of Jesus as the Messiah. Peter is then rebuked by Jesus when he denies Jesus' foretelling of his own suffering. Peter also denies Jesus three times (all four Gospels concur in this event).

The Gospel of Matthew wants to show both separation from and appropriation of Pharasaic Judaism with the emerging Christian church. The Gospel certainly knows of the Gentile mission (and there may well have been a good many Gentiles in the church at Antioch) but takes seriously the importance of having the Christian church define itself within the context of the more dominant Jewish (rabbinic) movement. Jesus is shown as the One who reinterprets Torah without abolishing it (5:17-20). It's almost as if Matthew's Jesus is telling people to "do as they say but not as they do" when referring to scribes and Pharisees. The Torah, for Jesus, is about mercy, not sacrifice (12:7). The teaching about sheep and goats (25:31-46) makes clear that judgment by God is rendered according to how followers treat "the least of these."

There is some use of allusion in Matthew that presents Jesus as a Mosaic figure. He is

called “out of Egypt” (2:15) and born to “save his people” (1:21). He also saved them from a wicked king (2:13-14) and is tested in the desert (4:1-11). These accounts would certainly have reminded Jewish followers of the Moses stories even though Jesus is clearly not seen by Matthew as another Moses, but as the unique and authoritative “Son of God.”

Matthew’s Gospel is written in the context of early church life that is rife with dissension. Issues include apostasy due to persecution (13:21; 24:10), betrayal among members (24:10), the lure of wealth and secular values (13:22), false prophets (7:15; 24:11) and disobedience to God’s Law (24:12). Again, we see that being a follower of Jesus was fraught with difficulty in the earliest days of the church.