

Gospel of Matthew

Authorship/Date

- Gospel written a decade or two after Mark – 80's or early 90's
- It is one of two gospels named after a disciple of Jesus.
 - Matthew was a tax collector before Jesus called him to be a disciple.
 - Mark and Luke tell the same story but name the tax collector “Levi”- could be names for the same person.
 - Name Matthew also appears in all the lists of the 12 disciples in the gospels and Acts.
- Was this really written by one of Jesus' disciples
 - For centuries taken for granted that this gospel was written by this Matthew and eyewitness to this historical life of Jesus. – one of the inner circle.
 - Mainstream modern scholarship does not think this is likely.
 - The names were assigned to the gospels only in the 2nd century
 - The gospel of Matthew does not claim to be written by Matthew
 - Moreover, its date in the last decades of the 1st Century makes it unlikely that it was written by somebody who knew the historical Jesus.
 - The author uses Mark as its main source – would an eyewitness use someone else's work?
- The gospel is an expanded version of Mark.
 - Matthew uses 90% of Mark (600 of Mark's 678 verses) in his 1071 verses.
 - To Mark's gospel, author added:
 - Birth story (48 verses)
 - Jesus' teachings (400 verses)
 - About 200 from “Q” the collection of Jesus' teachings shared with Luke.
 - Rest are mostly sayings and parables not found in the other gospels
 - Part of the STM (Sermon on the Mount)
 - Parables – weeds, hidden treasure, pearl of great value, unmerciful servant, and workers in the vineyard

Fivefold Structure

- Review – Mark – threefold narrative pattern of Galilee, journey to Jerusalem, Jerusalem
- In between birth story and final days – 5 “blocks” of material
- Each “block” combines narrative and teaching and ends with a distinctive formula
- This structure reflects the 5 books of the Pentateuch, the Torah, and perhaps also the traditional division of the Psalm in 5 sections.
- The themes are: Sermon on the Mount, evangelism, parables, church organization, eschatology.
- Resonance with the Torah is most important as this is the foundational document of Judaism (at heart is the story of Moses, exodus, creation of new community under God, and giving of the laws at Mt. Sinai by which to live)
- This structure suggests that the story of Jesus is analogous to the story of Moses and the exodus in both importance and context. Jesus' story is about a new exodus from a new pharaoh and the creation of a new community under God – and is deeply grounded in the story of ancient Israel.

- Example: Matthew is the only gospel that says that Jesus taught the STM from a mountain. Jesus is like Moses, a new Moses, revealing God's will from a mountain, a new Sinai.
- Connections with Moses and the exodus also appear in Matthew's story of Jesus' birth. After a genealogy that underlines Jesus' origin in Israel's heritage going back to Abraham, it is dominated by King Herod's plot to kill the newborn "king of the Jews" Even the story of the wise men is integrated into this theme. Herod's behavior echoes Pharaoh's in the story of the exodus, including especially ordering the killing of Jewish infants.
- Basic theme: Jesus is a new Moses leading a new exodus from a new pharaoh into a new way of life.

Affirmation of Judaism

- Matthew's 5-fold structure and the theme it expresses indicate the gospel's deep roots within Judaism. Matthew emphasizes this more than the other gospels.
- Not counting allusions or echoes, Matthew quotes the Jewish Bible 40 times with an explicit phrase such as "It is written" and another 21 times without such a phrase.
- Matthew affirms the eternal validity of the "law" and the "prophets" designations for sections of the Jewish Bible in his time.
- Jesus says in this gospel, and none other, "I did not come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."
- In Matthew, Jesus restricts his mission during this lifetime to Jews. When he gives his disciples mission instructions, he tells them: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
- It is only the risen Jesus, the post-Easter Jesus in the last verse of the gospel, who commissions his followers to go to "the nations" (the Gentiles).

Hostility toward Judaism

- Yet Matthew is deeply hostile toward "Jews" – meaning those who opposed Jesus or at least did not respond to him.
- Matthew intensifies the conflict between Jesus and other Jewish contemporaries (scribes, lawyers, Pharisees, Sadducees, temple authorities, that the other gospels report.
 - Harsher language- condemnatory, vindictive
 - Sadly, along with John's gospel, has been the major scriptural justification for Christian anti-Semitism and often deadly persecution of Jews.
- Hostility dominate a whole chapter in Matthew's story of Jesus' final week in Jerusalem.
 - Indicts "scribes and Pharisees" – scribes (highly skilled literate class who could read and write complex religious and legal documents, who mostly worked for powerful and wealthy elite) – Pharisees – by time of Matthew's writing, were in the process of becoming the dominant interpreters of Judaism, now that the temple and its authorities no longer existed.

- They are not just “hypocrites” (as in Luke) – they are “children of hell”, “blind guides”, “blind fools”. They are “whitewashed tombs” that look great on the outside but are filled with rot and death inside. They are “snakes”, “brood of vipers” and “descendants of those who murdered the prophets”
- Matthew interprets what happened in 70 – Roman destruction of the temple – as God’s judgment on those who rejected Jesus.
- Most seriously of all with regard to its effects on subsequent history, a text in Matthew assigns primary responsibility for Jesus’ death to the Jewish people.
 - Mark’s story – it’s Pilate, Roman governor
 - Matthew adds – “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves” Then “the people as a whole” take responsibility for Jesus’ death: “His blood be on us and on our children.”
 - This verse is only in Matthew – sometimes called the “blood curse”
 - Not just Jews back then, but also their children – presumably forever.
 - They are Christ-killers, a phrase used during the frequent and often fatal Christian persecution of Jews for many centuries.
 - Matthew doesn’t use this phrase explicitly, but some of his language did become the scriptural basis for Christian violence against Jews.

Why the Hostility? Why does the most Jewish of the gospels include such heightened hostility toward Jews?

- Historical contextualization helps
 - Matthew wrote during a time of growing conflict between Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews in the last decades of the 1st century.
 - His community, mostly of Jews who had become followers of Jesus, as well as a few Gentiles, had been very much affected by the conflict.
 - Conflict was particularly intense in and near the Jewish homeland – where there were large Jewish communities. Two factors are important:
 - The Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70. – the Roman reconquest meant the loss of the temple, the traditional center of Jerusalem
 - Also resulted in sharp decrease in Jewish population –
 - These factors led to a greater emphasis on Jewish identity and the social boundaries that maintained that identity and distinguished Jews from non-Jews.
 - There was a growing number of Gentile Christians, especially outside of the homeland.
 - Gentiles were still a minority of Christians and would remain so for another century, early Christian communities increasingly included Gentiles who had not become Jews (not circumcised, no purity laws)
 - The more gentiles there were, the less the movement struck other Jews as a form of Judaism. Rather it seemed to transgress and transcend the boundaries of Judaism. Its success in the Gentile world began the process of separation from Judaism, the parting of the ways.
 - The conflict led to what has been called “Jewish persecution of Christians” which began in the decades after the time Matthew wrote. Compared to later Christian persecution of Jews, it was mild and seldom lethal.

- Jewish followers of Jesus being killed by Jews –
 - Stephen (Acts 7)
 - James (executed in early 60's)
- Jewish persecution of Christian Jews in the decades after 70 took form of social ostracism. Commonly called the “expulsion from the synagogue” – far more serious than being expelled from a church today. To be expelled from synagogue, or the gathering or assembly – resulted in exclusion from the Jewish community. Presumably meant no marriage between Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews and perhaps the severing of family and economic relationships. In context where Jews were majority of population, this had severe consequences.
 - Matthew’s intensified invective against Jews flows from conflicts between his community of Christian Jews and other Jews in his setting. Doesn’t make it right – just now aware of his context.
- Matthew did affirm Judaism – by claiming that what happened in Jesus is the fulfillment of Judaism, not its negation.
 - Affirmation made in a setting in which two Jewish groups are making the claim to be the true descendants of Abraham.
 - Matthew’s affirmation- what happened in Jesus and early Christianity is deeply rooted in Judaism.
 - To separate Christianity from its Jewish roots invariably leads only to a diminishment of Judaism, but to a serious distortion of Christianity.

The Ending of the Gospel

- Mark’s gospel ends with the story of an angel promising the women at the empty tomb that Jesus would appear to his followers in Galilee, though no appearance is narrated.
- In his last chapter, Matthew adds a story of Jesus appearing to his disciples in Galilee, thereby fulfilling the promise in Mark.
- Jesus appears “on the mountain” – just as his teaching happened “on the mountain” – big things happen on the mountain in Matthew and in the rest of the Bible, including Moses.
- There Jesus speaks his final words to his followers – last 3 sentences – affirmation, imperative, and promise
 - **Affirmation:** “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me: - affirms Jesus is Lord and all authority is given to him by God. – **this is the Risen Christ**, not the pre-Easter Jesus who proclaims this.
 - **Imperative:** “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 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. – the Great Commission – Classical foundation for Christian missionary work, especially since 1800 – purpose was to convert “all nations” the whole world- to Jesus and Christianity.
 - In Matthew, “nations” has a more limited meaning. In 1st century Judaism and Christianity, it meant “Gentiles” –
 - It did not mean then what it means today when we speak of the nations of the world.

- Matthew was affirming the validity of the mission to the Gentiles, even though Jesus during his earthly life restricted his mission to the Jews and told his followers to do likewise. Now, as the gospel ends, the risen Christ authorizes the mission to the non-Jews.
- Promise: In the final words of the gospel, the Jesus of Matthew promises his followers: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
 - The ending returns to a theme at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel.
 - In his story of Jesus’ birth, he names Jesus as “Emmanuel” (citing Isaiah 7:14) and explains that it means “God is with us” (1.23) Now the risen Christ says the same thing about himself in first-person language – “I am with you always”.
 - Jesus is Emmanuel, “God with us”. Thus Matthew ends.