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# The Gospel of Matthew

## Jesus, The Teacher

### Getting Started

- 1 Read the following passages from the Gospel of Matthew: 5:1–7:29; 10:1–42; 13:1–52; 18:1–35; 24:1–25:46.
- 2 Write a paragraph on each of these sections identifying their main theme.

### Preliminary Comments

Matthew's Gospel contains some of the most well-known passages in the New Testament, such as the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the form of the Lord's Prayer that Christians recite today, the story of the Magi. The position of Matthew's Gospel at the beginning of the New Testament is also significant because it forms a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. The most Jewish of all the Gospels, Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish Torah and draws out his significance for his community.

Our examination of the Synoptic Problem showed that Matthew used Mark's Gospel as one of his major sources. Consequently, the basic content of his Gospel remains very close to that of Mark. In comparing Matthew with Mark's narrative, you will notice a number of

major differences. Matthew presents Jesus as a teacher who delivers five important sermons in the course of the narrative. Matthew brought together Jesus' teaching from his sources by molding it together into five well-developed sermons in order to portray Jesus as the teacher who fulfills Israel's hopes. Further significant differences with Mark's Gospel occur in the opening and closing of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew begins his narrative with a focus on Jesus' birth. At the conclusion of his narrative, Mark's description of the women running away in fear is replaced with Jesus' appearance to his followers as a proof that he is alive.

### A Walk through the Gospel of Matthew

In this walk through Matthew we intend to focus on what is distinctive in this Gospel without repeating what Matthew holds in common with Mark.

#### **Matthew 1:1–2:23: The Infancy Narrative**

Matthew begins with the account of Jesus' birth. We immediately get a sense of the author's intentions and concerns. His Gospel opens in Greek with the words "*Biblos geneleos*" (1:1), which means literally "the record of the generations." Matthew intends to provide

### The Significance of the Number Fourteen

Hebrew, as other ancient languages such as Greek and Latin, did not have our system of Arabic numerals. They signified numerical values through the letters of their own alphabets. Every letter of the alphabet had a specific value that was not arbitrary, but always held that value. We frequently see this at the end of movies where dates appear using the Latin alphabet. For example: L = 50; C = 100; M = 1000, and so forth.

The importance of the number fourteen in Matthew's genealogy can be understood against this background. In Hebrew the name of David (written as *dwd*) adds up to fourteen. In Hebrew the letter *d* has the value of 4, while the letter *w* has the value of 6. Hence, the name David would have the value of (*dwd*)  $4+6+4 = 14$ .

In this way Matthew draws attention to the fact that Jesus is the descendent of David. As Son of David he is unquestioningly the Messiah.

a list of Jesus' ancestors similar to the Old Testament genealogical records of the great figures of Israel's past. This phrase could also be an allusion to the first book of the Hebrew Bible, named *Genesis* in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). In this sense Matthew envisages the story of Jesus as a new beginning, a new creation.

The genealogy (1:2-17) is constructed around three sets of 14 generations. Matthew wishes to show that God has laid clear plans in the course of history for the coming of the Messiah.

While Matthew's genealogy traces Jesus' lineage through the male side, four women are deliberately singled out (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah's wife [Bathsheba]). The first three women were not Israelites, and Bathsheba's husband was not an Israelite. From the outset Matthew introduces one of the major themes of his Gospel. While Jesus' message was first preached exclusively to the Jews, it would ultimately be addressed to the Gentiles (non-Jews), who would give it a welcome reception. God's plan is realized despite these irregular unions (Tamar [Genesis 38], Rahab [Joshua 2], Ruth [Ruth 3], and Bathsheba [2 Samuel 11]). This paves the way for the extraordinary nature of Jesus' birth described in the opening chapter.

As in Luke 1, Matthew shows that Jesus was born through the power of the Holy Spirit ("the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" [1:20]). A new creative action of God gives birth to the Messiah as the fulfillment of God's plan. This opening chapter defines very clearly Jesus' identity as the son of David, the Mes-

### Reading Guide to the Gospel of Matthew

**Introduction: The Birth of Jesus, the Messiah**  
(1:1-2:23)

**Part One: John the Baptist and the Sermon on the Mount** (3:1-7:29)

*Narrative:* John's Preaching and Baptism  
Jesus' Temptation and the Beginning of His Teaching in Galilee

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

**Part Two: Ministry in Galilee** (8:1-10:42)

*Narrative:* Jesus Continues Preaching and Healing in Galilee

Nine miracles Are Recorded and Jesus Calls a Group to Follow Him

*Sermon:* The Mission Sermon (10:1-42)

**Part Three: Opposition to Jesus' Teaching in Galilee** (11:1-13:52)

*Narrative:* John the Baptist Inquires about Jesus  
Jesus' Conflict with the Religious Leaders about the Sabbath

*Sermon:* The Parable Sermon (13:1-52)

**Part Four: Jesus' Vision of the Church** (14:1-18:35)

*Narrative:* Continued Controversies with Jewish Groups such as the Pharisees  
Death of John the Baptist

*Sermon:* Sermon on the Church (18:1-35)

**Part Five: Journey to and Entry into Jerusalem**  
(19:1-25:46)

*Narrative:* Jesus Foretells His Death a Third Time  
Jesus Enters Jerusalem and Cleanses the Temple

*Sermon:* Eschatological Discourse (24:1-25:46)

**Conclusion: The Passion Narrative and the Resurrection** (26:1-28:20)

The Last Supper  
Jesus' Arrest and Trial before Jewish and Roman Courts  
Crucifixion and Death  
Burial and a Guard Placed at the Tomb  
Resurrection Appearances

siah who is God's presence among humanity, "Emmanuel . . . God is with us" (1:23).

The second chapter draws the reader's attention to the child's destiny. Wise men (magi or astrologers) from the East come seeking the child. Following the signs of the heavens, they conclude that this child is destined

to become king of the Jews (2:1-12). King Herod fears the child as a potential threat to his rule. He orders the slaughter of all children in Bethlehem two years old and younger. Matthew's narrative has painted a sharp contrast between the Gentiles who come seeking the king of the Jews and the Jewish authorities who refuse to believe. This contrast foreshadows the ultimate outcome of the Gospel narrative where the Jewish authorities hand Jesus over for crucifixion to the Romans, while a Roman centurion at the crucifixion confesses: "Truly this man was God's Son!" (27:54). This opening scene is a prelude to an important insight of the Gospel: how the message that was first intended for the Jews was embraced by the Gentile world.

A number of Old Testament allusions lie behind this narrative: Herod's massacre of the innocents parallels Moses' birth, where the Pharaoh endeavored to kill all the male Hebrew children (Exod 1:8-2:25). Another Old Testament figure also appears in the background of this passage, Joseph. The Joseph of Genesis and Joseph, the guardian of Jesus, are interpreters of dreams, and both go down to Egypt. Matthew focuses his birth narrative around Joseph, while Luke narrates the story almost from Mary's point of view.

In the course of his narration Matthew has used five quotations from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (Matt 1:23 = Isa 7:14; Matt 2:6 = Mic 5:2 and 2 Sam 5:2; Matt 2:15 = Hos 11:1; Matt 2:18 = Jer 31:15; and Matt 2:23 = Isa 4:2?). His purpose was to show that God's plan was fulfilled in Jesus' birth. Matthew's way of interpreting the Bible was in line with the way in which people of his time interpreted their Scriptures. They saw that every word had an inspired meaning. In presenting an interpretation, the focus was on the word and not on the context in which the word appeared. Matthew interprets his sacred writings in the way a scholar of his time did.

### **The Five Sermons**

#### **First Sermon: The Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29)**

This sermon is Matthew's most significant construction. The Sermon on the Mount has been described as "a design for life in the kingdom." The figure of Moses lies clearly in the background. Like Moses, Jesus goes up a mountain to deliver to humanity a compendium of ethical instruction (5:1). In the ultimate analysis Jesus brings Moses' instruction to fulfillment (5:17).

The Sermon opens with a series of nine Beatitudes (5:3-12) or blessings that are bestowed on different categories of people. The poor, meek, peacemakers, sorrowful, merciful, persecuted are those who uniquely enjoy God's blessings. Luke also has a Sermon (Luke 6:17-49), but it contains only four beatitudes. A compari-

### **The Synoptic Gospels**

son of both accounts shows that Matthew has tended to spiritualize the blessings more: for example, "poor in spirit," "hunger and thirst for righteousness," as well as extending the blessings to the merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers.

Matthew's Jesus goes on to indicate his role as the fulfillment of the Law or Torah (5:17-48). He upholds the Jewish Torah, as an expression of God's will for God's people. His role is not to do away with the Law, but to bring people to a deeper understanding of that Law: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (5:17). In a series of six antitheses Jesus shows how his fulfillment of the Law entails going beyond an external obedience to the Law to the inner heart of what lies behind the Law. As such Jesus' interpretation makes the biblical Torah more penetrating for the human heart: "You have heard that it was said . . . But, I say to you . . ." Jesus prohibits not only killing, but also anger; not only adultery, but also lust. He goes further by repudiating some interpretations of the past: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'" (5:38). This is known as the Law of Talion (or retribution). This law is found at the heart of the Torah (Exod 21:23-25; Lev 24:19-20; Deut 19:21). In a society where there was no police force, it was a very positive law. While justice was considered to be retributive, one could not exact justice beyond the offense. Jesus, however, rejects such an approach and challenges his followers to give up any desire to seek revenge. Jesus points to a way that leads beyond the cycle of violence to one that looks for alternatives that deal with the situation through the law of love.

These antitheses reach a climax by extending the law of love to everyone, including one's enemies (5:44). Matthew's Jesus shows that the law of love of neighbor (Lev 19:18) was meant to embrace even enemies. Again Jesus demands more from his hearers, a "higher righteousness" than the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). Throughout this sermon Jesus speaks with an authority that not only parallels that of Moses, but also goes beyond it.

Jesus calls on his hearers to imitate God in all their actions. Just as the Father sends rain and sun on all, good and evil alike, so believers must show love for all without distinction and without limit: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).

In the rest of the sermon Jesus continues to map out a way of life for his followers:

- through the reinterpretation of the religious practices of his day: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (6:1-18);
- through exclusive trust and devotion to God (6:19-34);
- through the treatment of others (7:1-12).

### Outline of Chapter 13

- (1) Parable of the Sower (13:1-9)
  - Purpose of Parables (13:10-17)
  - Explanation of the Sower Parable (13:18-23)
- (2) Parable of the Weeds (13:24-30)
- (3) Parable of the Mustard Seed (13:31-32)
- (4) Parable of the Yeast (13:33)
  - Use of Parables (13:34-35)
  - Explanation of the Weeds Parable (13:36-43)
- (5) Parable of the Treasure (13:44)
- (6) Parable of the Pearl (13:45-46)
- (7) Parable of the Net (13:47-53)

### Second Sermon: The Mission Sermon (10:1-42)

Matthew names the 12 disciples in this context (10:2-4). Significantly, these 12 disciples are instructed: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5-6). According to Matthew their preaching and healing mission is directed exclusively to the people of Israel, as was Jesus’ mission (15:24). Only at the end of the Gospel does Jesus send the disciples out to the Gentiles (28:19). In this way Matthew presents a progressive development of the Gospel preaching starting with Israel and later being extended to the Gentiles. This is different from the other Gospels, which see a ministry to the Gentiles during Jesus’ life. See, for example, Luke’s Jesus, who sends the disciples ahead of him into Samaria to prepare the way (Luke 9:52-56).

Matthew 10:16-23 describes the hostile reaction the disciples will face in the course of their mission. It seems that Matthew reflects conditions that his own community was experiencing in their proclamation of the gospel. He shows his habit of bringing together Jesus’ words with a commentary that reflects the situation of his own readers.

Words of encouragement (10:24-33) follow this discussion of persecution. Matthew’s Jesus reminds them that their lives are in God’s hands: “So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (10:31). Trust in God should enable the disciples to withstand the pressures and divisions that arise as a result of commitment to Jesus (10:34-39). The disciples are given the assurance that God is present with them in their healing and preaching ministry. Welcoming the disciples is tantamount to welcoming Jesus; and welcoming Jesus is

### The Nature of a Parable

Jesus’ characteristic way of teaching is through parables. To construct his parables Jesus drew on the agricultural world of his hearers. For us who come from a technologically-orientated society, some of these images create difficulties. Even for those who come from a rural world, many of the customs of that world are also puzzling. To understand them we need to know the world of that time.

The word “parable” comes from the Greek word *parabole*, indicating a wise saying, a figure of speech. In reference to the New Testament it refers to a short story (or an example) that is told in order to convey a message by means of a comparison. Ultimately two things are being compared for a purpose.

Jesus tells a story in which different aspects of God’s kingdom are highlighted by means of a comparison. The “kingdom of God” basically refers to “the rule or reign of God.” It refers to a relationship that has been established between God and humanity and how God exercises God’s power for those in this relationship. As we have noted, it is both a present and a future reality.

Matthew always speaks of “the kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God,” showing his Jewish sensitivity. In order to uphold the commandment that said, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” (Exod 20:7), the Jews avoided using the divine name. Instead they would use circumlocutions to refer to God: heaven is one of these circumlocutions.

Scholars make a distinction between a parable and an allegory. Both are figures of speech where a story is told and a comparison drawn from that story. The difference is that a parable conveys only one point in the comparison; it has only one message. In the allegory, every detail in the story is significant and communicates a message. In Matthew 13 we can see this distinction clearly: in the parable of the Weeds (vv. 24-30) Jesus tells a parable, but in vv. 36-43 the interpretation turns it into an allegory where every detail is significant: “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world . . .” (vv. 37-38).

tantamount to welcoming God, the Father. Their mission is to extend God’s grace to everyone.

### Third Sermon: The Parable Sermon (13:1-58)

This sermon in Matthew 13 contains seven parables. Matthew has used Mark 4 as the basis for this sermon, but has brought together a number of other parables in order to present a more encompassing teaching of Jesus on the kingdom.



Interior of the fourth-century c.e. synagogue at Capernaum. (Phoenix Data Systems, Neal and Joel Bierling)

Matthew divides this sermon into two parts: the first is addressed to the crowds (13:1-35), the second to the disciples in a house (13:36-53). The parable of the Sower and its interpretation show how this parable was transformed into an allegory. This probably occurred when Jesus' followers adapted the parable to the situation of their audience. In the interpretation, an emphasis is placed on the different difficulties and obstacles that believers encounter when handing on the word. In the parable of the Weeds and its interpretation, we have the same transformation from a parable into an allegory (13:24-30, 36-43). The concern lies on the separation between good and evil, a separation reserved for the end time.

Particularly noteworthy in this chapter is the response of the disciples to Jesus' teaching. Unlike Mark where the disciples struggle to understand Jesus and his teaching, the disciples in Matthew's Gospel do understand. This emerges clearly at the conclusion to this sermon (see 13:51-52) where Jesus asks them: "Have you understood all this?" They answer, "Yes." The final parable in this section concerns the master of the household who brings out new and old treasure from his house. Those who follow Jesus are like scribes who have been trained for the kingdom: in Jesus' teaching they recognize that in the *newness of his revelation* Jesus interprets for them the *past revelation* that came through Moses. Jesus is the one who makes it possible for them to understand the past. The disciples respond to this positively.

#### Fourth Sermon: The Church (18:1-35)

Here Matthew uses traditional Jesus sayings found in his sources to instruct his own community. This chapter operates on two levels. It can be read on the surface level of the ministry of Jesus and on the deeper level of instructions directed to Matthew's own community.

The sermon opens with a discussion on greatness in the kingdom of God (18:1-5). In the kingdom, the value of humility is most important because life in God's kingdom acknowledges dependence on and trust in God's power. That is why a little child is held up for emulation.

The instructions on church discipline and the law of forgiveness (vv. 15-22) strive to bring Jesus' teaching to life within the community. Matthew's Jesus gives the community the right to ostracize members who refuse to change their ways. Peter's sevenfold offer of forgiveness is in fact a generous offer. But Jesus takes the opportunity to show the true nature of his forgiveness. "Seventy-seven" times is Jesus' response to Peter, which shows the infinite quality that forgiveness requires. The final parable in this chapter on the Unforgiving Servant (vv. 23-35) develops this further by calling forth divine judgment on those who refuse to forgive.

The highlight of the sermon is Jesus' promise to remain with his followers: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (v. 20). This reminds the reader of the theme of God's abiding presence with the community at the beginning of the

Gospel: “and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’” (1:23) and at the end: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). The whole Gospel is included between these two statements about Jesus as God’s abiding presence among God’s people.

#### **Final Sermon: Eschatological Discourse (24:1–25:46)**

This long speech on the end times owes its inspiration to Mark 13. It opens with the disciples asking about the destruction of the temple and the end of the age. Jesus continues to warn them not to be led astray (24:4). The hallmark of the chapter is the spirit of watchfulness, since no one knows the day when the Son of Man will return (24:37–51): “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (v. 44). This section culminates in the parable of the Judgment of the Nations (25:31–46). What is so striking about this parable is Jesus’ challenge to his hearers to embrace a lifestyle that is very different from that of the scribes and Pharisees. His followers are to embrace an ethos of concern for the least members of society: they must pay attention to the poor and lowly rather than the rich and powerful.

#### **Matthew 26:1–28:20: The Passion Narrative and the Resurrection**

Matthew’s narrative on Jesus’ death and resurrection follows Mark’s account very closely. At the same time, Matthew has introduced a number of aspects that conform to his interests and theology.

- **Judas:** Matthew adds details that embellish Judas’s betrayal. Matthew alone states that Judas was paid 30 pieces of silver for betraying Jesus (26:14–16). The details surrounding Judas’s death (27:3–10) are referred to as fulfilling the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 32:6–15), while the actual price of 30 pieces of silver comes from Zechariah (Zech 11:12–13).
- **A warning dream:** Pilate’s wife warns her husband not to have anything to do with “that innocent man” after she has received a dream (27:19). It reminds the reader of the warning dreams that occurred in the infancy narrative.
- **The end times:** When Jesus died not only was the veil of the temple torn in two, but “the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (27:51–52). Matthew uses images that describe the end times. Just as heavenly signs marked Jesus’ birth, so Jesus’ death also embraces cosmic events. Jesus’ death dramatically changed the world in its relationship with God.

- **Roman guards at the tomb:** In an attempt to prevent Jesus’ disciples from stealing the body, Roman soldiers are posted at the tomb (27:62–66; 28:11–15). After the resurrection these soldiers are bribed to say that his disciples did in fact steal the body. Matthew is undoubtedly using this narrative to counter the Jewish leaders of his time who were attacking the Christian belief in the resurrection.
- **Resurrection appearance (28:16–20):** In the Gospel of Mark Jesus promises that after his resurrection he will go ahead of his disciples to Galilee (Mark 14:28; 16:7). Matthew continues this tradition by having the risen Jesus appear to them on a mountain in Galilee (28:16). The reappearance of the theme of a mountain is significant. The mountain is the place where God’s revelation occurs: it reminds the reader of Jesus’ revelation in the Sermon on the Mount (5:1) and of God’s revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:3). Jesus’ sending his disciples out to teach and baptize all the nations reverses the command to go only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5–6). This outreach to the Gentiles must reflect what is already happening in Matthew’s community. Many Gentiles must be making inroads into their community. The baptismal formula “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” must reflect the baptismal custom of Matthew’s community. This shows a further development within the early Christian church: the original baptismal ritual included a baptism in the name of Jesus (see, e.g., Acts 10:48: “So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ”). The ritual developed to incorporate all three persons. Finally, the risen Jesus gives them the assurance that he will be with them “to the end of the age” (28:20). As we noted above, this is an inclusion with the opening of the Gospel, where Jesus is identified in the words of the prophet Isaiah as “Emmanuel: God is with us” (1:23). The presence of God will continue in the community of those who believe in Jesus.

### **Critical Issues in Studying Matthew**

#### **Use of Sources**

Matthew used the Gospel of Mark as his basic source. While Mark was directed to a Gentile audience, Matthew’s intention was to rewrite this Gospel for a community largely made up of Christian Jews. Matthew’s style is very different from that of Mark. He wrote in a very polished Greek and tended to improve on Mark. The picture of Jesus in Matthew downplays the human characteristics that Mark had painted. Compare, for example, the description of the woman with a hemorrhage

## Example of Matthew's Editing of Mark

### The Baptism of Jesus

#### Mark 1:9-11

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased."

#### Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew preserved Mark's basic text. He inserted a dialogue between Jesus and John about Jesus' baptism by John. This dialogue is Matthew's creation. He tried to answer a question that puzzled his community: If Jesus was without sin, as his followers came to believe, then why was he baptized with John's baptism of repentance? Matthew constructs this narrative to answer that question. Matthew's Jesus replies that he accepts baptism because it is part of God's plan. The use of the word "righteousness" here is characteristic of Matthew's vocabulary.

in Mark 5:21-43 and Matt 9:18-26. You will notice that Matthew avoids mentioning that Jesus did not know who touched him and he leaves out the disciples' judgment that Jesus had asked a stupid question.

Into this framework provided by the Gospel of Mark, Matthew introduced the sayings source Q that was well suited to his purpose because of its Jewish character. In using Q, Matthew rearranged it to fit into the five basic sermons that he constructed. In addition to Mark and Q, Matthew had his own special material, referred to by scholars as Special M. This is information known only to Matthew. We see this especially in the opening chapters of the Gospel.

A characteristic feature of Matthew's Gospel is his use of Old Testament quotations throughout the Gospel. This is very evident in the first two chapters, where he uses these quotations to support the episode that he narrated (see 1:23; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23).

Matthew's use of Old Testament quotations has led some scholars to argue that he created these stories on the basis of these quotations. But when you examine these episodes carefully, you see that it is hard to imagine how the quotation could simply have generated the story. It makes more sense to see these accounts as coming to Matthew from his sources. To these Matthew added a quotation since it was his deliberate intention to show that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills the expectations of the past.

The author should not be seen as simply using scissors and paste to construct his narrative. He rewrote the narrative giving his own theological focus on Jesus, the

disciples, and the community. He had a much more developed understanding of Jesus, the community, and the end times. The narrative that Matthew ultimately produced was to become the most popular of the Gospels in the early church.

### Who Is the Author of the Gospel of Matthew?

The earliest reference we have to the authorship of this Gospel comes from Papias (ca. 70-125 C.E.), as recorded by the historian Eusebius (260-339) in his *Ecclesiastical History* (3:39.16): "Matthew collected the oracles (*logia*) in the Hebrew language, and each interpreted them as best he could." Papias claims that Matthew wrote the "oracles of Jesus" in Hebrew. The view that the Gospel of Matthew (as we have it today) was originally written in Hebrew (or Aramaic) and later translated into Greek is difficult to uphold from a scholarly point of view. An examination of the canonical Gospel shows that it was written in Greek, and the language and style are certainly not those of a translation from another language.

This does not mean that Papias is completely wrong. He was writing about four decades after the composition of Matthew so may have known the tradition related to this Gospel. The problem lies with our interpretation of what Papias says. Papias clearly speaks about "the oracles." He is not referring to the Gospel, but rather the tradition of the "sayings" (*logia*) that lie behind the Gospel of Matthew.

We can bring this information together in this way: An unknown writer who was not an eyewitness originally wrote the Gospel of Matthew in Greek, relying on sources



Antioch of Syria (Antakya, Turkey), location of the first Christian church outside Jerusalem. (Phoenix Data Systems, Neal and Joel Bierling)

such as Mark and Q. The name Matthew was associated with the sayings tradition which the author used. Since the Gospel relied heavily on the tradition of Jesus' sayings, it ultimately took its name from them and gave it its authority. We will continue to speak of the author of the Gospel as Matthew, but it is to be understood as referring to the unknown disciple who composed this Gospel based on the traditions of Matthew.

From an examination of the Gospel itself, we can say that this unknown writer was a Christian Jew writing for a community of Christians who had come from Judaism. This is seen from his use of the Septuagint, the parallels he draws between Jesus and Moses, that Jesus is the Son of David, how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law or Torah, and the controversies with the Jewish religious leaders, especially the Pharisees. The Gospel shows an author who knows the world and thought of Judaism really well.

#### **Who Are the First Readers of This Gospel?**

Our examination of Matthew's Gospel has indicated two interesting phenomena.

- Matthew's Gospel has a predominantly Jewish focus with the intention of showing the relationship of Jesus to the world and beliefs of Judaism. The Gospel breathes the thought and world of Judaism. Further, Matthew's Jesus understands his mission as directed

exclusively to his own people: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). His sending out of the disciples was directed in like manner exclusively to the people of Israel: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles" (10:5).

- On the other hand, Matthew's Gospel also embraces an outreach to the Gentiles. We have already observed how the story of the Magi at the opening of the Gospel sets the stage whereby the gospel message is rejected by the Jewish authorities and embraced by seekers from the Gentile world. The Gospel ends with Jesus sending forth his followers to make disciples of all nations (28:19-20).

Reflecting on these aspects, scholars have proposed the following scenario for the origin of this Gospel. It emerges from a Christian community that was predominantly Jewish, hence we would call it a Christian Jewish community. The strongly anti-Pharisaic attitude in this Gospel would be explained from the context of the world of Judaism immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E. The only religious groups to survive those horrendous events were the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew emerges against that background. It reflects a community of followers of Jesus who were struggling with the Pharisees for the heart and

### Comparison of Matthew with Hebrew Bible Texts

Matthew quotes the Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the Old Testament at least 60 times, while he alludes to it on more than 100 occasions. Here is a selection of some of Matthew's quotations to show how they compare with the Hebrew Bible texts:

#### Matthew (Septuagint)

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." (1:23)

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." (2:6)

"Out of Egypt I have called my son." (2:15)

"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (2:18)

"He will be called a Nazorean." (2:23)

"One does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (4:4)

#### Hebrew Bible

Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (Isa 7:14)

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Mic 5:2)

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. (Hos 11:1)

A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. (Jer 31:15)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (*netser*) shall grow out of his roots. (Isa 11:1)

He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut 8:3)

soul of Judaism. Each group was claiming to be the true interpreter of and heir to the traditions of Israel's past. This explains why it is important for Matthew's Gospel to present Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law.

A decade after the destruction of Jerusalem Matthew's community experienced a new phenomenon. The numbers of Gentiles entering their community increased dramatically. Matthew uses his Gospel to show that this outreach to the Gentiles is in conformity with Jesus' intentions and spirit. The acceptance of Gentiles into their community is part of God's plan to bring salvation to the nations of the world. This direction would set the stage for the emergence of two separate religions: Judaism (from the followers of the Pharisees) and Christianity (from the followers of Jesus). The Gospel of Matthew is a beautiful record of this initial transformation.

Where would the community of Matthew be located? Many scholars suggest the city of Antioch because it was one of the very few early Christian centers where the

makeup of the community was predominantly Jewish Christian. One would date this Gospel to around 80.

### Theological Themes in the Gospel of Matthew

#### Virginal Conception

Matthew 1:18-25 speaks of the virginal conception of Jesus. Matthew's main interest here is to show that Jesus is divine, that he is God's Son. Some modern scholars tend to question the virginal conception, arguing that this belief is a Christian adaptation of a pagan myth where the gods are seen to beget humans. However, one of the clearest differences with these accounts is that Matthew is speaking about a virginal conception, not divine sexual intercourse, as was the case with the pagan gods. Further support for the virginal conception is its attestation in two independent sources, Matthew and Luke. This surely shows a tradition that predates either

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles —  
the people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow  
of death light has dawned.” (4:15-16)

“He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” (8:17)

“Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,  
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.  
I will put my Spirit upon him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.  
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,  
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.  
He will not break a bruised reed  
or quench a smoldering wick  
until he brings justice to victory.  
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.” (12:18-21)

“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is,  
‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”  
(27:46)

“In the former time he brought into contempt the land  
of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the  
latter time he will make glorious the way of the  
sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the  
nations. The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —  
on them light has shined. (Isa 9:1-2)

“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried  
our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted. (Isa 53:4)

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for this teaching.  
(Isa 42:1-4)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words  
of my groaning?” (Ps. 22:1)

of the two Gospels. From a theological perspective it is supported for Protestants by a belief in the authority and the inerrancy of Scripture while for Catholics it is supported by church tradition.

### **Anti-Semitism**

The hostile statements made by Matthew against the Pharisees and the Jews in particular (esp. ch. 23) have given rise in past centuries for a strongly anti-Semitic attitude. This is an illustration of what happens when the biblical text is read independently of its social context. Matthew’s Gospel must be seen to emerge from a situation of conflict within the Jewish community. Both the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus are struggling with each other for the heart of Judaism. A writing emerging from such a hostile environment would portray its opponents in a very negative light. Further, Matthew tends to paint the Pharisees in the light of those who possess qualities that he does not want his community to adopt. They become his foils for showing what characteristics they should avoid if they are to be true followers of Jesus. The tragedy is that sometimes Christians have read these statements as accurate descriptions of all the Jew-

ish people. That is unfair, especially since Matthew and his community considered themselves to be the heirs of Judaism.

### **Jesus the Teacher Fulfills the Law**

As we have indicated above, in composing his Gospel Matthew was concerned with a twofold reality: the relationship of the teaching of Jesus to the traditions of Israel and the fact that many Gentiles had accepted the message of Jesus.

Matthew’s starting point was to present Jesus as the Teacher (the Rabbi) who upheld the true traditions of Israel. The following statement captures the very essence of all that Jesus did and said: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17). Jesus claimed for himself the authority to interpret the traditions of Israel’s past as contained in the “law and the prophets” (a phrase used to refer to Israel’s Sacred Scriptures). The Law specifically refers to the Torah, the expression of God’s will for God’s people that is found in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus’ statement claimed authority to give the biblical Torah the rightful understanding and

interpretation. This “fulfillment” meant that Jesus took a hard look at the traditions of Israel’s past and made a distinction between those traditions that truly were an expression of God’s will for God’s people and those that were not.

In the Sermon on the Mount, after his statement on fulfilling the Law, Jesus goes on to give his own understanding and interpretation of the laws through a sustained contrast: “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . .” (5:21-48). Jesus does not contradict the teaching of the Law. Instead, he calls on his followers to adhere to the Law in a much more intense way. He tells them that they are to abide by the Law more fully than even the Jewish religious leaders were doing: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). By the word “righteousness” Matthew embraces the concept of “moral action according to God’s will.” Jesus challenges his followers to ensure that the way they lead their lives must be according to God’s will (discovered in the Torah, the biblical Law). They must be dedicated to doing God’s will more intensely than even the religious leaders of that day. In the antitheses of Matthew (5:21-48), Jesus asks his followers to abide by the intention and the spirit, rather than giving a mere legalistic adherence to the Law.

Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law culminates in the simple command to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (22:34-40). Matthew’s Jesus presents his teaching on the centrality of the spirit of love in response to the question of a lawyer (one who belongs to the Pharisee party, an expert in interpreting the Jewish Law). When Jesus concludes this statement on the importance of loving God and neighbor, he says: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (22:40). This statement is significant because it draws the reader’s attention back to Jesus’ saying in the Sermon on the Mount that he has come not to abolish the Law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. Here Jesus shows in the clearest way how he fulfills the Law. He brings people to realize that the fullest understanding of the intention of the Law is contained in the law of love. Love should be the dominant motive in all that one does in order to carry out God’s will as envisaged by the Law.

The fulfillment of the Law looks beyond the confines of Israel to embrace all humanity. God’s revelation through Israel was not meant to be isolationist or exclusive, but rather it was a revelation intended ultimately for all people. Since Matthew’s community has experienced many Gentiles joining it, Matthew interprets this as a clear fulfillment of God’s plan. This is what God intended from the very beginning in choosing Israel as

## The Synoptic Gospels

God’s chosen nation. In this sense Jesus truly is “the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.”

### Discipleship

The negative picture of the disciples so characteristic of Mark’s Gospel is transformed by Matthew into a very positive one. This change emanates from Matthew’s image of Jesus: he is a rabbi with students (the disciples) around him. As students, the disciples absorb Jesus’ teaching faithfully throughout the Gospel. At the end they can go out and continue Jesus’ ministry of teaching (28:19-20). Because the disciples could effectively carry out Jesus’ mission only if they first understood Jesus’ teaching clearly, Matthew’s Jesus instructs them on every possible occasion.

The purpose of their mission is to make disciples (Greek *matheteuein*, 28:19; see 13:52; 27:57). Jesus sees his followers in the role of scribes who have been trained in the ways of the kingdom: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained (*matheteutheis*) for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (13:52). Their training conforms to the essence of Jesus’ teaching on his fulfillment of the Law.

Peter receives a prominent place in Matthew’s treatment of the disciples and is featured much more positively than in Mark, taking on the role of the one who represents the other disciples. Jesus endorses Peter’s confession of him as Messiah with a special blessing (16:17) and identifies Peter as the “rock (on which) I will build my church” (v. 18). When Jesus promises Peter the power of “binding and loosing,” he uses images that refer in a Jewish context to making legal decisions regarding the Law. This same power is entrusted in 18:18 to the community of disciples. Consequently, Jesus presents Peter’s role as intimately bound up with the community. He is representative of the community.

The whole Gospel is directed toward instructing the community on the nature of discipleship. Matthew’s Gospel has been described as “a handbook” for the community on how to lead their lives. The five sermons are orientated toward this instruction. This is the only Gospel that uses the term “church” (Greek *ekklesia*, 16:18; 18:17) for the Christian community, a term that was popular in the Pauline world for the assembly of Christian believers.

Throughout the sermons the word “brother” is used in the Greek text (5:22, 24, 47; 18:15, 21, 35), but this is not meant to be understood in the restrictive sense of referring only to males. Hence the NRSV translates it correctly as “brother and sister” in order to designate the disciples who are living in close relationship with one another and with God. The bottom line for all mem-

bers of Matthew's community is that they are all equal; they are all "brothers and sisters." Discipleship begins a new life for the members of Matthew's community. They share in the community's life in an equal way.

Teaching, then, is the fundamental mission of a disciple according to Matthew's Gospel. Within the community the disciples instruct new members or help those members whose faith is weak. This task of teaching is carried out in the spirit of "brotherly equality." Jesus sums up the qualities and attitudes demanded of a disciple: "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father — the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (23:8-12).

While Matthew's Gospel is a narrative about Jesus, his focus remains with his own community. Through the story of Jesus and his disciples Matthew addresses his own community. The disciples in Matthew's Gospel become models for the life of every believer who is called to discipleship in the sense of being a student who learns Jesus' teachings and passes them on to others.

## Questions for Review and Discussion

- 1 How does Matthew's infancy narrative help the reader understand the significance of the person of Jesus? What does it contribute to our understanding of Jesus and his mission?
- 2 Explain the meaning of Matthew's use of the following terms: righteousness; fulfillment; church.
- 3 Discuss the difference between Matthew's and Mark's understanding of discipleship.

## Further Reading

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