

Matthew: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT: *This article provides a cursory introduction to the first book of the New Testament, presenting key features, themes and significance for ministry today.*

KEY WORDS: *Placement; Details; Thesis; Structure; Gospels; Themes; Relevance; Sources*

PLACEMENT

Matthew is the hinge upon which the Bible turns. As Malachi rounds off the Old Testament canon, Matthew opens the New. Malachi finishes expectant of certain hopes related to the new covenant: the coming of an Elijah-like figure heralding the Lord's coming, and the Day of the Lord. After Malachi there were some four hundred years of prophetic silence, which Matthew then breaks. It is no small thing that Matthew heads the New Testament canon. Echoing Gen 1:1 from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), it begins, "The book of the genealogy [lit. beginning]..." He is the chosen instrument to introduce God's new will (i.e. testament), or the old covenant's fulfilment in Jesus as the Christ. This is unmistakably obvious in the genealogy that posits Jesus as the continuation of the old covenant and also the many Old Testament fulfilments found throughout the book, some sixty-five in all (the

most of any Gospel). However, despite the strong continuation it is also clear that Jesus inaugurates a new covenant (Matt 26:28).

DETAILS

While the Gospel of Matthew is technically anonymous, tradition links the Gospel with the tax collector-turned-disciple of Jesus named Matthew or Levi (e.g. Matt 9:9). This comes to us from the Apostolic Father Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (b. AD 130)¹ and Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (AD 60–130).² Given their generational proximity to the apostles, there is little reason to doubt their testimony. (Papias knew John and Irenaeus was mentored by Polycarp, who knew John). Many other Apostolic Fathers also cite from Matthew. While both bishops refer to Matthew writing in Hebrew, no manuscript evidence supports this. Irenaeus does note Matthew composed his gospel before the deaths of Peter and Paul. Following Marcan priority the date range of AD 55–65 has been suggested.³ The four Gospels were generally considered together as “the Four Gospels” by AD 150. Matthew is listed as part of the canon by the earliest sources such as Irenaeus (c. 200) until the fixing of the Canon in the West at the Council of Carthage (AD 419). In addition, there would have been little benefit to attaching a document to a lesser-known apostle. The Gospel is also in keeping with the hallmarks we would expect from a tax collector (knowledge and Greek) and a Jew (an interest in Jewish questions). Thus Matthew is a credible eyewitness to the person and events he details (c.f. Luke 1:2; 1 John 1:1).

THESIS

Like the wider Gospel genre, Matthew is not merely interested in writing about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection—the Gospels are a theologically-informed biography written to inspire saving faith.

1 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

2 Papias, *Fragments*, 6.

3 For Marcan priority see below, *MATTHEW AND THE GOSPELS*.

Though he is not as explicit as John (cf. John 20:30–31) this is nevertheless his aim: hence Jesus' question in Matt 16:16, "Who do people say that I am?"

Matthew's thesis is found in the opening verse, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew is conscious, and its canonical placement ensures, that he is launching a new chapter in an old story employing the same language from Gen 1:1. Through the "theology of genealogy" found in chapter one and the rest of the book, it is Matthew's aim to prove to his primarily Jewish audience that Jesus is the fulfilment of the covenantal promises God made to David and Abraham (Matthew often says, "This was done that it might be fulfilled..."). Jesus is the Christ, or anointed one; the Messiah who is able to "save His people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). The motif of royalty resonates throughout: an angelic proclamation, the Magi looking for the king, authoritative teaching, the triumphal entry, the returning King (Matt 25:31), the trial with Pilate, the sign on the cross ("This is Jesus, King of the Jews," Matt 27:37), His resurrected glory and authoritative commissioning. Matthew also makes clear through "Emmanuel," "Son of God" and Jesus' resurrection, that He is a divine king.

It is also evident through unmistakable parallelism that Matthew also desires to show Jesus as the "one greater than Moses" (Dt 18:15). Like Moses, Jesus has a providential birth, escapes into the wilderness and then returns to begin His ministry whereupon He sits down on a mountain and delivers His law, the Sermon on the Mount (water is also a linking factors: Red Sea and baptism). The Gospel's five sections of discourse and narrative also mimic the Torah, the five books of Moses.

Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, or king, who inaugurated the kingdom of heaven so all those who repent and believe His good news might become citizens thereof (Matt 3:17).

LITERARY STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW

Literary structure is key to hermeneutics. Many outlines have been made of Matthew, each seeking to highlight his points of emphasis.

Most have recognized something of the following, including the alternating pattern of narrative and discourse.⁴ The five narrative and five discourse sections between the introduction and conclusion address a number of Kingdom matters (i.e. the Torah or five books of Moses):

Introduction (chapters 1–3)

The introduction heralds (cf. angels, Magi and John the Baptist) the inauguration of the Kingdom and introduces Jesus as the Messiah; the continuation of the Old Testament story. This is reinforced through genealogy, angelic pronouncements, and fulfilment of promises.

Chapters 4–7

Narrative: Jesus proclaims and demonstrates the arrival of the Kingdom as He advances it (e.g. Baptism, Temptation and Galilean ministry [“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”]).

Discourse: The Kingdom’s teaching— In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus shows Himself the authoritative teacher by teaching how His disciples (or citizens) ought to fulfil the Law and live.

Chapters 8–10

Narrative: Jesus’ proves His Messiahship through various miracles. As He does He engages with nine different people/groups with the general injunction to “follow me.”

Discourse: Teachings about accepting or rejecting Jesus, the sending of the Twelve, persecution, His family, etc.

4 The outline is an amalgamation of: a) “Outline of Matthew,” *ESV Study Bible*. (IL: Crossway, 2008), 1817–1819; and b) “Matthew,” Bible Project Book Overviews. <<https://bibleproject.com/explore/book-overviews/>> (2023). Despite the value of the Bible Project for book overviews, theological caution is suggested for some of their material.

Chapters 11–13

Narrative: Differing responses to Jesus the Messiah, both positive (people), uncertain (John) and negative (Pharisees).

Discourse: Commentary parables on these responses, e.g. the Sower.

Chapters 14–20

Narrative: The confrontation of differing Messianic expectations—“Who do people say that I am?” (Matthew 16). Jesus will become the suffering servant.

Discourse: Parables about an upside-down Kingdom from this world or the world’s expectations

Chapters 21–25

Narrative: How Jesus’ Kingdom clashes with that of the world, both in the present and the future (e.g. the Triumphal Entry, parables attacking the establishment, confrontations with religious leaders [e.g. paying taxes to Caesar])

Discourse: The famous woes and parables about the second coming or final judgement of the Messiah; just as Jesus would be crucified, Jerusalem would be destroyed, and just as Jesus rose, He would be fully vindicated when his Kingdom comes in its fullness.

Conclusion

The conclusion (chapters 26–28) demonstrates, in a definitive and defining sense, how Jesus became the Messiah through his life, death and resurrection and how he commands his apostles to expand the Kingdom by making disciples. It shows how he defeated his enemies and was crowned in his resurrection.

MATTHEW AND THE GOSPELS

Matthew is one of the synoptic gospels, a nineteenth-century term to refer to how Matthew, Mark and Luke have a similar synopsis of Jesus’ life. While some posit Matthew as the first gospel, the great majority of scholars favour Mark (mid-AD 50s) with Matthew likely following (late AD 50s–early AD 60s) and then Luke-Acts (early AD 60s). While not the oldest, Matthew has many unique features: its

intertestamental placement, that it was written by an Apostle (like John), its Jewishness, and its length. Perhaps most notable, though not as much as in John, is the unique content found in Matthew, such as Jesus' infancy narrative, aspects of the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the tares (and other parables, such as those of the kingdom), the adultery clause for remarriage, the death of Judas, the guard at the tomb, report of the guards, and—famously—the Great Commission.

KEY MATTHEAN THEMES

There are many themes that run through Matthew. The following are some of the major ones:

Jesus as the Messiah (see above)

The Testamental Hinge (see above)

The King and His Kingdom: It is evident that Jesus is the King, but what sort of King? He is the King of the Jews (Matt 10:5) but also of the Gentiles (Matt 11:28, 12:18, 28:19. Many Gentiles feature prominently: the Magi, the Cannanite woman (Matt 15:22), and the centurion (Matt 27:54). He is King over the new covenant community (Matt 22:10) or to use similar language, Lord of his Church (Matt 16:18, 18:15–20).

Salvation: From the outset of the Gospel it is clear what sort of Messiah he would be: a saviour (Matt 1:21 says, “He will save his people from their sins”). This he would accomplish by being the Suffering Servant, dying and rising, as the paschal lamb (Matt 16:21—“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised”). By repenting and trusting this good news, sinners can join the kingdom (Matt 24:14).

Discipleship: Jesus is interested in followers, not fans. This is abundantly clear throughout: calling his disciples, teaching them (e.g. Sermon on the Mount), urging total commitment in would-be followers (Matt 16:24—“If anyone would come after me, let him

deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”) to making disciples (Great Commission).

Judgment: From John the Baptist’s phrase, “but the chaff [i.e. those who do not repent] He will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12) to “And these will go away into eternal punishment” (Matt 25:46), it is clear Matthew took seriously Jesus’ authority as king to judge.

The Holy Spirit: The Spirit consistently appears across the pages of Matthew. He first appears at Jesus’ conception (Matt 1:18—“she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”), in the discourse about blasphemy against the Spirit (Matt 12:31), and in the Great Commission.

Mission: Matthew is unique in that it is the only place the Great Commission is found. Jesus’ disciples must tell others about the good news of the kingdom (Matt 24:14) and call them to join it. This mission is undergirded by Jesus’ own mission and his call to the disciples to go out (Matt 10:1-23).

ENDURING RELEVANCE

Matthew has particular contemporary relevance in a number of areas:

Apologetics: Matthew is an early eyewitness account and contains prophetic fulfilment, miraculous accounts, wise sayings, historic details, and the empty tomb. All these are ready-made tools for defending the faith that many apologists have helpfully catalogued for us. Matthew himself employs apologetics within his apologetic in the report of the guard (Matt 28:11-15).

Discipleship: Long before *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* or other small group studies, the Lord gave the Church ready-made Gospels to serve the dual purpose of (1) pointing inquirers to Jesus so they might decide who He is and follow Him and (2) equipping followers to mature in following His example and teaching so that they might be conformed to his image. Considering Jesus’ people skills and teaching techniques is also of benefit.

Missions: How do you do missions in a post-Christian context? Matthew, written in a pre-Christian context, has much to teach us. Compassion on the lost (Matt 9:36), keeping Jesus central (Matt 16:16), remaining true to God's word (Matt 5-7), proclaiming glad tidings of salvation (Matt 24:14), making clear the cost of following, not casting "pearls before swine" (Matt 7:6), "teaching them," and remembering in all things we represent Jesus (Matt 18:18; 28:18) are critical elements of evangelism today.

While Bible study tools such as the *Gospel Witness* are helpful, the best way to get into Matthew is to pick it up or listen to it. It takes about two and a half hours to read: why not try giving it a bird's eye view?

USEFUL RESOURCES

In addition to reading Matthew, there are a number of resources, popular and academic, contemporary and historic, to aid in studying the Gospel (there are others of a more liberal vein that can prove helpful if used under a watchful eye):

Contemporary Popular

- M. Green, *The Message of Matthew*, in the Bible Speaks Today series (Intervarsity, 2000).
- J. Legg, *Matthew: The King and His Kingdom*, in Welwyn Commentary Series (Evangelical Press, 2004).

Contemporary Academic

- D. A. Carson, *Matthew 1-12, Matthew 13-28*, in Expositor's Bible Commentary (Zondervan: 1984).
- K. Chamblin, *Matthew 1-13, Matthew 14-28*, in Mentor Commentary (Mentor, 2010).
- R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Eerdmans, 1994).
- R. T. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (InterVarsity, 2007).
- C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1999).

Historic

Church Fathers such as Chrysostom, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Matthew Henry, John Gill, Charles Spurgeon, and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.