

# GENERAL HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

It is necessary to look at the general history of the time between Malachi and Matthew if one is to understand the background of the world into which Jesus entered and Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote. The principle sources for this information are found in documents, such as Josephus, the Jewish historian, and the Apocryphal books. Generally speaking, as the last of the OT prophets, passed from the scene (c. 400 B.C.), Judea was a tiny province of returned Jewish exiles living in relative peace within the Persian Empire.<sup>i</sup> The Persian rule (536-331 B.C.) brought with it their polytheistic views that gradually contaminated the people of Palestine.

After Alexander the Great defeated the Persians in Asia Minor, he went to Jerusalem where he was met by the High Priest and welcomed peacefully into the city. Alexander treated the Jews and their religion with favor. After his death in 323 B.C., his vast kingdom was divided among four of his generals.<sup>ii</sup> “Under the Ptolemies of Egypt (321-198 B.C.), the Jews, for the most part, enjoyed great favor.

Under the Syrian regime (198-167 B.C.), the loyalties of the Jewish people went back and forth between the rival kingdoms of the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Syrian kings to the north. Under the Syrians, most of the time, the Jew’s were treated cruelly. During this time, many abandoned their sacrifices and rites in favor of the Greek religion. In response to this, there arose an opposing party of the strict and orthodox Jews led by the Scribes. They founded synagogues and zealously guarded their traditions.<sup>iii</sup>

“The Jews, under the Maccabean patriotic leaders (167-63 B.C.), recovered their independence from the Syrian rulers to the North.”<sup>iv</sup> Through a series of battles and strategies that included guerrilla warfare by Patriots, Matthias and his descendants engaged the Syrians till the coming of the Romans under Pompey, who took the city in 63 B.C.<sup>v</sup>

“(Herod) Antipater, a wealthy Idumean officer, gained great prestige with the Roman Emperor and was made Procurator of Judea. He placed his sons in charge of Judea and Galilee.”<sup>vi</sup> One of his sons, Herod the Great, governed Palestine at the time of Christ’s Birth.<sup>vii</sup> Much has been written about the life and influence of Herod the Great but this one quote may serve as a brief commentary: “Herod died, as he had lived, cruel and treacherous.”<sup>viii</sup> After his death, the Romans increased their sovereignty and divided the country into three regions under Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Herod Philip.<sup>ix</sup>

Pontius Pilate became the fifth of the succeeding Procurators (25-36 A.D.). After the resurrection, he was banished to Gaul and there committed suicide. In 37 A.D., Caligula made Agrippa I king. In 44 A.D., “the Emperor Claudius reverted to the system of Procurators, two of whom were Felix and Festus.”<sup>x</sup> Some of their account is recorded in Acts 23 and 24. “In 53 A.D. the country was again united under King Agrippa II who beheaded James (Acts 12). The Jews were given a large measure of autonomy by the Romans through their Sanhedrin, but with certain restrictions.”<sup>xi</sup>

It was this unrest that mandated the understanding of who Christ was, what he did and, more specifically, what he demanded in the life of a disciple. The New Testament begins with Matthew’s Gospel and it provided just what was needed, the guide for life in the midst of great uncertainty.

# AN INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW

As the Old Testament comes to a close with the passing of Malachi we find the nation of Israel in a state of relative peace and great anticipation. The canon of the old covenant ends with the final prophet and the canon of the new covenant begins with the record of the first evangelist (a common way theologians refer to Matthew). Fittingly, the Gospel of Matthew begins with words connecting the two covenants and setting the stage for the birth of “Immanuel.” The historical events of the 400 years between Malachi and Matthew, which are not found in our Bibles, cause the reader to understand more fully what God intended.

When we see the context of the time and place of the writing, we can see the Gospel of Matthew is **A Guidebook for the Church: Then and Now!** Specifically, it reveals Christ’s requirements for how one in the church is to live and function. Before much more is said, let’s acknowledge that many commentators have not arrived at a singular purpose yet most have most have given strong support to this view.

“Requirements for discipleship and the constitution of the community of Jesus’ followers that became the church dominate Matthew’s Gospel as they do no other...”<sup>xii</sup>

“Finally, Matthew stresses discipleship as following Jesus so as to obey the sum total of God’s commandments as interpreted by and fulfilled in Christ.”<sup>xiii</sup>

“What is spoken to the former is spoken to the latter; what is demanded of and promised to the twelve is demanded of and promised to Matthew’s church. Matthew’s Gospel is above all a book for the church.”<sup>xiv</sup>

“The evangelist has collected and shaped the major discourses particularly for the instruction and edification of the Church.”<sup>xv</sup>

“His gospel becomes a manual on discipleship, as Jew and Gentile are made disciples of Jesus Messiah and learn to obey all that he commanded his original disciples.”<sup>xvi</sup>

There exists considerable debate as to the location of the author’s church; however, the specific locale is not as necessary as the background of the author and the life setting of readers. Matthew, like all the Gospels in the New Testament, is an anonymous document. The title was given to the document in the second century. Since that time, the unanimous traditions of the church support the claim of Matthew the Tax Collector, disciple of Christ, as the author.

## SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FEATURES

It is important to understand that at both the time of Christ and Matthew's writing, there existed great religious power struggles, a lack of identity within Judaism, a major moral deficit in the world as a whole, and a value system that created unrest. Pentecost, in his work, states:

"The world was in a state of extraordinary moral degeneration. Two thousand lords in Rome had 1,300,000 slaves, which were treated with great cruelty. In the Empire there were 6,000,000 slaves. The rich lived in the utmost profligacy. Chastity and marriage were the exception while divorce and immorality were the rule."<sup>xvii</sup>

Rome offered no hope for spirituality, only war. The philosophy of the Greek culture had been tried and been left wanting. A luxurious lifestyle was the primary desire of the time. "Tacitus said that the spirit of the times was 'to corrupt and to be corrupted'."<sup>xviii</sup> Paul's words to the church at Rome shed a bit of light into the social climate in Rom 1:24-25: **"Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator..."**

Despite rampant poverty within the masses, it must be noted that during the time of Jesus Palestine was not without wealth. The taxation deposits of Archelaus, Herod the Great and Agrippa II were all substantial.<sup>xix</sup> From some of the comments within the text one could argue that Matthew may have possessed a measure of wealth (Matt 6:19-21; 19:23, 24).

The religious make-up was divided into five principle sects. The Pharisees resisted foreign influence and were zealous for their traditions. The Sadducees were a wealthy, sacerdotal aristocracy who did not believe in the Oral Law or in the future of life. They opposed the attitude of the Pharisees and their primary concern was political. The Essenes were a sect who lived mostly in isolated communities west of the Dead Sea. Their purifications and reverence for the sun indicated Persian influence. Though they did not follow of Jewish traditions, in many ways they were part of the dysfunctional form of Judaism of the day. The Herodians were supporters of the government of the Herods, holding that a foreign governor was a better guarantee for protection of life and property than the religions of the day. Finally, the Zealots were also like the Pharisees in belief but insisted on war against Rome. Various revolts promoted by them were unsuccessful and severely punished.<sup>xx</sup>

If this were not enough, the conflict between the Orthodox Jewish and Hellenistic culture created further unrest. The Jews of the Hellenistic tradition greatly sought to be equal with their more orthodox brethren. However, the pharisaic rule made no secret of their contempt for the Hellenists.

This influence bears weight on the nature of our Gospel. "...Matthew is written in relatively good Greek, better, for example, than Mark ... Given the amount of Hellenization that had infiltrated Galilee by the first century, and given the regular contacts with Gentiles that a toll collector would have had, the apostle Matthew would have become a reasonably cosmopolitan Jew, quite capable of this kind of writing."<sup>xxi</sup>

"As a tax collector he would have been trained in secular scribal techniques, and as a Galilean Jewish Christian he would have been able to interpret the life of Jesus from the perspective of the Old Testament expectations."<sup>xxii</sup>

It was especially in light of these cultural and social backdrops that the need for a guidebook existed. Matthew's community needed a guidebook from the One who knew the beginning and the end to show them the correct path for life. This disenfranchised group of Jewish believers needed a guidebook on navigating righteousness in the midst of depravity from the One who was tempted in every way just as they were being tempted yet never fell to it. The background of the day mandated that Matthew record the life of Christ in the manner in which he did. It was Matthew who took to heart the parting words of our Lord in Matt 28:19-20: "Therefore go 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 I have commanded you**. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

## HOW IT IMPACTS US TODAY

Clearly, they needed guidance and direction but no more so than we. For can't we identify today with a depraved morality? Do we not hear daily the stories of corruption? When was the last newspaper delivered without a reference to war? In what political election has the topic of taxation not been debated? Which church or individual Christian doesn't struggle with being in the world but not of the world? Of course we can identify with the context in which the evangelist wrote. And we now, as they did then, need to know and live Christ's requirements for how one in the church is to live and function. The Gospel of Matthew is a guidebook for us. It reveals Christ's requirements for how one in the church is to live and function.

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- <sup>i</sup>Wilmington.
  - <sup>ii</sup>Pentecost, 530.
  - <sup>iii</sup>Pentecost, 530.
  - <sup>iv</sup>Pentecost, 531.
  - <sup>v</sup>Pentecost, 531.
  - <sup>vi</sup>Pentecost, 531.
  - <sup>vii</sup>Edersheim, 10.
  - <sup>viii</sup>Edersheim, 10.
  - <sup>ix</sup>Pentecost, 532.
  - <sup>x</sup>Pentecost, 532.
  - <sup>xi</sup>Pentecost, 532.
  - <sup>xii</sup>Bornkamm, 32.
  - <sup>xiii</sup>Blomberg, 34.
  - <sup>xiv</sup>Hagner, xlii.
  - <sup>xv</sup>Hagner, lxiii.
  - <sup>xvi</sup>Wilkins, 21.
  - <sup>xvii</sup>Pentecost, 536-537.
  - <sup>xviii</sup>Pentecost, 537.
  - <sup>xix</sup>Edersheim, 11.
  - <sup>xx</sup>Pentecost, 542.
  - <sup>xxi</sup>Blomberg, 43.
  - <sup>xxii</sup>Wilkins, 24.

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