Matthew was the favorite and most prominent Gospel of early Christianity; it was typically listed first, and it was the Gospel most frequently quoted by the “Church Fathers.”

- Carefully constructed to facilitate memory
- Early assumption that it was written by an apostolic witness
- Early assumption that Matthew was written first
- Begins with a genealogy, providing ancient readers a sense of connection between the Gospel story and the salvation-history stories of Hebrew scripture.

**Date:** Probably between 80 and 100, with 90 as a reasonable estimate

**Author and Audience:** The author is unknown. Like all the Gospels, “Matthew” was written anonymously, and his name was attached to the document toward the end of the 2nd century. The author was apparently a person of Jewish background who must have grown up in a Hellenistic city (probably Antioch), and spoke Greek. He may have been familiar enough with Hebrew for limited study (although the Greek Septuagint would have been his Bible), and enough Aramaic for informal conversation. Although he does not appear to have had formal training as a rabbi, he clearly had a teaching role in his community.

This is not material written as timeless truth; it was not written for future generations. Like every “book” and letter in scripture, Matthew’s Gospel was written to a particular group of people to help them with the development of their faith in their unique historical situation: to educate, encourage, teach, and inspire.

Matthew is a Greek Gospel, using Greek sources, written for a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians at a time when the Jesus tradition had become mixed with legend, and when the ethical teaching of Jesus was being reinterpreted in order to apply it to new situations and codified into law. All of these factors eliminate the possibility of authorship by an eyewitness.

Matthew was probably written to, from, and for an Hellenistic Jewish Christian community, probably in Antioch. It is very much a “church” book, written specifically to meet the needs of the church as a developing organization. It provided a basis on which the church could build its life, a set of instructions for procedure in its affairs, and an understanding of its past, present, and future that helped define its ongoing life in the world.

The audience appears to have been a relatively wealthy urban community: Matthew has changed Q’s references from “poor” and “hungry” to “poor in spirit,” and “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” References to small-denomination copper coins are replaced by references to gold and larger-denomination coins, and Matthew includes remarks about high finance and lavish dinner parties. Matthew adds a comment about Joseph of Arimathea: he is both a disciple and a wealthy man.

Matthew made Mark’s narrative his basic storyline, inserting Q and his own material into Mark’s material, providing an elaboration and new interpretation of the Markan narrative. This Gospel is not the work of an isolated author, but reflects the life and concerns of a particular Christian community which had been involved in a long and intense relationship with the surrounding dominant Jewish community and can’t define itself apart from that relationship.

Matthew is not just an editor who compiles Mark’s material. He gives the material a special emphasis, a different application, and occasionally a new content. He works in a community for whose needs he is writing. His Gospel is a product of the community and for the community. Matthew’s Gospel
serves as a manual in church membership, especially helpful to new converts, with the teachings of Jesus assembled under appropriate headings into 5 discourses. It is a story that is intended for reading aloud in community worship and study, as opposed to private or individual reading. The purpose is not biographical, but Christological. This Gospel is best understood by modern readers if we can imagine ourselves as a new convert who is being exposed to its content for the first time.

Matthew is much less interested than Mark in the “end times” and the return of Jesus; for Matthew the delay of Jesus’ return allows time for the work and witness of the church; and the return of Jesus becomes especially a judgment of the church.

Matthew is much more interested in theology and evangelism than he is in history. His work is influenced by his theology and his community’s needs. For example, he does not make a distinction between the early traditions about Jesus and the more recent ones: It seems unimportant that Mark said nothing about a virgin birth; the concept was circulating in Matthew’s church, and it helped solve the problem of how Jesus became the Son of God.

Matthew does not see the Jesus movement as a new religion but as a messianic community which is the true heir to the Hebrew nation, and which after the exaltation of Jesus, includes Gentiles. Those who recognize Jesus as the Messiah will inherit the Kingdom of God.

Matthew is not a record made by a reporter, nor a collection assembled by an editor; rather, it is a narrative composed by an author. Like any author, the author of Matthew makes numerous editorial choices. A number of Matthew’s editorial choices are intended to make a connection between Jesus and Moses:

- Matthew organizes the teachings of Jesus into 5 major discourses, calling to mind the 5 books of the Torah. This arrangement implies that Jesus is bringing a new Torah, a new revelation that supersedes the old.
- Matthew has Jesus and his family go to Egypt, reminiscent of Moses sojourns into Egypt.
- Matthew has Jesus family hiding him from an alleged massacre of male children by the ruling empire, like Moses.
- Matthew jumps into the “sermon on the mount” early in his document, delivered from a mountain like Moses on Sinai.

Additional “Jewish seasoning” by Matthew:

- the birth narratives are centered around Davidic descent
- the kingdom is referred to as the Kingdom of Heaven, not the Kingdom of God
- strong emphasis on righteousness, defined as fulfilling the law
- Jesus tells his disciples not to go to the Gentiles.
- major emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism’s past, the “fulfillment of prophecy.”

**Matthew’s Sources:**

![Diagram showing Matthew's sources and community](image-url)
From the very beginning of Matthew’s community the Q document had been a revered part of the community’s sacred tradition and was probably read in public worship. Q material assumed the laws of the early Jewish Christian community were still valid. It was not just a literary source; the document but was part of the history and mind-set of the community and it helped shape the ethos of the community.

Gospel of Mark: Some time after 70, the Gospel of Mark arrived in the Matthean community, was accepted as part of the community’s own sacred tradition, and was used in its life and worship.

Matthew’s own material: Matthew’s Gospel contains the first use of the term “church” to describe a community of believers. The Gospel is a manual of membership – it is best understood by modern readers if we can imagine ourselves as a new convert who has just been exposed to it for the first time.

Matthew’s account met many of the needs of church life, thereby enhancing its value and increasing its popularity:

- conveniently arranged
- easily separated into sections for reading in public worship or study
- style was smooth, pithy, quotable

Placing Mark’s material at its core, Matthew puts together Mark’s material, Q material, and his own sources with great artistry and care. His framework is a marvelous combination of chronological and topical material. He preserves Mark’s order, in most cases, but deals with the details of Mark’s account quite freely: he incorporated some of them as he inherited them, and occasionally re-wrote others, an acceptable practice for evangelists who were considered composers as well as editors.

The period between the time of Jesus and the completion of the Gospels was a very dynamic period for the transmission of the Jesus story: stories about him were being preached, reinterpreted, and handed on in the various streams of the movement and in their respective centers of influence.

Such re-telling was quite common in biblical and Jewish tradition: Deuteronomy re-tells the Exodus story with modifications and expansion, including the creation of new sayings and speeches for characters in the story; and the Book of Chronicles modifies the accounts of David and Solomon.

Mark’s interest in the story for the story’s sake has disappeared. Matthew’s doctrinal motives are obvious in the way he uses Mark and Q. He is eager to protect Jesus’ divine power and perfect goodness against any possible denial or distraction (for example, changes in the baptism {not for repentance of sin} and resurrection stories {we have objective verification}).

Matthew included almost all of Mark, but added important material:

- a genealogy describing Jesus’ Davidic lineage
- a narrative of Jesus infancy
- Jesus’ family goes to Egypt.
- a lengthy description of Jesus’ temptations and dialogue with the tempter
- The voice at baptism is addressed to the crowd, not just to Jesus.
- Following the death of John the Baptist, Jesus goes to Capernaum.
- resurrection appearances
- a disclaimer about soldiers guarding the tomb to prevent removal of the body
• earthquake that moved the stone from the grave opening
• an extended account of Jesus’ ethical teachings. Matthew attached a number of Jesus’ sayings to the initial nucleus of the “Sermon on the Mount,” providing a memorable collection of Jesus’ sayings in one central place.
• a commissioning of the apostles as the first missionaries, directing them to all the world
• baptism in a “Trinitarian formula”

Matthew’s omissions are significant:

• Jesus’ harshness toward the leper (and others)
• Jesus’ periodic anger
• the idea that the demons recognize him (no possible consorting with Beelzebub)
• charge of insanity
• “no one is good but the Father”
• Jesus is no longer a carpenter, but the son of a carpenter.

The role and wisdom of the disciples is elevated in Matthew:

• References to their ignorance and bewilderment have been removed or toned down greatly; in Matthew they are much more astute, and they accomplish considerably more
• They are more like students of a rabbi.
• Unlike the crowd, they have a spiritual perspective.
• They, not the crowd, are his true family.
• Early on they hail him as the Son of God.
• It is not the sons of Zebedee who ask about the place of honor, but their mother who makes the inquiry.
• While Jesus is alive, the disciples heal the sick and proclaim the kingdom, but do not to teach. Only Jesus teaches until after the resurrection, when the disciples are charged to go out and teach.
• Jesus calls them apostles, signaling Matthew’s view that they are the founders of the missionary movement.

Matthew revised a number of Mark’s references to eliminate questions that might have surfaced from Mark’s account:

• Jesus’ baptism is not for personal repentance.
• Peter is praised for hailing Jesus as Messiah.
• The miracles took place instantaneously.
• The body of Jesus was not stolen from the tomb (a story fabricated by the guards).

Matthew edits Jesus’ teaching material to make it more precise and more applicable to life in Christian community:

• He adds moralizing passages which teach the necessity of good works.
• He portrays Jesus’ earthly ministry as directed to Israel; the Gentile mission begins only after the resurrection.
• He adds editorial comments that are consistent with rabbinical teaching, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Matthew makes a number of less significant changes in Mark’s material:

- He puts the cleansing of temple on the same day Jesus enters Jerusalem.
- Characters in his stories are doubled (2 vs. 1).
- Numbers are increased in both stories about feeding the large crowds (“plus women and children”).
- He expands Mark’s editorial summaries.
- Joseph of Arimathea is now regarded as a disciple.
- The young man at the tomb becomes an angel.

In Matthew the distinction between Christian and Jew is becoming more pronounced: Matthew continues to refer to a new way. He emphasizes prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, as well as the power of faith and prayer. (An aside: in Matthew, the Lord’s Prayer is longer and more liturgical in form than it is in Luke’s version.)

Matthew, like all of the evangelists (including Paul) struggles to explain why Israel had rejected Jesus, although his mission was clearly to the chosen people. They also struggled with the question of why Jesus died.

Matthew and other early Christians read the Hebrew scripture in light of their own experience and expected to find every significant event in the life of Jesus foreshadowed there. They assumed that what Jesus did was part of the divine plan; and every “prediction” of the prophets must come to pass, especially in the age ushered in by the Messiah.

Matthew thinks of the time of Jesus as a special, sacred time. By adding genealogy and a series of stories about the birth and infancy of Jesus, and by emphasizing Jesus as the new revelation fulfilling the promise of the old (and superseding it), he is able to set the time of Jesus apart from all previous time as the time of fulfillment.

The disciples are to act on this revelation, to go out into all the world, to teach and baptize; they are to organize into a church with a distinctive rite and formula of initiation: baptism in a “Trinitarian” formula. The disciples will be constantly helped in this process, and their teaching will be authenticated, by the presence of the risen Lord in their midst.

Matthew probably portrays Jesus as more anti-Pharisee than he actually was. By heightening the miracle stories he has made Jesus look omnipotent, and gives the reader the impression that Jesus was interested in predicting the future and laying plans for a Christian church.

Jesus’ teaching was not a new law that abrogated the old law, but rather gave it the meaning God had intended. Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ expectation that his disciples will observe the code he taught, and assures them they will be judged on the basis of their performance – perhaps soon.

In Matthew we see the beginnings of ecclesiastical law:

- One reason is allowed for divorce.
- Christians are free from the temple tax to which Jews are obligated, but should pay it to avoid offences.
- It includes a process of correction/church discipline.
Matthew also emphasizes the forgiveness and the boundless mercy of Christ. Penitents are to be welcomed back not just one time, but 77 times. In some circles reinstatement was not possible, and certainly not more than once.

**Relationship of Matthew’s Gospel to the Jewish Community**

“Matthew is both deeply Jewish and painfully anti-Jewish.” (Daniel Pate, NT scholar). The community appears to be subject to the disciplinary measures of the synagogue authorities, perhaps still keeps the Sabbath, and at times uses the term “Gentile” synonymously with “pagan.”

However, Matthew contains a number of “anti-Jewish” features as well, reflecting a growing tension between the Jerusalem Jewish community and the Jewish Christian communities outside Palestine.

- “their synagogue”
- “their scribes”
- “the Jews”
- Disciplinary matters are to come before the church, not the synagogue.

Matthew’s church saw itself as the messianic community, the eschatological people of God – distinct from all (Jew or Gentile) who did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Matthew regards the Christian community of Jews and Gentiles as the continuation of the people of God who would come to eschatological fulfillment when the 12 tribes of Israel are regathered. Matthew sees those Jews who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah (especially their leadership [Pharisees, Sadducees, high priests]) as having forfeited their claim as the people of God. Israel is considered merely one nation among all others, called to constitute the continuing people of God by confessing Jesus as the Messiah and by living according to his teachings.

The Gospel of Matthew is not written to Jewish outsiders to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah; it is written for Matthew’s own community to instruct them in their faith and to clarify it over against misunderstandings; it is not as an evangelistic or apologetic writing directed at outsiders.

Matthew’s church and/or the Q community had previously carried on an unsuccessful mission to Jewish people; it no longer saw itself as a Jewish movement/reform movement; now sees itself as a mission to the “nations” of which Israel is one.

In Matthew the role of Peter is heightened: in his role individually, and as a representative for the 12. Peter plays a unique role in the founding and maintenance of the community, and receives a special Christological revelation from God, a unique pronouncement of blessing by Jesus, and a special responsibility in the founding of the church.

**The Place of Matthew in Primitive Christianity**

Before Matthew included Q, the Q document was a fluid and unstable document; by including Q material in his document, even preferring over Mark in some places where the two sources disagree. Matthew has preserved this material for the church, and was able to prohibit it from continuing expansion.

During the first half of the first century the Christian churches developed almost entirely without central control (no creed, no liturgy, no canonical writings apart from Hebrew scripture), no external organization. Within a generation the communities in various parts of the empire had begun to develop distinctive interpretations of the message: Antioch was more liberal; Rome was more conservative; Jerusalem emphasized strict adherence to Jewish law. The church nearly split in the late
40’s over uncircumcised Gentiles, and was on the verge of falling apart when Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels appeared. Mark’s Gospel had helped provide some unified religious education, but it included few of Jesus’ teachings. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, although quite different in their respective approaches, served a valuable purpose in helping the church crystallize and standardize its message.

“The message about Jesus as Son of God, Son of Man, and Messiah born of a virgin, crucified, and risen, is fundamental, and so is the story of his human life as an Israelite; so also are the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament, which confirms the whole story; furthermore, this story is guaranteed to us by the twelve, who were the church’s original apostles.” (Sherman Johnson)

Sources


