

# The Gospel of the Nazareans

Jewish Christians in the early centuries of the church were widely thought to have preferred the Gospel of Matthew to all others, since it is Matthew that stresses the importance of keeping the Jewish Law down to every jot and tittle (5:17–20) and that emphasizes, more than any other, the Jewishness of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> According to a number of ancient sources, one group of Jewish Christians, sometimes known as the Nazareans, produced their own version of Matthew, translated into Aramaic, the language of Jesus and of Jews living in Palestine.<sup>2</sup> This version would have been produced sometime near the end of the first century or the beginning of the second.

Eventually this “Gospel of the Nazareans” fell into disfavor with the Christian community at large, both because few Christians in later centuries could read Aramaic and because the Gospel’s Jewish emphases were considered suspicious. As a result, the Gospel came to be lost. Now we know of it only through quotations of its text by church fathers like Jerome, and by references to it in the margins of several Greek manuscripts of the Gospel according to Matthew.

These quotations reveal clearly the Jewish-Christian concerns of the Gospel and show that the Gospel contained stories of Jesus’ baptism, public ministry, death, and resurrection. It evidently did not include, however, the first two chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, which record the events surrounding Jesus’ miraculous birth. For according to many Jewish Christians, Jesus was not born of a virgin, but was a natural human being who was specially chosen to be the messiah because God considered him to be more righteous than anyone else.

Today scholars debate whether the church fathers were right in thinking that the Gospel of the Nazareans was an Aramaic version of Matthew; it may have instead been an original composition, in Aramaic, based on oral traditions about Jesus that were in wide circulation and available both to this author and the author of Matthew.

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<sup>1</sup>See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 2003), chap. 7. <sup>2</sup>See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 99–103.

Translation by Bart D. Ehrman, based on the Greek, Latin, and Syriac texts in A. F. J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition* (VCSupp 17; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992) 47–115.