

The Gospel of Matthew

1. Introduction

Matthew was traditionally thought to be the original of the four canonical gospels. However, with the widely accepted view that Mark was the earliest of the gospels, Matthew received little attention in New Testament scholarship. However, this has changed during the last few decades, and Matthew is now the focus of renewed interest. Matthew, more than any other gospel, addresses the 'church' and a key area of research has been to determine the origin and nature of the 'Matthean community'.

2. Authorship - Origin - Date

The gospel has been linked to Matthew, the apostle and tax collector. Papias (as quoted by Eusebius in *The History of the Church*) refers to a figure called Matthew compiling sayings in a 'Hebrew dialect' (Aramaic?), although this does not seem to have been a gospel, but a collection that may have been a source for the gospel.

Much of the greater length of Matthew compared with Mark is due to the teachings of Jesus, which are assumed to have come from the logia source Q (see earlier module units). In addition, there is material unique to Matthew (M) assumed to come from the author or his community.

Matthew has obvious affinities with Jewish tradition, but he is also critical of Jews. He is generally thought to be a Jewish Christian writing for a community of Jewish Christians. This seems to be a community of Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles, with a clear sense of mission to the Gentiles. Northern Palestine or Syrian Antioch has been suggested as the most likely place of origin. The gospel is generally dated post 70 CE (around 80-100 CE), but no firm clues are given as to the date of the text.

3. Content

In addition to Markan material, Matthew has added several new sections: an infancy narrative, five blocks of teachings or 'discourses', and post-resurrection appearances.

a) Infancy stories (chapters 1-2) Matt begins with a genealogy and ties the story of Jesus more closely to Jewish origins than Mark. Note that the infancy story is very different from Luke (no shepherds or angelic hosts). The story is arranged so that it emphasizes the fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures: Gentiles coming to worship (Isaiah); Herod's persecution (Jer.

31:15: 'A voice heard in Ramah'); flight to Egypt (Hos. 11:1: 'out of Egypt I called my son'); return to Nazareth (2:23- quotation from an unspecified source).

b) The Five Discourses (chapters 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-5) The blocks of teaching were initially identified by transition statements e.g. 7:28 'Now when he has finished saying these things'. Some attempts were made to link Matthew's five discourses to the five first books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Pentateuch) and to Matthew interpreting Jesus as the new Moses. The Pentateuch scheme is not now widely held (although see Dale Allison's study on Moses typology (1993)), but structure does seem to be deliberate literary creation.

3-4 Narrative: *Baptism, temptation, proclaiming the Kingdom.*

5-7 Discourse on Righteousness: 'Sermon on the Mount'

8-9 Narrative: *Miracles and healings*

10 Discourse on Mission ('sending out the disciples')

11-12 Narrative: *questioning and opposition*

13 Discourse on the Kingdom; parables by the lake

14-17 Narrative and dialogue: *establishing the church*

18 Discourse on the Church.

19-23 Narrative: *journey to and time in Jerusalem.*

24-25 Discourse on the End Times (in the Temple).

26-28 Narrative: *death and resurrection*

c) Post-Resurrection appearances Matthew expands on Mark, adding a story about meeting Jesus in Jerusalem and later in Galilee (cf. John 20-21).

4. Matthean Themes and Motifs

Matthew takes up many Markan themes: suffering messiah, discipleship, Gentile mission. In addition, Matthew is keen to establish Jesus as the Messiah predicted in Scripture. He has a typically Jewish view of the sovereignty of God over events. Messiahship is defined as the rule of the peaceable king through obedience to his commandments.

The Jewishness of Matthew is not uncritical: the *ritual* demarcations (food, sabbath, sacrifice) are replaced by *ethical* standards that define the people of God.

Matthew alone of the gospel writers uses the term *ekklesia* (= 'church') and it is central to Matthew's conception of salvation. The Messiah is present in church (18:20), and the church carries his authority (28:16-20). Peter stands as a key and important figure.

5. Reconstructing the Matthean Community: The Contribution of Social-scientific criticism

Since the 1970s some NT scholars have employed the insights of sociology to try to understand the nature of the social world of the first Christians. This historical approach is different from classic historical criticism in that it employs a wide range information beyond texts (e.g., archaeology, history) and is heavily dependent of social-scientific theories. The ideas of Berger and Luckman and others on the social construction of reality, symbolic worlds and religious legitimization are used as ways of looking for evidence within texts.

There have been several attempts to define the community of Matthew, based on the particular style and emphases of the gospel and other historical sources (Sim, 1998; Overman, 1990; Stanton, 1997). The key issue has been whether Matthew originated in a fully Jewish community (Overman) or from a Jewish-*Christian* community, i.e., one that saw itself as the 'true' expression of Judaism' (Graham Stanton).

The diverse opinions about the nature of 'the Matthean community' stem from apparent contradictions in Matthew:

- Reverence for the Torah (5:17-19) versus Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23)
- Jesus avoids the Gentile towns (10:5-6) but gives the Great Commission which embraces Gentiles (28:19)
- Jewish-Christian Christology (Jesus as Son of David), along with rejection of Israel (13:11-15)

The majority view is probably of a Jewish-Christian group in the Diaspora (probably in Antioch), coping with being evicted from synagogues and stressing the need for Gentile mission. Note the following delineation offered by Ulrich Luz (1995):

- Matthew was a Jewish Christian
- The Matthean community no longer associated with Jewish synagogues
- Matthean community lived in conformity to the Law.
- The breach with synagogue was relatively recent.
- The community was either engaging in, or wanting to engage in, a Gentile mission.

Bibliography

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