

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

### A. ORIENTING DATA FOR MATTHEW

- Content: the story of Jesus, including large blocks of teaching, from the announcement of his birth to the commissioning of the disciples to make disciples of the Gentiles
- Author: anonymous; Papias (ca. A.D. 125) attributes “the first Gospel” to the apostle Matthew; scholarship is divided
- Date: unknown (since he used Mark, very likely written in the 70s or 80s)
- Recipients: unknown; but almost certainly Jewish Christians with a commitment to the Gentile mission, most commonly thought to have lived in and around Antioch of Syria
- Emphases: Jesus is the Son of God, the (messianic) King of the Jews; Jesus is God present with us in miraculous power; Jesus is the church’s Lord; the teaching of Jesus has continuing importance for God’s people; the gospel of the kingdom is for all peoples—Jew and Gentile alike

### B. OVERVIEW OF MATTHEW

It is fitting that Matthew comes first in the New Testament, for two reasons: first, from the opening sentence it has deliberate and direct ties to the Old Testament; second, because of its orderly arrangement of Jesus’ teaching, it was the most often used Gospel in the early church (cited by the early church fathers more than twice as often as the other Gospels).

The genius of Matthew’s Gospel lies in its structure, which presents a marvelous tapestry of narrative interwoven with carefully crafted blocks of teaching. So well is this done that the most prominent feature of Matthew’s story—the five blocks of teaching—is sometimes not even noticed because one is more aware of the flow of the narrative (which follows Mark very closely). The five blocks of teaching (5:1–7:29; 10:11–42; 13:1–52; 18:1–35; [23:1] 24:1–25:46) are presented on a topical basis. Each is marked off by a similar concluding formula (“When Jesus had finished [saying these things]”), which Matthew uses to transition back to the narrative.

The story itself begins with a twofold introduction about Jesus’ origins (chs. 1–2) and about his preparations for public ministry (3:1–4:11). After that, each combined block of “narrative with discourse” forms a progressive aspect to the story, all having to do with Jesus, the

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ca. *circa*, about, approximately

messianic King, inaugurating the time of God's kingly rule—4:12–7:29, proclamation of and life in the kingdom; 8:1–10:42, the power and mission of the kingdom; 11:1–13:52, questioning and opposition to the kingdom and its mixed reception in the world; 13:53–18:35, growing opposition, confession by the disciples, and special instructions to the community of the King; 19:1–25:46, mixed responses to the Prophet who now presents himself as the King, and the judgment of those who reject him. The story concludes (chs. 26–28) with the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, and the commissioning of the disciples to take the story to the nations.

## C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING MATTHEW

You cannot easily miss Matthew's way of tying the story of Jesus to that of Israel, since it is so direct and upfront. Jesus belongs to the genealogy of Israel's royal line, and he fulfills all kinds of prophetic messianic expectations. Note how often (eleven times in all) Matthew editorializes, "This was to fulfill what was said [spoken] through the prophet(s)." Moreover, Jesus' ministry and teaching presuppose the authoritative nature of the Old Testament law (5:17–48), and during his earthly ministry, Jesus focuses on the "lost sheep of Israel" (10:6).

But at the death of Jesus, the temple curtain is torn in two (27:51), indicating that its time is over and that the time of Jesus and his followers has begun. You will see as you go along how Matthew presents Jesus as being in unrelieved opposition to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (e.g., 5:20; 12:38; 21:15; 22:15; 23:2–36), so much so that he speaks of "their [your] synagogue(s)" as over against his disciples (e.g., 10:17; 13:54; 23:34). And an alternative story explaining away Jesus' resurrection still circulated among some Jews at the time Matthew is writing (28:11–15).

At the same time, look for the ways that Matthew also exhibits clear concern for the mission to the Gentiles. For example, four women—primarily, if not all, Gentiles—are included in the genealogy (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah's wife [Bathsheba]). The story proper begins in Galilee (Matt 4:12–16), which Matthew sees as fulfilling Isaiah 9:1–2—that the people living in darkness, in Galilee of the Gentiles, have seen a great light—and it ends (Matt 28:16–20) with a commissioning of the apostles to make disciples of all the nations (= Gentiles).

This interweaving of themes suggests that the Gospel was written at a time when church and synagogue were now separated and were in conflict over who is in the true succession of the Old Testament promises. Matthew's way of answering this issue is by telling the story of Jesus, who "fulfills" every kind of Jewish messianic hope and expectation: After his birth as "king of the Jews" (2:2), he is honored (worshiped) by Eastern royal figures; at his birth, baptism, and transfiguration he is signaled as God's Son; his virgin birth fulfills Isaiah 7:14 that "God is with us" (cf. 12:6, 41, 42; 28:20); he dies as "THE KING OF THE JEWS," 27:37; and is acknowledged as "Son of God" by the Roman centurion (27:54). At the same time Matthew also recognizes Jesus as Isaiah's suffering servant (20:28) and extends this recognition to include his whole ministry, including his healings (8:17) and the opposition (12:17–21).

Equally important for Matthew, Jesus is presented as the true interpreter of the law (5:17–48; 7:24–27), especially over against the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The latter have

turned the law into a heavy yoke (11:28) and bind heavy burdens on people's backs (23:4); Jesus, who as Son knows and reveals the Father (11:25–27), offers an easy yoke and light burden (11:28–30). His “law” is mercy and grace (9:13; 12:7; 20:30, 34; 23:23). Those who experience such mercy are thus expected to be merciful in return (18:21–35; cf. 5:7). Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and Prophets but to fulfill them (5:17; 7:12), to bring the new righteousness of God's kingdom that goes infinitely beyond the teachings of the Pharisees (5:20). At the same time, Matthew shows concern about some within the believing community who prophesy but do not live obediently (7:15–23). In his Gospel, therefore, the twelve disciples play the role of learners who are to model life in the kingdom. You will want to look for these features as you read.

Thus, for Matthew, Jesus is the center of everything, and those who follow him not only proclaim the coming of the kingdom—the coming of God's mercy to sinners—but they are also expected to live like him (7:15–23). And when they have success in their own proclamation of the kingdom, especially among Gentiles, they are to make disciples of them by teaching them to observe the way of Jesus (28:19–20), both in their individual lives (chs. 5–7) and in their church communities (ch. 18). Matthew almost certainly intends his Gospel to serve as the manual for such instruction!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 269–272.