

Lesson 1: An Introduction to Matthew

The Importance of Matthew's Gospel

Note: Galatians 1:7 tells us that there is only one gospel, but I will often follow the typical shorthand and refer to the four gospel accounts as the "four gospels."

Much has been written about the importance of the first gospel:

- "In grandness of conception and in the power with which a mass of material is subordinated to great ideas no writing in either Testament, dealing with a historical theme, is to be compared with Matthew. In this respect the present writer would be at a loss to find its equal also in the other literature of antiquity."
- "When we turn to Matthew, we turn to the book which may well be called the most important single document of the Christian faith, for in it we have the fullest and the most systematic account of the life and the teachings of Jesus."
- "All things considered, the first gospel is perhaps the most powerful document ever written."

For most of the church's history, Matthew has been the most popular of the four gospels. It contains the greatest quantity of Jesus' teaching, including some of his most beloved parables and his most famous sermon, which in turn includes some of his most well-known teachings (the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, the Golden Rule). It also contains the greatest number of links with Judaism and the Old Testament.

Only Matthew records certain key events of Jesus' life: Joseph's vision (1:20-24), the visit of the Wise Men (2:1-12), the flight into Egypt (2:13-15), the killing of the infants in Bethlehem (2:16), the dream of Pilate's wife (27:19), the suicide of Judas (27:3-10), the resurrection of the dead at the crucifixion (27:52), the story of the bribed guard (28:12-15), and the Great Commission (28:19-20). These are not found in any of the other Gospels.

Matthew has always been seen as a pivotal book in understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Placed first in the earliest collections of the New Testament canon, this book is a natural bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Matthew demonstrates repeatedly that Old Testament hopes, prophecies, and promises have now been fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus.

Matthew has always held a special status in the missionary and evangelistic outreach of the church because of the prominent placement of the Great Commission, which climactically concludes the book. It is Jesus' final command, and it more than any other statement in the Bible has caused Christians throughout history to look outward to all the peoples of the earth who have not yet heard and obeyed the gospel.

The Structure of Matthew

Many outlines of Matthew revolve around the five large collections of Jesus' teachings in the book, each of which ends with the statement, "when Jesus had come to the end of these sayings..." (7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, and 26:1) In each case, this phrase marks the end of a discourse and the beginning of a new phase in the narrative. One commentator suggested that this five-fold division was intended by Matthew to provide a counterpart to the five books of Moses, with Genesis 1 and Matthew 1 each describing a beginning. He said that Matthew wanted to present Jesus as a new Moses, giving his followers a new law. (This is a minority view among scholars.)

Others divide the book geographically, with the first phase in Galilee, the second phase on the journey from Galilee to Judea, and the third phase in Jerusalem. (This north to south structure does not mean that Jesus did not visit Jerusalem prior to the events at the end of Matthew, but rather would be Matthew's way of focusing the reader on those final events. Portions of the gospels appear to be organized thematically rather than chronologically.) Also, at the end of Matthew, there is a dramatic return to Galilee in 28:16-20 so that the events come full circle back to where they started.

However we organize it, Matthew probably expected congregations to read his Gospel as a whole unit publicly, or at least to treat it in larger segments than we do today. Limited by the time available, preachers and teachers are often forced to approach the text a paragraph at a time. In personal study, however, we are wise to read the Gospel in larger sections.

The World of Matthew

Although the message of Matthew is ageless, we need to remember that the book was written in a particular place and time. Doing so will help us better understand that ageless message.

Modern readers often assume that the Jews were an undifferentiated community of people living together in the Holy Land, united at the time of Matthew against their common enemy, the Romans. One commentator calls this view "a gross distortion of the historical and cultural reality." Galilee, in particular, was very different from the sophisticated southern province of Judea, where Jerusalem was located.

- Racially, the area of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel had, since the Assyrian invasion in the 8th century BC, a more mixed population. Conservative Jewish areas such as Nazareth and Capernaum were in the first century situated closely to largely pagan cities such as Tiberias and Sepphoris.
- Geographically, Galilee was separated from Judea by the non-Jewish territory of Samaria.
- Politically, Galilee had been under a separate administration from Judea during almost all its history since the tenth century BC (apart from a brief reunification under the Maccabees). In the first century, Galilee was under the rule of an Herodian prince, while Judea and Samaria were under the rule of a Roman prefect.
- Economically, Galilee offered better agriculture and fishing than the more mountainous region of Judea, making the wealth of some Galileans the envy of their southern neighbors.

- Culturally, Judeans despised their northern neighbors as "country cousins." They particularly disliked how their lack of Jewish sophistication was combined with their greater openness to Greek influences.
- Linguistically, Galileans spoke a distinctive form of Aramaic whose slovenly consonants were the butt of Judean humor. Matthew 26:73 -- "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you."
- Religiously, the Judean opinion was that Galileans were lax in their observance of the law and the Jewish rituals.

The closest modern parallel between Galilee and Judea would be to compare them to Texas and New York. (Which, of course, would mean that Jesus is a Texan!) What these differences mean is that even an impeccably Jewish Galilean in first century Jerusalem was not among his own people. He was, as one commentator described it, "as much a foreigner as an Irishman in London or a Texan in New York." His accent would immediately mark him out as "not one of us." No matter what message he had to proclaim, Jesus would first have to fight through those prejudices. As the people asked in John 7:41, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" There was bound to be tension between the Galilean prophet and the Jerusalem establishment. Each gospel account shows the southern capital rejecting and killing the northern prophet.

Do you remember the very first thing that Nathaneal said about Jesus? "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). You can be very sure that he was not the only person to ask that question. "To read Matthew in blissful ignorance of first-century Palestinian socio-politics is to miss his point. This is the story of Jesus **OF NAZARETH.**"

He Shall Be Called a Nazarene?

One of the fulfilled prophecies in Matthew is found in 2:23, where Matthew declares that Jesus "came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophets, that he should be called a Nazarene." Where is that prophecy? (We know it happened. Consider, for example, John 14:67 -- "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.")

There is no Old Testament prophecy that uses those words. Did Matthew blunder? Not at all. Notice that instead of identifying a particular prophet, Matthew says that the statement had been spoken through the (plural) prophets. That suggests that no single Old Testament reference is in view, but rather the point being made rests upon a general theme reflected in numerous Old Testament prophecies.

A likely suggestion is that Nazareth was originally settled by people from the line of David, who gave the settlement a consciously messianic name, connecting the establishment of the town with the hope of the coming naser ("Branch") of Isaiah 11:1 -- A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch [neser] will bear fruit. The name of the city comes from the Aramaic word for "vow" (nezer), which may have linked the first settlers of the city with the Nazirite vows. Each of these applied to Jesus -- he was the Messianic Branch, and he was dedicated to God the Father as were the Nazarites.

But we have already seen that the term "Nazareth" was used in a derogatory sense in the first century. (John 1:46) Either the town had a bad reputation, or more likely was simply viewed as insignificant or backward. The city is not mentioned in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the Talmud, or by Josephus. In the book of Acts, "Nazarenes" is used as a slur-expression for Christians (Acts 24:5).

There were a number of Old Testament prophecies that foretold that the Messiah would be a despised person, rejected by many of his contemporaries (see: Psa. 22:6-8,13; 69:8,20-21; Isa. 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3,8).

He was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:3)

Thus, saying that the prophets said that Jesus would be called a Nazarene most likely points to those prophecies that Jesus would be disdained and held in low regard. That was surely how the title was used in John 14:67.

As an interesting footnote, the Lord himself, in his conversation with Saul on the road to Damascus, identified himself as "Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 22:8). Saul's opinion of Nazareth likely changed dramatically on that road, as did many of his other opinions!

The Author of Matthew

Despite the title on the first page of your New Testament, the gospel of Matthew was most likely anonymous. (The title of the book is likely not original.) But, attribution of this gospel to Matthew the apostle goes back to the earliest surviving extra-Biblical evidence, and there is no evidence that any other author was ever proposed.

Let's look at the question from the other side: If Matthew were not the author, why would anyone have ever attached his name to the book? After all, Matthew (also named Levi) was otherwise a little known apostle with an unscrupulous past (by Jewish standards).

"It is difficult to conceive why Christians as early as the second century would ascribe these otherwise anonymous Gospels to three such unlikely candidates if they did not in fact write them. Mark and Luke were not among Jesus' twelve apostles. Mark is best known for abandoning Paul, and Luke is particularly obscure, being mentioned by name only once in the New Testament (Colossians 4:14). Matthew, although an apostle, is also best known for a negative characteristic -- his unconscionable past as a tax collector. Tax collectors were considered traitorous to their nation."

In fact, the evidence suggests that perhaps this book was never anonymous at all, as most scholars contend.

"It is inconceivable that the gospels could circulate anonymously for up to sixty years, and then in the second century suddenly display unanimous attribution to certain authors. If they had originally been anonymous, then surely there would have been some variation in second-century attributions (as was the case with some of the second-century apocryphal gospels)."

Thus, Matthew's name was likely attached to this text from Day 1.

Some argue that Matthew could not have been the author because the Greek is too good. (The Greek in Matthew is more polished than that in Mark but less so than that in Luke.) But, as a tax collector, Matthew would have had regular contact with Greek speaking peoples.

The best conclusion from all the evidence is that Matthew the apostle wrote this book.

Who was Matthew, the person?

The list of 12 apostles in Matthew's gospel refers to him as "Matthew the tax collector" (10:3), and tells us how he was called by Jesus while sitting in the tax booth (9:9). Luke and Mark refer to him as Levi, with Mark also telling us he was the son of Alphaeus. (Although James was also the son of someone named Alphaeus (Mark 3:18), most scholars do not believe they were brothers since they are never shown linked as such.) Most likely, Levi's name was changed to Matthew (meaning the gift of God) after he was called by Jesus.

The booth from which Matthew was called was probably located on one of the main trade highways near Capernaum, from which Matthew collected tolls for Herod Antipas. Matthew immediately followed Jesus and arranged a banquet in his house, to which he invited a large number of tax collectors and sinners. This response by a tax collector is likely one of the great turnarounds in the Bible -- perhaps on par with the transformation of Saul to Paul. Jesus turned lives around then -- and he turns lives around today.

Tax collectors (or publicans) were both numerous and almost always dishonest. They were employed by the hated foreign government that dominated the land and sent taxes collected from both poor and rich alike to far-away Rome. Tax collectors, in fact, became the real enemy because the people did not actually see the government of Herod and Rome. Instead, they saw the tax collector.

Rome did not collect its own taxes. The system was to farm out the taxes and let the collector collect as much over the rate as he could. Rome was satisfied with its quota -- the tax collector could keep the balance as a fat commission. A man without a conscience could easily become rich under such a system. People were not informed of the customs rates and the collector could collect as much as he could get from each caravan or individual. It is not surprising, therefore, that tax collectors were numbered with harlots, thieves, and murderers. That such people came into the kingdom showed the power of the gospel. Such a person was the perfect choice to put the gospel of Jesus Christ into writing.

But we should note that, unlike with another famous tax collector in Luke 19:8, there is no indication that Matthew had to repay anyone due to his own unjust gain. Thus, although he was apparently wealthy, we have no direct evidence for believing that he was dishonest, although most were, and, like wealthy career politicians today, one has to wonder where the money came from.

Some commentators contend that Matthew was much more than a mere tax collector. The Greek word "telones" could refer to one in charge of a customs station, which near Capernaum would have included both the sea tax and the land border tax. We know Matthew left much behind to follow Jesus -- he may have left *very* much behind!

Little else is known about Matthew. As a tax collector, he would have been trained in secular scribal techniques, but we see from his Gospel that we was also steeped in the Hebrew scriptures.

It is interesting that after his name appears in the lists of the apostles, Matthew disappears from the history of the church as recorded in the NT. His last mention in the Bible is found in Acts 1:13. Incidents attributed to him later probably are legendary. The traditions regarding his death are mixed, with some saying he died as a martyr and others saying he died a natural death. Clement of Alexandria said that Matthew preached to the Ethiopians, the Greeks of Macedonia (northern Greece), the Syrians, and the Persians. He is known mainly for his writing of the first gospel -- otherwise he would be almost entirely unknown.

Why did Jesus call Matthew? Most of the disciples were fishermen. They would have little skill and little practice in putting words together on paper; but Matthew would be an expert in that. When Jesus called Matthew, as he sat at the receipt of custom, Matthew rose up and followed him and left everything behind him except one thing--his pen.

When Was Matthew Written?

The almost unanimous view until the middle of the 19th century (when we all suddenly became much smarter!) was that Matthew was the earliest gospel to be written. In fact, among the early lists and texts, the one constant factor is that Matthew is always listed first.

Although it is true that a number of ancient sources state that Matthew was the earliest gospel, those same sources maintain that his gospel was written in Hebrew. For example, Eusebius quotes Papias (AD 100-150) to have said that "Matthew composed his Gospel in the Hebrew language, and everyone translated as they were able." (Papias claimed to have been a hearer of the Apostle John and a companion of Polycarp.) But Greek scholars tell us that the Greek used in Matthew shows no hint of having come from a translation, so perhaps Matthew wrote an earlier Hebrew compilation before he later penned the Greek gospel that we have now have from him.

The Synoptic Problem?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic gospels. Synoptic comes from two Greek words that mean to see together. The reason for that name is that it is possible to set these three books down in parallel columns and compare them.

The relationship among the first three gospels is one of the biggest debates among New Testament scholars, and it is known as the *synoptic problem*.

Why is it called a problem? The answer to that question has changed over the years. In older commentaries, the supposed problem had to do with the *differences* among the gospels and how they could be reconciled, but under modern criticism, the supposed problem has more to do with the *similarities* among the gospels and how they can be explained.

Some argue that the correspondence between the first three gospels is so close that we are bound to come to the conclusion either that all three are drawing their material from a common

source, or that two of them must be based on the third. The most common view today is that Mark came first, and Matthew and Luke are based in part on Mark.

Was Mark the Earliest Gospel?

Modern critics answer that question with a resounding yes, and they base that conclusion on the similarities between Mark and the other two synoptic gospels. Here is how Barclay summarizes the similarities among the first three gospels:

Mark can be divided into 105 sections. Of these sections 93 occur in Matthew and 81 in Luke. Of Mark's 105 sections there are only 4 that do not occur either in Matthew or in Luke.

Mark has 661 verses: Matthew had 1068 verses: Luke has 1149 verses. Matthew reproduces no fewer than 606 of Mark's verses; and Luke reproduces 320. Of the 55 verses of Mark that Matthew does not reproduce, Luke reproduces 31; so there are only 24 verses in the whole of Mark that are not reproduced somewhere in Matthew or Luke.

What Barclay fails to mention is that much of the similarity comes from the actual words of Jesus, where the agreement among the gospels runs close to 100% -- as we would expect. As one commentator noted: "the verbal similarities ... extend chiefly to identical accounts of Jesus' words and to specific and unalterable vocabulary that is required by the nature of what is being related."

Also, when we look below the surface similarities, we find some very interesting differences. First, the language is different. The vocabulary of Mark is made up of 1345 words. If the critics are correct, then one would expect a large percentage of those words to appear in Matthew and Luke as well. Yet, 187 of Mark's words appear in neither Matthew nor Luke, and the three have only 830 of Mark's words (or just over 60%) in common. That seems strange if Matthew and Luke copied wholesale from Mark as we are told.

Second, we would be wrong to conclude that Matthew simply took what Mark wrote and expanded upon it. In fact, where Matthew shares a narrative with Mark, Matthew is almost always *shorter*. For example, to tell the story of the woman with a hemorrhage Mark takes 154 words and Luke 114, but Matthew uses only 48 words.

Those who argue that Mark came first say that if Matthew came first then there would have been no need for Mark to write his gospel. But how can anyone who has read both Matthew and Mark possibly argue that we could ever do without Mark? Events in Matthew that are boiled down to their bare essentials are described by Mark with a lively, expansive style and plenty of picturesque details.

Also, why would Matthew have needed to rely on Mark? Matthew, unlike Mark, was an eyewitness from the beginning. Some respond that Mark got much of his material from Peter, and Peter, unlike Matthew, was part of the inner circle. But how then explain that Matthew includes a number of key events from the life of Peter that are found in no other gospel? Matthew narrates five incidents about Peter in five central chapters found nowhere else in the Gospels, the most important being Peter walking on the water in 14:28-31 and Peter's great confession in 16:16.

Up until recently, the almost unanimous view was that Matthew was the earliest gospel, and I see no reason to depart from that view. It is supported by the text and by the ancient extra-Biblical evidence. Clement of Alexandria, for example, wrote that the gospels containing the genealogies were written first.

Were The Gospels Written Independently?

As we have seen, most critics today argue that Mark was written first, and Matthew and Luke were based on Mark. A minority who hold that Matthew was written first argue that Mark was based on Matthew and Luke was based on both. Still others hold that Mark was based on Matthew and Luke.

But must we conclude that any of them were based on the others? Not at all. When one bothers to read the gospels, what one discovers is that there is no need at all to conclude that any of them depended on any of the others. In fact, there is a very simple explanation provided by the books themselves for the similarities that we see among them:

John 16:13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

John 14:26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

The simplest and best answer for why the gospels often use similar or identical language is that ultimately they each were penned by the same author -- God. Each of the four gospels is inspired by God, and so they all come from and depend on the Holy Spirit. Each word of each gospel is God-breathed.

Also, much of the similar language is found among the statements of Christ, where we expect a great deal of similarity. A modern parallel would be three reporters covering the same presidential speech -- wouldn't we expect similar reports? But would we, based on that similarity, then argue that two of the reporters must have copied from the third?

But there is an additional wrinkle with the gospel accounts. Greek was not the language in which Jesus originally spoke most of his teachings, and so how do we explain the high degree of verbal parallelism among the Greek translations of Jesus' statements? The simplest explanation is again the best -- inspiration. "He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." They had a common divine source.

It is true that if we were to say that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source we would not by that statement be denying inspiration. If Mark is inspired, then it could be used by other inspired writers, and perhaps that happened to some degree, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But most critics who argue for dependence do not believe in any sort of inspiration. They argue that these books were written much later than the events they recorded, and not by eye witnesses.

It is not a coincidence that this view of Mark's priority and Matthew and Luke's dependence on Mark arose at the same time that scholars were abandoning all supernatural explanations in

favor of humanistic, naturalistic explanations. No so-called scholar today will retain his job for very long if he bases a theory on the divine origin of the Biblical text -- and yet (as with supernatural explanations for our origin), the supernatural explanation is the true explanation. The books of the Bible are not like any other books on earth -- their origin is divine; they are not simply the product of man, and they must not be studied as such. **You cannot explain the origin of the world apart from God, and you cannot explain the origin of the Word apart from God. Any attempt to do so is doomed to failure.**

Liberal critics who reject the inspiration of the Bible do so because they reject any supernatural explanation. They cannot, however, admit that as their reason, and so they argue against inspiration based on some attribute of the text, be it the style of the Greek or the similarities with other texts, etc. But let's turn that objection on them. What attributes would a text have to have for them to admit that it was inspired by God? The answer, of course, is nothing -- they would never admit such a thing no matter what the text said. How about detailed prophecies in the text, where we can show that the text was written prior to their fulfillment? We have that in Daniel. How about scientific explanations that long predate our own understanding? You mean like hanging the world on nothing or the dwelling place of light? We already have that -- and it is not enough for the critics. They will not accept a supernatural explanation no matter the evidence. We see the same phenomenon with evolution. Have you ever noticed that no matter what the life form, the evolutionists always have an explanation for how it evolved to be that way? The next time you hear such an explanation, ask this question: what would a life form have to look like for an evolutionist to agree that it is the product of intelligent design rather than random mutation? The answer, of course, is that there is no such life form -- nothing in our natural world would ever convince them that the true explanation is a supernatural explanation.

Why do we have four gospels?

We know that God intended us to have four gospel accounts rather than just one, but why is that so? Certainly, part of the answer comes from the fact that each of the four gospels has a different emphasis, but there is likely a more important reason -- and one that we can find elsewhere in the Bible:

Deut. 19:15 -- "at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established."

Jesus mentions this same principle in Matthew 18:16 ("that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses"). 1 John 5:6-12 also tells us about the importance of testimony.

The gospels contain testimony about Jesus, and that testimony is best established by multiple *independent* witnesses. Peter explained the importance of the apostolic witnesses in Acts 10:39-41.

And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: 40 Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; 41 Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead.

Saying that Matthew and Luke simply copied from Mark undercuts the value of their testimony, and that is particularly true for Matthew's *apostolic* testimony. Mark may have gathered information from Matthew, as he likely did from Peter, but I have difficulty believing that Matthew gathered material from Mark. (Luke 1:1-4 tells us that Luke consulted various sources in preparing his gospel. There is no such indication in Matthew -- nor would we expect there to be.)

"The very differences between the writers speak of independence; the similarities reflect a common background of information, a common subject of writing, and the common inspiration of God."

"The gospels do not simply echo each other; but they are individual accounts in which a common element has persisted because of a common subject states in a common way."

Before or After AD 70?

When one tries to date the book of Matthew, one is confronted with an immediate question -- was it written before or after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70?

The majority view among scholars today is that Matthew was written in the final quarter of the first century. Why? Because Matthew 24 describes in great detail the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Romans in AD 70. As with all predictive prophecies, liberal commentators postdate the prophecy rather than accept a supernatural explanation. (They have trouble doing this with Daniel though because copies of that prophecy have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which predate its detailed prophecies about the Roman emperors.)

But doing this to Matthew 24 presents an even bigger problem. Why? Because the date of the prophecy in Matthew 24 does not go back to when Matthew 24 was written -- the date for that prophecy goes back to when Matthew 24 was *said* by Jesus. So moving the writing of Matthew 24 beyond AD 70 does not remove the supernatural from the text unless you also argue that Jesus never said what Matthew attributes to him in that chapter. And if Matthew was just making it all up, then what does it matter when it was written?

Matthew 24 contains warnings for what Christians were to do when the destruction of the city was at hand. Why would those warnings have been needed if Matthew were written after the fact? Most scholars say that John's gospel was the last to be written -- and it is the only one of the four that does not include Jesus' prophecies about the fall of the city. In my opinion, the most likely conclusion is that John was the only one of the four gospels written after AD 70.

There is some other internal evidence for when the book was written. Matthew tells us in 27:8 that the field of blood was still called by that name when the book was written. Some argue that this points to a pre-AD 70 date for the book. Also, the discussion of the temple tax in 17:24-27 would have been misleading after AD 70 when the tax was diverted to the upkeep of the temple of Jupiter in Rome.

Matthew refers to the Sadducees 7 times (as many as all the other books of the New Testament put together; Mark and Luke have the term once each). This reflects the time before A.D. 70; after that date we hear little of the Sadducees.

So when was Matthew written? The most likely date is somewhere between AD 38 and 69. A recent book entitled *Eyewitness to Jesus* makes the case that the Magdalen Papyrus (which contains fragments of Matthew 26) should be dated to AD 60. If so, Matthew's eye-witness gospel account would have to be dated much, much earlier than almost any liberal critic would now admit!

Why was Matthew written?

"A rather fruitless debate often rages about the purpose of a given book of Scripture. There is no reason why a writer, inspired or otherwise, has to have one and only one purpose in writing."

We can see many themes in Matthew's gospels:

The Jews and the Gentiles

All agree that the primary intended initial audience for Matthew was Jewish. The book contains untranslated Aramaic terms such as *raca* in 5:22 and *korbanas* in 27:6. It also contains unexplained references to Jewish customs such as hand-washing in 15:2 or the wearing of phylacteries in 23:5. (Compare Mark's explanation of hand-washing in Mark 7:3-4.) Matthew, along with Hebrews, is perhaps the most Jewish book in the New Testament.

On the one hand, Matthew includes some of the most *exclusive* texts in all the Gospels. Only he includes Jesus' statements in 10:5-6 and 15:24 about his mission being only to the lost sheep of Israel. The Samaritans are mentioned only once in Matthew, and that mention in 10:5 instructs the twelve not to go among them.

On the other hand, Matthew also includes some of the most *inclusive* texts in all the Gospels. Only he has the Gentile magi coming to worship the child in 2:1-12. Only he speaks of Israel being judged and replaced by a new people in 21:43. Only Matthew tells us about events such as the healing of the centurion's slave and of the daughter of the Canaanite woman. Matthew even lists Gentile women, Rahab and Ruth, in Jesus' genealogy.

Only Matthew's book ends with Jesus' great commission to reach all nations with his gospel. At the end of Matthew, it is obedience to Jesus' commands that constitutes discipleship -- not obedience to the Law of Moses.

We often say that Matthew's gospel was addressed primarily to Jews, and it was. But part of that message was to remind the Jews of something they should have known all along -- that the promised Messiah would be a blessing to the entire world.

And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.
(Genesis 22:18)

That message rings out clearly from the very first pages of the New Testament!

Fulfillment

The Old Testament casts a long shadow over Matthew's gospel. No other New Testament writer, including Paul or the author of Hebrews, drew upon the Old Testament as much as Matthew did.

The theme of fulfillment is probably the central theme of Matthew. The book repeatedly cites Old Testament passages, over half of them not found in any other Gospel. The United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament lists 61 quotations from the Old Testament in Matthew compared with 31 in Mark, 26 in Luke, and 16 in John. One-fifth of Matthew's quotations are from Isaiah. No other Old Testament book influenced Matthew as much as Isaiah did.

From the opening genealogy onward, the goal of Matthew is to show the Messiah as the climax of the history of God's people. A conservative count lists 54 direct citations from the Old Testament in the book of Matthew along with 262 allusions and verbal parallels from the Old Testament.

Many of these Old Testament citations in Matthew are introduced by what has come to be known as a "formula-quotation" of fulfillment. We see it for example in 1:22 -- "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet." Sometimes the prophet is named (when it is Isaiah or Jeremiah) and in 2:23 the plural "prophets" is used. With these variations, the formula occurs 10 to 20 times, depending on how one defines it. Five of them occur in the first two chapters and they continue all the way to the passion narrative, where references to Psalm 22 dominate.

Some modern commentators accuse Matthew of taking some or many of these Old Testament quotations out of context and twisting them to apply to events they were never intended to describe.

"Such texts owe their presence in Matthew's gospel not to any messianic significance they possessed in their own right but to his imaginative perception of Old Testament pre-echoes of details in the stories of Jesus."

Wayne Jackson provides a good summary of this view:

A common view among a good number of Bible scholars who have been subtly influenced by the views of "higher criticism" (though perhaps unwittingly), is that the New Testament writers often would use the expression "fulfilled" in a loose sense. Allegedly, they frequently would not consider an event as an actual fulfillment of prophecy—even when employing the "fulfilled" expression. Rather, they would lift an Old Testament passage (in part or whole) from its original context, and give it an application that had nothing to do with its initial meaning.

(via [Matthew's Use of the Term "Fulfilled" : ChristianCourier.com](#))

How do we respond to such charges? First, applying an Old Testament prophecy to Christ does not mean that it did not also have a more immediate application at the time it was written.

[New Testament writers] frequently quote prophecies, the context of which must, at the time they were first delivered, have been interpreted of things then present, and that, too, according to the Divine intention. But the same Divine intention, looking forward to remote futurity, so framed the language of prophecy, that it should apply with still greater speciality to the times of the Messiah.

(via [Matthew's Use of the Term "Fulfilled" : ChristianCourier.com](#))

Second, and more importantly, if the New Testament tells us that an Old Testament prophecy applies to Christ -- then it applies to Christ. If we apply it differently, then it is we rather than the New Testament writers who are twisting those prophecies.

The Kingdom

An important feature of Matthew's Gospel is his emphasis on God's kingdom. He uses the expression "the kingdom of heaven" most frequently (32 times), though he also has the expression favored in the other Gospels, "the kingdom of God" (5 times), as well as "the kingdom" (5 times), and once also (in prayer) "your kingdom." He uses expressions like "the kingdom of their Father" and "the kingdom of my Father," and he refers to the kingdom of the "Son of man" (13:41, etc.). Ten times he records parables that begin with the phrase "The kingdom of heaven is like--."

Perhaps no text is more striking than 11:11, which relegates John the Baptist to a lesser status than everyone in the kingdom because he did not live to see its inauguration. Something great and wonderful was right around the corner! The kingdom of heaven was at hand! (3:2, 4:17, 10:7)

A unique feature of Matthew's gospel is the so-called ecclesiastical text of 16:18: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." (Matthew has been called the ecclesiastical gospel.) The passage has influenced the history of the church on earth as much as any other. The Catholics mistakenly believe that Peter is that rock rather than Peter's great confession. (They apparently fail to notice that Jesus referred to Peter as Satan just a few verses later!) No other gospel has these words, not even in a different format.

Christ

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew focuses on Jesus' identity as the incarnate Son of God. Jesus is the promised King of Israel who has come to usher in the kingdom of Heaven. Only Matthew's gospel shows Jesus referring to his coming kingdom as the church. When we speak of the *Lord's* church, we are pointing back to the foundational statement in Matthew 16:18 -- "On this rock I will build *my* church."

The first verse in the book gives perhaps the greatest title for Jesus -- he is the Christ, the anointed of God, the messianic king. That his followers quickly came to be known as Christians shows us how important this concept was to them.

One of the most distinctive titles for Christ in Matthew is the Son of David. Matthew uses the name of King David 17 times, more than any other book in the New Testament. The title "Son of David" occurs nine times (eight of which have no parallel in the other gospels). That title never occurs outside the first three gospels, although Romans 1:3 comes close. In Matthew, that title is often found on the lips of those who come to Jesus to request healing.

Matthew also frequently uses the deliberately ambiguous title, "Son of Man." That title can refer to the God who is also man, to the suffering servant, or to the exalted figure of Daniel 7. It is the title that Jesus most often used of himself. Those who first heard it likely thought of Ezekiel, whom God referred to as the "son of man" over 90 times. But they would also have thought of how the "Son of Man" was used in Daniel to refer to the glorified king who rules forever with the Ancient of Days. When we reach Jesus' final use of the title in 26:63-68, there is no doubt that it refers to the divine Messiah of Israel.

Matthew also uses the title "Son of God," and one commentator describes that title as the key title for Christ used in Matthew. We see it as Jesus' birth in 2:15, as his temptation in 4:3, 6, at his recognition by his disciples in 14:33 and 16:16, and at his death in 26:63, 27:40, 43. That title more than any other points to Jesus' divinity and to his unique relationship to God the Father. Jesus refers to God as his Father 23 times in Matthew, 15 of which are unique to this gospel.

Matthew has one final characteristic. Matthew's dominating idea is that of Jesus as King. He writes to demonstrate the royalty of Jesus.

The wise men come looking for him who is King of the Jews (2:2). The triumphal entry displayed his position as King (21:1-11). Before Pilate, Jesus deliberately accepts the name of King (27:11). Even on the Cross the title of King is affixed, even if it be in mockery, over his head (27:37). The final claim of Jesus is: "All authority has been given to me" (28:18). Who but a king can make that statement?

Matthew's picture of Jesus is of the man born to be King. Jesus walks through his pages as if in the purple and gold of royalty.