

Andrews Bible Commentary

Light. Depth. Truth.

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MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

Title and Authorship. Although a title was not part of the earliest extant manuscripts of this Gospel, as with other works in antiquity, a title was eventually added (often on the outside of the scroll) to make it easy to locate among other scrolls. The title was likely added very soon after the Gospel was written. There are several versions of the title found in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel, including: "The Gospel According to Matthew," "According to Matthew," and "The Holy Gospel According to Matthew."

The Gospel of Matthew does not state who wrote it, when it was written, or where it was written. We can work out the answers to these questions only from clues within and without the Gospel. The best clue to authorship is the fact that every copy of this Gospel that has a title identifies Matthew as the author. A disciple by this name appears in each of the Gospels and in Acts (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), though it is only in the Gospel of Matthew that Matthew is identified as having been a tax collector, a discipline which would have required him to write frequently, before he became one of the Twelve (Matt. 9:9; 10:3). Interestingly, he is called Levi in Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27—apparently his second name, as was common in the ancient world (e.g., Simon Peter and Thomas called Didymus). The only story that includes Matthew as a significant character involves the dinner that he gave in honor of Jesus (Matt. 9:9–13; Mark 2:15–17; Luke 5:29–32).

The earliest evidence of authorship from outside of the manuscript comes from a writer named Papias, who was of the generation that knew the apostles. He indicates that the author was Matthew, but he does not identify him as the disciple. Irenaeus, a second-century Christian author, clearly identifies Matthew as the disciple of Jesus and the author of the Gospel. Thus the earliest documentary evidence and the earliest Christians who comment on the authorship of the Gospel all agree that it was written by Matthew who was a disciple of Jesus.

Date. The only indication within the Gospel itself as to its date is found in Matthew 27:8, which states that the field in which foreigners are buried is called the field of blood "to this day," a phrase missing from the only other description of the death of Judas in the NT (Acts 1:17–19). This phrase indicates that some time must have passed between the events surrounding the death of Judas and this writing. While we do not know how much time elapsed, the Gospel had to have been written and in circulation before the beginning of the second century, since allusions to it are found in other writings that date to that time (i.e., the *Didache* and Ignatius's *Epistle to the Smyrneans*).

Another important consideration that plays a significant role in any attempt to fix a date to Matthew's Gospel is its strong literary relationship with the Gospels of Mark and Luke. The similar stories, wording, and order of events that these three Gospels (known as the Synoptic Gospels—since the term "synoptic" means, "seen with the same view") share indicate some sort of literary interdependence exists between them. While some scholars suggest that Matthew was written first, followed by Mark (who would have then abbreviated Matthew) and Luke (who used both Mark and Matthew), most scholars believe it is more likely that Mark was the first Gospel written and that Matthew and Luke later expanded on what Mark wrote. If this is the case, then Matthew would have to have been written sometime after the completion of Mark's Gospel, likely between A.D. 60 and 85.

Those who argue for a more precise date of the Gospel are divided over whether Matthew was written before or after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Advocates of a post-70 date claim that Matthew contains many anachronisms

that indicate it had to have been written after the destruction of Jerusalem. This includes references to the destruction of a city in Jesus's parables (Matt. 22:7; 23:36, 38) that are understood as oblique allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem, explicit references to the "church" (16:18; 18:17), and Jesus's prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem itself (24:1–2, 15–22). These objections, however, are easily overcome if we allow that Jesus was intentionally gathering and forming His disciples into a new messianic community and that in the political climate of the day, He recognized the certainty of a confrontation with Rome and its inevitable outcome. Besides, the description of Jerusalem's destruction is general enough not to have required specific knowledge of the events themselves after they occurred. Moreover, as believers, there is no reason to deny that as the Son of God, Jesus could in fact have predicted the future.

Those who favor an earlier date argue that Matthew's largely positive focus on Judaism and its depiction of Jesus as the promised Messiah foretold in the OT Scriptures point to a time when most of its readers were still Jewish believers living in Jewish circles. This situation certainly changed after the Jewish War (A.D. 66–73) and with the expansion of the Gentile church. In addition, the way Matthew narrated the sayings of Jesus seems to indicate that the temple was still standing when the Gospel was written, since if the Gospel had been written after the fall of Jerusalem, one would expect the author to have included some sort of indication of the fulfillment of Jesus's prophecy about its destruction as further confirmation of His identity. Even if Mark was written first, there is no reason to think that Matthew could not have been written sometime before A.D. 70 and Luke likely sometime after that.

While it is difficult to know for certain when Matthew was written, there is even greater uncertainty about the location where the Gospel was written. Suggestions range from general areas, such as the Holy Land or Syria, to specific places, such as Syrian Antioch, Pela in Transjordan, Galilee, and even Alexandria in Egypt. Most commentators opt for either the northern part of the Holy Land or Southern Syria, but unless further information emerges, it is not possible to be certain as to where the Gospel was written.

Theology and Purpose. In discussing the theology and purpose of Matthew, we need to examine the similarities it has with Mark and Luke and also to understand in what areas it is unique.

1. Similarities with Mark and Luke. As noted earlier, the Gospel of Matthew shares much in common with the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Like them, Matthew portrays Jesus as one who was born of known parents (the carpenter Joseph and his young wife, Mary), grew up in Galilee in the territory of Herod Antipas (one of Herod the Great's sons), and died in Jerusalem on the orders of the Roman governor of Galilee, Pontius Pilate. Also like Mark, Luke, and John, Matthew gives the most attention to the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus. In doing so, Matthew highlights the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The central theological insight of the Gospel is that Jesus's death accomplished the salvation of humanity. This salvation is announced to Joseph at the beginning of the Gospel by an angel, who said that Jesus will save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). At the time of the institution of the Lord's Supper, the drinking of the wine signified Jesus's blood, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins (26:28). As the Gospel progresses, it emerges that the death and resurrection of Jesus has worldwide, indeed cosmic, import. This is anticipated by the resurrection of the righteous that accompanied Jesus's death and resurrection (27:52). It is Jesus Himself who will judge all the nations (25:31–46).

2. Themes in Matthew's Gospel. Much of the material unique to Matthew deals with matters that could be put under the heading "The Community of Believers." It deals with such matters as community discipline (Matt. 18:10, 14–20, 28–31); the mixed nature of the community (13:24–30, 33–43, 47–50; 25:1–13); and various leaders of the community, such as true and false prophets (7:15, 21–23; 10:41; 24:10–12, 14), Christian scribes (13:51–52), and Peter (14:28–31; 16:17–19; 17:24–27). Matthew 18:3–4, 23–35; 19:28b; 21:43; 23:8–10; 28:16–20 also relate in some way to the matter of the community of believers.

A significant portion of the material unique to Matthew deals with Christian behavior, especially how Christians should relate to the laws set out in the OT Scriptures. This is explored most thoroughly in Matthew 5:17, 19–24, 27–28; 7:21–23; 12:5–7, 11; 15:12–13; 21:28–32. The unique material also has a lot of practical injunctions on how to behave as Christians. For example, because Christians are forgiven much by God, they should themselves be forgiving of others (Matt. 6:15; 18:21–35), and their prayers should be distinctive (6:5–8, 10b; 18:19–20). Practical injunctions may also be found at Matthew 5:4–5, 7–10,

in fact the first mention of the Pharisees in the Gospel of Matthew since Matthew 23:29, which may imply that the Pharisees had nothing to do with the plotting that eventually ended up with the death of Jesus, despite earlier attempts to act against Jesus (e.g., 12:14; 22:15). They came to Pilate on the day after the day of preparation (27:62, an unusual way of saying the Sabbath). The Pharisees and the high priests requested Pilate to take steps to ensure that Jesus's body would not be stolen. They were given a guard of soldiers and together they went to make the tomb "safe" by sealing the rolling stone (vv. 63–66).

28:1–15. Resurrection of Jesus. Matthew 28:1 first identifies the time of the coming events by stating that they took place after the Sabbath—which in modern reckoning would mean after sunset on Saturday night. To avoid the conclusion that the events about to be described happened at night, it specifies that it was at dawn. In the Greek, the word *sabbaton* is used twice, once to indicate the Sabbath, the day of worship, and once to indicate a week. Sunday is identified as the "first of the *sabbatōn* [Sabbaths]." *Sabbatōn* can be used in the sense of seven days (i.e., a week) rather than the seventh day, as it is used, for example, in Leviticus 23:15–16 (LXX). In the time of Jesus, the days of the week were numbered according to their proximity to the Sabbath: Sunday was therefore the "first" of the *sabbatōn*, Tuesday the "third" of the *sabbatōn*, and so on until Friday, which is the preparation day for the *sabbatōn*. Note *sabbatōn* is usually, but not always, used in the plural in the NT (e.g., it is used in the plural in Matt. 12:1, 5, 10; Mark 3:4; Luke 4:31; 6:2; but it is used in the singular in Matt. 12:2, 8; Mark 6:2; Luke 6:1; John 7:22–23). Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2 use the exact same phraseology, "first" of the *sabbatōn* (plural), to indicate Sunday.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (the mother of James and Joseph) were witnesses to all the important events surrounding the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Matt. 27:55–56, 61, 28:1–10). On first reading, it almost appears that the two women were present when the angel descended from heaven. It seems to contrast the effect of the resurrection on the two Marys and the guards. The guards became paralyzed with fear, while the two women believed. But a closer reading of the text makes it seem unlikely that they were present when the angel appeared. Why, then, would the angel have invited the two to view the empty tomb? The women shortly thereafter met Jesus Himself (28:9), so the conclusion seems to be that the angel appeared, opened the tomb for Jesus to emerge, and Jesus was resurrected before the two women arrived at the tomb.

One noteworthy feature of this passage is the emphasis on "seeing." The women came to *see* the tomb (v. 1); the angel invited the women to *view* the empty tomb (v. 6); the women disciples were told twice, once by the angel and once by Jesus Himself, to go to Galilee, where they would *see* Jesus (vv. 7, 10). The reports of the resurrection are based on what eyewitnesses reported they saw. There was an earthquake associated with both the death of Jesus (27:51) and His resurrection (28:2). The miraculous events surrounding the death of Jesus caused one set of guards to confess that Jesus was truly the Son of God (27:54). The miraculous events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus froze the other guards with paralyzing fear (28:4), but they apparently were prepared to deny the reality of the resurrection, even though they had seen it with their own eyes.

28:16–20. Commissioning the Disciples. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus had told the disciples that they were not to go and preach to any Gentiles or the Samaritans. They were rather to go to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 10:5–6). The death and resurrection of Jesus clearly changed this. Jesus met His disciples at the prearranged place in Galilee and declared that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to Him (28:18). Therefore, the disciples were to go to all nations (*ethnē*, the word can mean Gentiles or nations; here the context implies nations) and make disciples of them. Those who would accept Jesus were to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The disciples were to teach the followers of Jesus to observe all the things that He had commanded. Jesus promised His disciples that He would be with them until the end of the age. These post-resurrection promises constitute a fundamental aspect of the very core of the Christian hope and the Christian mission to the world.