
Introduction

When the four Gospels were arranged (in the order we now have them in the New Testament) it was natural that the Gospel of Matthew should be placed first. Its distinctive structure and specific purpose made it an ideal Gospel for the growing church, with its need to instruct its converts in the life and teachings of Jesus. This early recognition has not diminished in the years that have followed. Though Mark continues to attract readers on the basis of vivid narrative, and Luke appeals to those of broad and benevolent concerns, Matthew is the Gospel that over the years has shaped the life and thought of the church. Renan, the nineteenth-century historian, called it the most important book ever written.¹

Authorship

The Gospel has traditionally been assigned to Matthew the apostle, although nowhere is there any clear indication of authorship. Some note that in the listing of the apostles, only in the first Gospel is Matthew identified as "the tax collector" (Matt. 10:3; cf. Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15, Acts 1:13). Supposedly this occupation would qualify him to be the official recorder of what Jesus said and did.

The view that Matthew was the earliest Gospel rests primarily on a statement of Papias (a church father who lived until about A.D. 130) as recorded by Eusebius (the "father of church history," who became Bishop of Caesarea in the early fourth century). The statement reads, "Matthew composed [or collected] *ta logia* in the Hebrew dialect, and each one interpreted [or translated] them as best he could" (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.16). Ralph Martin, in his book *New Testament Foundations*, surveys the possible meanings of the key term (*logia*) and places them in one of three categories. The term may refer to an earlier Aramaic edition of the Gospel that was written by the apostle and later translated into our Greek canonical Gospel. If the term refers only to part of Matthew's Gospel, then the reference could be either to Old Testament prophetic "oracles" used by the church to prove that Jesus

came in fulfillment of prophecy or to a collection of "sayings" of Jesus (scholars use the designation "Q") that the writers of Matthew and Luke used when they compiled their Gospels. Martin favors a third possibility, that *ta logia* refers to an undefined collection of material that was used later in the composition of the entire Gospel.²

Scholars who hold that the apostle Matthew did not write the Gospel feel that it would be highly unlikely for one of the Twelve (Matthew) to rely so heavily on the writing of someone who was not an apostle (i.e., Mark; New Testament scholarship is almost completely committed to the priority of Mark). However, according to the same Papias who identifies Matthew as the author or compiler of *ta logia*, Mark was the "interpreter of Peter" (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.15), and it is possible that Matthew would find little problem deferring to the early leader of the Christian church. It is also objected that an eyewitness of the events would include more vivid and lifelike details in his writing. This objection is less weighty when we remember that Matthew abbreviated much of Mark's (Peter's?) material and wrote not so much to tell the story of Jesus as to supply an organized compendium of Jesus' life and teachings for the instruction of new converts to the Christian faith.

In favor of the apostolic authorship of the Gospel is the strong witness of the early church fathers. In the early third century Origen wrote, "The first Gospel was written by Matthew, who was once a tax collector, but who was afterward an apostle of Jesus Christ."³ Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Jerome gave similar evidence. It can also be argued that if the apostle did not write the Gospel, how did his name become attached to it, and what became of the person who did write it? Though it is difficult to answer with any certainty the question of authorship of a Gospel that makes no claims for itself, the most reasonable answer is that Matthew the apostle was responsible for the Gospel in its earliest form and that behind the canonical Gospel lies the authority of Matthew the tax collector, one of the Twelve.

Setting and Date

Though earlier writers tended to favor Judea as the place of origin for the Gospel of Matthew, modern scholarship favors some place in Syria, probably Antioch. Early in the second cen-

tury Ignatius of Antioch reveals in his writings a knowledge of the Gospel. The date of composition is difficult to determine. The references in 27:8 and 28:15 to events that are remembered "to this [very] day" suggest that a considerable period of time had elapsed between the events and the time when the Gospel was written down. Certain observations, such as the existence of a trinitarian formula for baptism (28:19) and the general impression that the church had settled into a rather fixed ethical code and pattern of organization and worship, suggest a rather late date for composition. On the other hand, if the Gospel were written after the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), it seems strange that the author did not refer to such a dramatic event as a fulfillment of Jesus' predictions in chapter 24. Sometime between A.D. 70 and 80 seems to fit the evidence best.

Structure

It is widely recognized that Matthew is a literary masterpiece. F. C. Grant writes that "the Gospel is clearly the work of a first-rate literary artist and teacher, who has reflected long and deeply upon the substance of the Christian Gospel."⁴ While following the order of Mark and preserving almost all its material, Matthew organizes his Gospel into five blocks of teachings separated by narrative sections. The clue lies in the formula "when Jesus had finished saying these things," which is repeated with only minor variations at the close of each section (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). This fivefold structure is common in ancient Jewish literature (cf. the five books of Moses, the five divisions of the Psalms, the five Megilloth, etc.). Barker, Lane, and Michaels point out that Matthew's five "books" deal with the ethics of the Kingdom (5:1-7:27), mission (10:1-42), redemptive history (13:1-52), church discipline (18:1-35), and eschatology (23:1-25:46).⁵ These would be major concerns of an early church desirous of instructing new converts.

Leading Characteristics

Several characteristics set Matthew off from the other Gospels. Perhaps most prominent is his extensive use of Old Testament quotations. In addition to the more than fifty clear quo-

tations, the Gospel contains innumerable single words, phrases, and echoes of the Old Testament. For this reason alone, the Gospel of Matthew served as a natural link between God's people of the old covenant and the new Israel, the church. Gundry's *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* is especially helpful at this point.

Attention is often drawn to the "Jewishness" of the Gospel: for example, the genealogy in chapter 1, interest in fulfilled prophecy (a variation of "that it might be fulfilled" occurs repeatedly) and interest in the law and the traditions of Judaism. At the same time, Matthew expresses a great deal of concern for the Gentiles. It was wise men "from the east" who first came to search out the birthplace of the Messiah (2:1-12). A missionary motif runs throughout the entire Gospel. The Great Commission in 28:19-20 sends the eleven out to "make disciples of all nations." Though it is not true that the basic message of the Gospel is that "the Gentiles have displaced the Jews,"⁶ there is no doubt that Matthew is universalistic in outlook.

Matthew evidences a great deal of interest in the organized church. Only in Matthew, among the Gospels, does the word *ekklēsia* ("church") occur. His entire Gospel is organized around the catechetical needs of the growing community. The abridgment of Marcan material is intended to make it more easily learned and remembered by new believers. The emphasis on the teaching ministry of Jesus is prominent. The Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7) is the largest single block of Jesus' teaching to be found in any of the four Gospels. Other emphases that should be mentioned are Matthew's stress on the inevitability and serious nature of divine judgment, his concern with apocalyptic eschatology, and his insistence that Jesus the Messiah is the Lord of the worshiping church.

Interpretive Approach

One final word needs to be said about the view that certain portions of Matthew (basically, the infancy narratives and various amplifications of the passion and resurrection narratives) are examples of a Jewish-Christian midrash (imaginative elaborations that bring out the deeper meaning of the text). Grant says that such things as the flight into Egypt (2:13-18), Peter's walking

on the water (14:28–31), and the resurrection appearance in Galilee (28:16–20) “must be viewed as fancies—pious fancies, no doubt, but still only the poetic or imaginative embellishment of the central narrative and message of the NT.”⁷

There is, of course, no way to prove or disprove in any final sense the validity of one’s hermeneutical methodology. What may seem obvious to one scholar may not be nearly so convincing to another. The basic assumptions one brings to Scripture determine to a great extent what the text will turn out to mean; we are all affected by the mind-set with which we approach a text. If, for example, we are of the general opinion that miracles do not (and never did) happen, then the miracles of Jesus will have to be interpreted to fit. On the other hand, if we believe that God is able to act from time to time in ways that seem to defy “natural law,” then Peter’s walking on the water (to say nothing of the resurrection) will be taken at face value.

The approach followed in this commentary is to let the Gospel speak for itself. Since there is no indication that the early church discussed at length the historicity of Jesus’ life and work vis-à-vis the possible deeper and allegorical significance of each event, to take up the task some nineteen centuries later has little promise of success. To deny the historical nature of the central events in the redemptive activity of God is to treat narrative as though it were poetry and in the process sacrifice the heart of the Christian gospel.

Notes

1. F. V. Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 1.

2. R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975–78), vol. 1, pp. 238–40.

3. Origen, *Ecclesiastica Historia* 6.14.5

4. F. C. Grant, “Matthew, Gospel of,” *IDB*, vol. 3, p. 304.

5. G. W. Barker, W. L. Lane, and J. R. Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 265.

6. K. W. Clark, "Gentile Bias in Matthew," *JBL* 66 (1947), p. 172.

7. Grant, "Matthew," 307.

Note: A list of the abbreviations used in the commentary is found at the beginning of the book (see pp. xi-xii). See also, "For Further Reading" (pp. 271-74); full bibliographical references for works referred to in short-form notes within the commentary are supplied there.