

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربي), French (Français), Hindi (हिंदी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

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Matthew

The apostle Matthew shows that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ and the king of Israel that Israel had awaited for a long time. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament promises but surprises his contemporaries. The Gospel of Matthew explains how both Jewish and non-Jewish people (gentiles) belong in God's expanding kingdom. It challenges readers to fully commit to Jesus Christ as king.

Setting

Matthew wrote his gospel when a major decision confronted the early Christian community. Would it remain a part of Judaism or become a separate faith? Matthew's Gospel comes from a Christian community near Jerusalem. Jews who remained very Jewish surrounded them. This community, unlike the Christians in the apostle Paul's churches, had to follow Jewish law in their daily lives.

The Christians reading Matthew's Gospel encountered the challenge of living as Jewish Christians among Jews fully committed to the Old Testament law of Moses (*torah*). The letter from the apostle James also describes a Christianity closely connected to the synagogue (local place of Jewish worship) (see [James 2:1-26](#)). This Jewish Christianity is as dedicated to the Jewish community as it is to its glorious Lord (compare [Acts 15:1-41](#)).

Matthew's Gospel explains how Jesus's life influenced Jewish Christians dealing with ceremonial, legal, social, and political issues. For these early Christians, Matthew addressed an important idea. "How should we follow Jesus today, while living among Jewish traditions and sharing the good news (gospel) of the kingdom with everyone?"

Summary

Matthew's story follows Jesus from before his birth to after his death and resurrection. As a child, Jesus encounters many dangers ([chapter 2](#)). As an adult, he has a short "career," teaching about God's righteousness ([chapters 5-7](#)). He performed amazing miracles ([8:1-9:34](#)). He expands his mission by sending out twelve apostles ([9:35-11:1](#)).

However, many Jews from Galilee and Judea reject Jesus ([chapters 11-17](#)). During his last week of life on earth, he confronts Jewish leaders in the temple ([chapters 21-22](#)). He warns against leaders who guide the people away from living for God ([chapter 23](#)). He prophesies God's judgment and the destruction of Jerusalem ([chapters 24-25](#)).

They arrest, sentence, and crucify Jesus for opposing Jewish leaders and challenging social norms ([chapters 26-27](#)). After his resurrection, Jesus instructs his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" ([chapter 28](#)).

Matthew organizes his gospel story using two main principles:

1. After an introduction, Matthew changes between teaching and telling stories ([chapters 1-4](#)). We find teachings in [chapters 5-7](#); [10](#), [13](#), [18](#), [23-25](#). There are stories in [chapters 8-9](#); [11-12](#), [14-17](#), [19-22](#), [26-28](#).
2. Matthew describes Jesus confronting Israel with God's message about the coming of his kingdom in the last days of history ([4:12-11:1](#); see [4:17](#)). He follows this by showing how different people reacted to this message ([11:2-20:34](#)). Matthew then narrates Jesus Christ's death and resurrection for the salvation of humanity ([chapters 21-28](#)).

Author

Matthew was a tax collector whom Jesus made his friend and called him to a life of justice and obeying God ([9:9](#)). Matthew invited many friends to spend an evening with Jesus ([9:10-13](#)). Jesus made him one of the twelve apostles ([10:2-4](#); see also [Mark 3:16-19](#); [Luke 6:13-16](#); [Acts 1:13](#)). Early church tradition says that after writing his gospel, Matthew moved from Palestine in the AD 60s to proclaim Christianity in India (Eusebius, *Church History* 3.24.6).

In the early 100s AD, Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, said, “Matthew composed the oracles in the Hebrew language [or, ‘in a Hebrew style’] and each interpreted them as he was able.” Traditionally, people believe this means the apostle Matthew wrote a gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic, which they later translated into Greek. It is possible someone familiar with the Gospel of Mark made the translation. Recent studies suggest Papias referred to Matthew’s Jewish style, not his language. This is because Matthew’s Gospel does not seem like a translation from another language.

In the 1800s, scholars believed Matthew used Mark’s Gospel as a source. They argued that an apostle would not use another gospel to write about Jesus’s life. This was especially true with a gospel written by someone who was not an apostle. Thus, they thought Matthew did not write the gospel named after him.

However, early tradition links Mark’s Gospel to the apostle Peter. This connection makes it easier to understand how Matthew might have relied on Mark. There is no conflict if one apostle (Matthew) uses another apostle’s (Peter’s) accounts to shape his own story.

Occasion of Writing

Unlike the apostle Paul's letters or the apostle John's Revelation, we must infer the settings of the gospels. This comes from comments and emphases within the books themselves (see [24:15](#); [27:46](#); [28:15](#)). This is because there is no direct evidence.

Matthew seems to have written his gospel when Christians and Jews were debating issues like:

- How to follow the law ([5:17-48](#); [15:1-20](#)).
- Identifying the Christ ([chapters 1-2](#)).
- Determining who God's true people are (Israel or the church; [21:33-46](#)).
- Identifying the true leaders of God's people ([4:18-22](#); [10:2-4](#); [21:43](#); [23:1-36](#); [28:16-20](#)).
- Understanding how gentiles (non-Jews) relate to the church and Israel ([2:1-12](#); [3:7-10](#); [4:12-16](#); [8:5-13](#); [15:21-28](#); [28:16-20](#)).

There is a serious debate about whether Matthew's Gospel came from a community still within Judaism or one outside it. In other words, had Matthew's Christian community separated from Judaism, or was it still under the influence of Judaism? Or, was Matthew written for a general audience instead of a specific community?

Early Christianity was diverse. Some Christian leaders, like James, maintained long lasting relationships with Jewish communities. Scholars examine the following passages to discuss this question: [2:1-12](#); [4:12-16](#); [8:5-13](#); [10:5-6](#); [15:21-28](#); [17:24-27](#); [19:28](#); [21:43](#); [22:7](#); [23:1-39](#).

Date and Location

Matthew probably wrote between AD 65 and 80. People who believe Matthew used Mark's Gospel as a source usually date it after AD 70. Those who think it is independent often date it earlier. Some suggest Matthew wrote his gospel in the AD 50s. Many today believe Matthew wrote in Antioch, Syria, which is more probable than other suggested locations.

Meaning and Message

Matthew argues that Jesus fulfills Israel's ancient faith and the Old Testament's hope. In Jesus, the Christ and "the day of the Lord" have arrived.

Some people follow Jesus. By following Jesus's teachings, these disciples proclaimed his message throughout the Roman world. They built a community, the church, that includes both Jews and gentiles. However, most of Israel does not follow its Christ. Jesus warns them of God's judgment unless they change their perspective ([chapters 23-25](#)).

Matthew's Gospel is unique in presenting Jesus as the Christ and teacher. It emphasizes the kingdom of heaven and strongly calls for submitting to Jesus (discipleship). The gospel often shows how Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecies. It criticizes Jewish religious leaders and includes gentiles who trust in Christ as part of the kingdom.

The Christ

Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the Christ (Messiah) ([1:1](#), [16-18](#); [11:2-3](#); [16:16](#), [20](#); [23:10](#)). He presents Jesus as fulfilling Old Testament promises, but not as his Jewish contemporaries expected. For Matthew, Jesus is plainly the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary to save his people ([1:21](#)). In summary, Jesus is "Immanuel" (which means, "God with us") ([1:23](#); [28:20](#)).

The Kingdom of Heaven

The term "Kingdom of Heaven," used thirty times by Matthew, is a way for Jews to say "Kingdom of God."

Matthew uses this term to describe:

3. God's invisible but present rule on earth through Jesus the Christ's work of saving.
4. Old Testament promises fulfilled ([4:17](#); [11:11-15](#)).
5. God's acts of saving, often through quiet and humble means ([11:25](#); [13:24-30](#), [36-43](#)).
6. The power and strength of God's actions ([11:2-6](#), [12-13](#); [12:28](#)).

7. The kingdom's arrival within "this generation" ([10:23](#); [16:28](#); [24:34](#)).
8. God's final, decisive judgment ([25:31-46](#)).
9. The perfect union (fellowship) of all God's holy people with the Father ([8:11-12](#); [13:43](#); [22:1-14](#); [26:29](#)).

The kingdom of heaven shows God's perfect rule through Jesus the Christ among his people. It starts with the church and reaches completion in the eternal kingdom of glory and fellowship.

Discipleship

Matthew's Gospel emphasizes Jesus's call that people:

- Become baptized.
- Follow him as disciples, or "those who learn."
- Obey his teachings ([28:20](#)).
- Enjoy union with him.

Jesus outlines the requirements of being a disciple in his sermon on the mount ([chapters 5-7](#)). This theme appears throughout Matthew (for example, [10:1-42](#); [16:24-26](#)). Matthew shows the disciples overcoming their failures with Christ's help (see [14:28-33](#); [16:5-12](#)).

Goal of the Old Testament

More than any other gospel, Matthew shows how the Old Testament's expectations and promises come true in Jesus. Like a Jewish commentary, Matthew connects Old Testament texts to events in Jesus's life that fulfill them. He often compares the Old Testament to the New Testament. Matthew believes that what God did in Israel, he is now doing again, finally, in Jesus the Christ.

Universal Outlook

This book, which is very Jewish in focus, is surprising in how it emphasizes the inclusion of non-Jews in the Christ's saving work. More than any other, this gospel stresses that the good news is for everyone, including non-Jews. This perspective put Matthew at odds with the Jewish community of his time on two key questions: Who are God's people? What is the future for the nation of Israel?

The birth stories show that God saves non-Jews, and throughout the book, it portrays non-Jews in a positive way. Since God is in total control, his Christ is king of all creation. God has worked especially in and through the nation of Israel (see [10:5-6](#); [15:24](#)). Yet, the start of the kingdom of heaven shares God's good favor with all nations as well (see [28:18-20](#)).