

The Gospel of Matthew
A Jewish Gospel
New Testament Survey – Lesson 5 (Part 2)

Until he passed away seven-plus years ago, my Dad was a steady presence and influence in my life. Now his physical presence is gone, but his influence continues and will until I die. One of the many ways Dad's influence remains steady is through phrases he coined or used over and over again. Dad always had a handy way of expressing himself that could be lighthearted and engaging.

His phrases became slogans that always bubbled up in the midst of every day life. When I fell off my bike and landed on the sidewalk, Dad first verified that I was more panicked over the experience than I was genuinely hurt. He then asked me, "Did you break the sidewalk?" The first time this came out, I was startled and said, "I don't think so, why?" He replied, "You are awfully hard-headed!" The distraction and laughter eased me out of the panic. We quickly learned in our house not to announce decisions of hygiene. Anyone who ever declared, "I'm going to take a shower!" or "I'm going to take a bath!" would immediately hear from my Dad, "Thank you!" If you got in between my Dad and the television, then he was apt to ask you, "Have you been drinking muddy water?" Again only once did I have to ask, "Why?" His response – "Because I am having trouble seeing through you!" If someone spilled milk at the table, Dad never used the mantra, "don't cry over spilt milk." For Dad, it was always, "If that's the worst thing that happens to you, you are going to have a great day!"

When Dad met someone he liked and enjoyed, Dad would frequently leave them with the compliment, "You're a gentleman and a scholar." If Dad related to them in a jovial fashion, in spite of Dad's true humility, then he would frequently add, "and there aren't many of us left!" On this, Dad was right! Very few people have thorough knowledge in a broad base of areas. Have you heard the term "polymath?" It comes from the Greek πολυμαθης and means "one who has learned much." A more common term is a "Renaissance man." This is a phrase that is used of a few noteworthy people like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Galileo, Copernicus, Aristotle, Goethe, Robert Leone, and Isaac Newton.

Renaissance people impress me for their wide range of knowledge that crosses fields. More and more, we live in a world of specialization. We see it in fields like medicine and law. We also see it in tradecrafts and academia. Among theologians and Bible scholars, some folks are well tuned to theology, others are well-informed about New Testament, and still others Old Testament or some other

aspect of Biblical study. One positive of such specialization is an ability to really excel in an area.

One danger of specialization is myopic vision. We have a tendency to see things from our area of specialty, and an inability to cross over into other areas of specialty can stop us from making important connections. This is especially dangerous when we speak dogmatically from presuppositions that are informed only from a limited background. For example, many students who approach Matthew are Christians who have spent most of their study time in the New Testament. As a result, many have a tendency to read Matthew through that New Testament lens, without adequate consideration to the Old Testament and inter-testamental Judaism. Even some scholars in the New Testament arena, who are frequently well-versed in Greek (the language of the New Testament), are not so well versed in the Hebrew/Aramaic dialects of the time of Jesus and the New Testament. Often these scholars approach a Gospel like Matthew and read it mainly through the lens of their Greek studies. Now such a lens is very useful, but when it excludes the lens of Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew as well as 1st century Aramaic, it can also be overly narrow, and risk missing many of the finer points of Matthew. This scholastic myopia can also lead people to wrong constructs on issues like date of composition and more.¹

¹ A number of scholars propose an extremely late date for the gospel of Matthew, some as late as 125AD. The reasons for this late dating are multifold. One might suggest that the late date is generated by an agenda seeking to discount reliability of the gospel; however, that is never the reason given! Instead, the two predominant reasons are Matthew's well-developed ideas of church structure and Matthew's passages that seem to speak to events that happened in the first and second rebellions against Rome (70AD and 135AD respectively).

The church structure passages include Matt. 18:15ff:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The theory is that Matthew evidences a church structure that would have taken at least 75 years to develop. This argument has seen its supporters dwindle in number since scholars have unfolded the Dead Sea Scrolls, illuminating a fuller understanding of Jewish life and culture at Qumran. The Scrolls have shown a structured religious community that existed in Jewish life that is far more developed than the community life indicated by Matthew's passages and the expressions of Jesus. There is no reason to think that the church could not and would not have established a structured community early in its history.

The second support for the late date is found in the passages that supposedly give a post-event announcement about the catastrophic Jewish rebellions. These passages include both the parable of the wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-14) and Jesus' prophetic pronouncements in Matthew 24-25. In

Hebrew backgrounds are especially helpful in the study of Matthew. Matthew is a Jewish gospel where the stories and structure make better sense in light of the Old Testament and the Jewish culture of Jesus' day. Matthew's usage of the Old Testament, both in direct quotations as well as his alluding to it, indicate dexterity with Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic (the three principal languages of Palestine in the time of Christ). Even beyond the stories and structure, Matthew's language also shows, at some level, either an underlying Hebrew text, or at least fresh memories of events that were committed to memory and expressed in stories in the Hebrew language.²

In this second lesson on Matthew, we are going to look at the gospel's Jewish message, with fresh material as well as an added emphasis to matters set out in the

the parable of the wedding feast, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast where those invited chose not to come. The king got angry and "he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." Some see this as a post-facto reference to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Of course, that argument assumes *a priori* that Jesus was not able to prophesy. Equally troubling to the argument, however, is the fact that the Romans did not burn Jerusalem when they conquered it. During the Roman invasion, the Temple was burned, but this was apparently due to the Jews, not the Romans (See, Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 6.251). It was not until later, after the city was subjugated that the city was burned (*War of the Jews*, 7.1). Additionally, if Matthew was an effort to write a prophetic word *after the events occurred*, disguising the timing and pretending it was written before, then it certainly does not read as clearly as it should. This same problem exists in the prophetic interweaving of the end of the temple life and the end of time in Matthew 24 and 25. See these and other arguments discussed in Nolland, John, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew*, (Eerdmans 2005), at 14ff; France, R. T., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, (Eerdmans 2007), at 18ff.

A late date projection runs into trouble when Matthew is viewed through a lens that includes a broader understanding of Judaism in the first century. It becomes even more difficult to maintain a late date in light of the many Hebraisms in Matthew. Matthew was not only written to a community that was, at least to some degree, predominantly Jewish, but the ultimate sources behind Matthew, whether written or oral, are clearly in many cases Hebrew sources. The style and reasoning of Matthew all reflect conditions and culture of the Palestine Jewish community prior to the temple destruction in 70AD. This would make better sense if Matthew were written earlier, when the Hebrew community of the church was strongest and when the Hebrew events were still remembered or freshly translated from the Hebrew and Aramaic occurrences. These Hebraisms are detailed in the later sections of this lesson.

² Robert Lindsey and David Biven are two scholars steeped in Greek as well as Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew who have both published a great deal on the theory that the gospel writers (at least Matthew and Luke) accessed an underlying Hebrew text as part of their source materials in compiling their gospels. See, Lindsey, Robert, *Jesus Rabbi & Lord*, (Cornerstone Publishing 1990); *The Jesus sources: understanding the Gospels*, (HaKeshet 1990); see also the many relevant articles by Bivin, David available at his website <http://www.jerusalemerspective.com>. See also his forthcoming article, "Hebraisms in the New Testament," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Brill, forthcoming).

footnotes of the previous lesson. We will use those materials to then discuss whether Matthew actually wrote Matthew.

MATTHEW'S JEWISH MESSAGE

While scholars rarely agree on who wrote Matthew or when it was written, most scholars readily acknowledge that Matthew focuses on a more Jewish audience than the Gospel of Mark (which, as discussed in the lesson on Mark, was likely written to a more Roman/Latin population). This is fairly obvious from a comparative reading of the two books. Mark goes to great lengths to explain Jewish words and customs, as if the reader would not be familiar with them. For example, in Mark 7:3-4, while setting out the interaction between the Pharisees and Jesus over the failure to wash hands before eating, Mark added the parenthetical information,

(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)

Matthew has no need to insert such information. He relates the story assuming everyone knows the issues at play:

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? (Matt. 15:1-3).

For Matthew, there is no concern his readers might not understand the story. This is one of many examples of Matthew targeting a Jewish readership, or at least a readership that was conversant with everyday Judaism.

To dissect Matthew and consider each example of the gospel's Jewishness would take an extensive commentary. In this lesson, we have opted instead to give some examples of the different types of Jewish effects in the gospel, urging those interested to seek out solid commentaries that delve into the subject more fully.³

³ See, e.g., France, R.T., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, (Eerdmans 2007) along with his extended introduction, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, (Wipf & Stock 1998); Morris, Leon, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew*, (Eerdmans 1992); Gundry, R.H., *Matthew: a Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, (Eerdmans 1994).

Matthew's Hebrew Wordplays

Repeatedly in the Gospel of Matthew, we have deliberate plays on words that make sense only if one reads and understands the Hebrew words behind the Greek words. Two clear examples are found in Matthew 1:21 (“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”) and Matthew 2:23 (“And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.”)

Matthew 1:21 records an angel giving Joseph instructions about the child Mary is carrying in her womb. The angel says in effect, “Don’t put Mary away. She wasn’t unfaithful. She carries a child by God. Take her and help her. She will give birth to a son. Name the boy Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” The Greek does not explain why naming the child “Jesus” is related to forgiving sins. It only makes sense if one understands the Hebrew behind it. In Greek, the name “Jesus” is *Iesous* (Ἰησοῦς). Other than being a Greek translation of the Hebrew name “Joshua,” the Greek has no real meaning. It is the Hebrew name “Joshua” that makes sense of the angel’s comment to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. The Hebrew name “Joshua” means “he will save.” This is the angel’s point Joseph readily understood, a Hebrew speaker. Matthew’s reader who knew the Hebrew behind the Greek would similarly understand it, so Matthew had no need to explain it beyond writing it.

Matthew 2:23 is another place where Matthew links Jesus’ early life to prophecy, saying he lived in Nazareth to fulfill prophecy that Jesus “would be called a Nazarene.” The problem is, to those reading in Greek (or English), this looks like an error on Matthew’s part. There is no messianic prophecy in the Old Testament that indicates the Messiah would “be called a Nazarene.” This has caused all sorts of theories by scholars, some of the more outlandish by those familiar with Greek, but not as familiar with Hebrew. Some have opined this was simply an error by Matthew. Others as far back as the early church (the Greek fathers Euthymius and Chrysostom, for example), thought Matthew must have had a resource of prophecies that was subsequently lost to the church.⁴ Similarly, others have thought Matthew was quoting some non-canonical source.⁵ Still others search for

⁴ See cites and comments on the treatment by the Greek fathers at Kitto, John, *et al.*, *The Journal of Sacred Literature* (1859), vol. 9, at 129f.

⁵ Fitzmyer, J.A., “The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament”, *New Testament Studies*, 7 (1961), at 304.

Old Testament prophecies that might fit, often linking some that on their own have no apparent Messianic message.⁶

In contrast are scholars who see the Hebraism behind Matthew's gospel. These scholars regularly link this passage in Matthew to the Messianic promise in Isaiah 11:1:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a *branch* from his roots shall bear fruit.

This connection can only be made if one reading or hearing Matthew is familiar with the Hebrew Old Testament. In the Hebrew, the word translated "branch" is the Hebrew *nzr* (נצר). The word "Nazarene" is then a word play as one who is a *nzr*, or a "branch." The Hebrew for Nazarene is spelled the same but with an "n" added at the end (nzrn). If one gets to make this connection, then the understanding of Matthew's point comes alive. (It also gives more meaning to Nathaniel's statement recorded in John 1:46, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"⁷) Jesus would be Isaiah's "branch" or *nzr* as one *that comes from the roots*, yet still bears fruit. The olive tree gives a great illustration of Matthew and Isaiah's point. The fruit from the olive tree comes from its branches up high as opposed to from the roots. The olive tree's roots and stump are notorious for producing shoots or branches that must be pruned away. They are not useful for fruit production. The branches are the plant equivalent of an unassuming, humble, low (literally and figuratively) growth that seems to have no destiny beyond the pruner's clippers. This was Jesus, whom Matthew would quote a few chapters later as one who was "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). Similarly, Paul defended his humility in ministry by the example of the meekness and gentleness of Christ (2 Cor. 10:1).⁸ Jesus came from an unassuming town (Nazareth) as an unassuming Messiah (*nzr*).

Matthew has such wordplay throughout his gospel, and the more thoroughly one understands the Hebrew and Aramaic of his day, the better one can appreciate

⁶ See discussion of different options at Gundry, R.H., *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Brill 1967), at 98ff.

⁷ Although some suggest Nathaniel's comment could be referencing a rivalry between Cana and Nazareth.

⁸ The Dead Sea Scrolls have taken the motif of a *nzr*'s humble and unassuming reality as an offshoot and applied it to one who was "mocked," "forsaken," and "without refuge." This is very inline with the thought of Matthew and Jesus as a *nzr* of Isaiah 11:1. See, 1QH^a XVI with the Hebrew and English found in Martinez, F.G., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (Brill 2000), Vol. 1, at 180ff.

Matthew's messages. Much of Matthew will be missed without the "renaissance man" approach of knowing the background, language and culture of Matthew's day!

Matthew's Hebrew Language and Usage

Even beyond the word play, Matthew sets out multiple passages using Hebrew idioms and language. For example, in Matthew 6:22-23 we read Matthew quoting Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount,

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

Now in itself, this may not seem difficult to understand. The difficulty arises if one places it into context. In the passage before this, Jesus instructs his listeners not to lay up treasures on earth, but in heaven. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19-21). The passage that follows our "good eye/bad eye" passage is on the same theme as the passage preceding it. It teaches one cannot serve God and money. How do we understand the "good eye/bad eye" passage as it sits between the two passages on materialism? (In fact, the whole chapter is actually on materialism, treatment of the poor, worrying about daily provision, *etc.*) In this context, the "good eye/bad eye" passage seems sorely out of place. That is, unless we understand the Hebrew idiom at play!

In Hebrew, the expression of a "good eye" carried the meaning of generosity. One with a "bad eye" was considered stingy. We see this in Old Testament usage as well as rabbinical writings more contemporary with Jesus and Matthew. In Proverbs 23:6, for example, the ESV translates the passage as:

Do not eat the bread of a man who is *stingy*; do not desire his delicacies.

The actual words translated "who is stingy" are in Hebrew "whose eye is evil."⁹ We find the same in Proverbs 28:22:

A stingy man hastens after wealth and does not know that poverty will come upon him.

"A stingy man" is literally "A man whose eye is evil."¹⁰

⁹ In Hebrew, רע עין.

¹⁰ For more citations in the Old Testament, as well as the Septuagint and the rabbinical fathers, see France, R.T., *Commentary on Matthew*, at 261f; Nolland, John, *The New International Greek*

We see Matthew use this idiom again in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20. In the parable, the vineyard owner pays the same to the folks that worked all day as he did to the folks that worked only a partial workday. The full day workers were grumbling, and the vineyard owner replied,

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or *do you begrudge my generosity?* (Matt. 20:15).

The literal translation of what the owner said is,

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or *is your eye bad because I am good?*

In each of these examples, understanding the Hebrew colloquial language helps us understand what Matthew wrote.

Even beyond idioms, we have Matthew writing in ways best understood by those with a good Hebrew background in his usage of “*gematria*.” *Gematria* is based on the fact that the Hebrew alphabet also served as the numbers in ancient Hebrew. Like many civilizations in the Ancient Near East, this enabled the Hebrews to find a numerical value in words. The numerical value often took on significance beyond the word itself. This practice went back at least as far as the Assyrian king Sargon II (727-707BC). One inscription of Sargon’s indicated he built the wall at the city Khorsabad 16,283 cubits long so that it would be the length of the numerical value of his name.¹¹

A number of scholars cite *gematria* as the reason for Matthew 1:17,

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

This comes in a chapter where Jesus Christ is first listed as the “Son of David,” a Messianic term, and is unique to Matthew’s gospel. Matthew sets his genealogy into three segments of fourteen, pointing out the “significance” of the sections at fourteen each (1:17). To do that, Matthew had to eliminate four known kings between Joram and Uzziah (Ahaziah, Athaliah, Joash, and Amaziah). Why is fourteen so important to Matthew and his largely Jewish readers? Many scholars believe the key is the *gematria* message of fourteen. *Gematria* is where the letters

Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew, (Eerdmans 2005), at 302, ft. 377. See also, Lindsey, Robert, *The Jesus Sources: Understanding the Gospels*, (HaKeshet 1990), at 21.

¹¹ “*Gematria*,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Keter Publishing House 1972), Vol 7, at 370.

and their numerical values had symbolic representation. Under the *Hebrew gematria*, fourteen is the number for David. The Hebrew spelling for David is *dwd* (דוד). The *gematria* value for each “D” is four (“D” is the fourth letter in the Hebrew alphabet) and the value for the “W” is six (“W” is the sixth letter in the Hebrew alphabet). So the fourteen generations are each a reflection of David. Matthew is not interested in truly listing every king. He is interested in driving home the point that Jesus is to be understood in light of his title Son of David!

In addition to word play, idioms and *gematria*, we find in Matthew instances of Hebrew words co-opted by the Greek language. One example is the Hebrew/Greek word “amen.” Jerusalem School scholar Robert Lindsay taught that Matthew’s use of “amen!” fell into the category of Hebraisms best understood in light of Hebrew usage. Matthew used this word “amen” more times than the rest of the New Testament combined. It was a Greek adaptation of the Hebrew word that is an exclamation of affirmation. In the Old Testament and most Hebrew literature, “Amen” was always used as an exclamation of support for what was said or done (much along the lines of meaning “May it be!”). In this sense, the word was used much in the manner that finds expression in churches today. Still scholars look to the “Amens” in Matthew more generally as a statement affirming the truth of what is *to follow* rather than what was just said. For this reason, the “Amens” are generally translated as “truly” or “verily” in modern editions with Jesus saying, “Truly I say to you.”

Before we consider Lindsay’s understanding, consider several passages where Matthew records Jesus’ usage of “Amen”:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you [literally “Amen I say to you”], until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matt. 5:17-18).

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you [literally “Amen I say to you”], you will never get out until you have paid the last penny (Matt. 5:25-26).

Lindsay believes scholars are making a mistake by reading the “Amen” linked to what follows (hence, “truly I say to you...”). Lindsay asserts that the Amen functioned like it did in the Old Testament, in other Jewish literature and much like it does today. It was an affirmation of what *was* said:

The placing of words idiomatically is as important in Hebrew as in English. As I began to examine all the places where “Amen I say to you” appears in the Synoptic Gospels, I was reminded that in the Greek manuscripts there is no punctuation. If we add a period or exclamation point after the word “amen,” and then add the words, “I tell you,” we would have, “Amen! I tell you (e.g., you will be with me...)” That sounds like true Hebrew!¹²

Lindsay then goes on to cite examples of Old Testament usage of the “ironic amen” and places where he sees Jesus using it similarly, with even a touch of humor. Consider the way it alters the flavor of Mathew 6:5:

Typical Usage	Lindsay Usage
<p>And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.</p>	<p>And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Amen! I tell you, they have received their reward.</p>

Importantly, there is no difference in the translation here. The key is how the Greek is read and punctuated.

A final illustration of Matthew’s usage of language particular to an appreciation of Hebraisms in the first century is his usage of “Israel” and “Jew.” This usage becomes more important when we consider the issue of dating the Gospel of Matthew and the audience for the gospel. Throughout much of the 1st Century, the status of the church as a part of the larger Jewish community likely fluctuated in different areas of the Roman Empire. Even in the region of Palestine and Syria, there is a mounting body of opinion that the church remained attached to some degree to the larger community of Judaism. Acts records Paul’s continued involvement in Jewish Temple ritual as well as his routine attendance at synagogues as a basis for his evangelization. The full schism between the church and Judaism might have accelerated around 80AD,¹³ but as a practical matter took much longer before it was realized throughout the empire.

¹² Lindsay, at 9ff.

¹³ There is a body of thought that with the council (or councils) of Jamnia around 80AD, the post-rebellion Jewish power structure sought to permanently disenfranchise the Christian community from the Jewish faith. The rabbis passed propositions including the *birkat ha-minim* that was

This enters into a study of Matthew because of his Jewish usage of “Israel” and “Jew.” It reflected a deference and respect to the Israelites as a whole, even as it challenged the power structure of the temple system, indicating that Matthew was written at a time and to a people that were not antagonistic to the Israelites and the Old Testament faith.

In short form, we can note that Matthew used “Israel” to reference either the land of “Israel” or the historical, ethnic people who were descended from Abraham. Matthew saved the label “Jew” for usage only when quoting Gentiles, with one exception. The clearest example of the different usage is found in the crucifixion story of Matthew 27. When Jesus is hanging on the cross, the chief priests and others mocking him called out,

He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of *Israel*; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him (Matt. 27:42).

In comparison, when Pilate confronted Jesus just hours before, he asked whether Jesus was the “King of the *Jews*” (Matt. 27:11). As the soldiers mocked and beat Jesus, they were calling him the “King of the *Jews*” (Matt. 27:29). Even the Roman placard above Jesus’ head on the cross where the priests were mocking him read “King of the *Jews*” (Matt. 27:37).

This usage of “Israel” and “Jew” is not only consistent with usage of terms at the time of Jesus, but it reflects a readership that was likely still involved to some degree in the Jewish faith groups of the day.¹⁴ This seemed to change after the foiled revolt against Rome in 70AD. The Jewish historian Josephus writes commonly of the “Jews” in 95AD. Similarly, when reading the Gospel of John, while Matthew used “Israel” twelve times and “Jew” five times, John flips those statistics. John used “Israel” only four times, but spoke of the “Jews” 65 times! Even today we use the word “Jew” to reference the historical, ethnic people descended from Abraham.

Matthew’s usage was sensitive and proper for a readership among people we now term “the Jews.” This is a clear goal and vision of Matthew. For Matthew, Jesus was not the start of a new religion. Jesus was not supplanting the law, nor was he repudiating the faith of the fathers. Jesus was the fulfillment of Judaism. Matthew emphasized this in his record of the Sermon on the Mount with Jesus saying,

added as a curse on “heretics” and “Nazarenes,” which are generally understood to mean Christians.

¹⁴ Saldarini, Anthony, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community*, (Univ. of Chicago 1994), at 28, 34ff.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matt. 5:17-18).

Jesus was the interpreter of the Jewish faith, the example for the Jewish faith, and the redemption for all mankind. For Matthew, affirming the “centrality of Jesus Christ as Son of God and Savior” does not “contradict an authentic Jewish interpretation of the Bible or Jewish way of life.”¹⁵

In this sense, it is useful to consider the one time Matthew uses the term “Jew” himself, as opposed to quoting a pagan usage of the term. In Matthew 28:15, there is a pejorative use of “Jews” where Matthew referenced those who were spreading the story that Jesus’ disciples stole the body of Jesus under the noses of the sleeping Roman guard. This one time, Matthew was pointing out those who were denying Jesus’s resurrection. That allowed the pejorative, as these were people who, in that denial, were not open to the faith in Jesus as Messiah.

Matthew is frequently cited for a mixture of venom and grace when dealing with the Jewish people. Upon close examination, Matthew really only attacked those of the Jewish community in his day that were rejecting Jesus.¹⁶ Of many of the crowds and other Jewish people, Mathew speaks positively and with compassion. These were the people who had populated the church and would have been receiving Matthew’s gospel.

Matthew’s Hebrew Structure and Storyline

Scholars are quick to point out the many parallels in Matthew’s gospel between Jesus and Moses. Moses, of course, was the prophetic leader called out of Egypt, leading the twelve tribes into the Promised Land (Ex. 3:10). Jesus was called out of Egypt to lead the people to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 2:6). Moses did so after surviving a childhood massacre of male sons by the Pharaoh (Ex. 1:15-2:2). Jesus likewise survived the childhood massacre of male sons ordered by King Herod (Matt. 2:13-18). Moses was in the wilderness and was sent by God back into Egypt to lead the people after “all the men who are seeking your life are dead” (Ex. 4:19). Matthew used almost identical language as the Greek version of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, at 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, at 35ff.

Exodus passage (the “Septuagint”) in speaking of Jesus’ return to Judea when he wrote, “those who sought the child’s life are dead” (Mt. 2:20).¹⁷

Throughout Matthew’s gospel, we will see running parallels between Jesus and Moses. For example, Moses went up on Sinai to receive the law (Ex. 19:20); Jesus stood on a mountain to deliver his teaching on the law (Matt. 5:1; 14:23; 15:29; 24:3; 28:16). Moses was accorded the first five books of the Bible as the books of Moses; Matthew grouped Jesus’ teachings into five clearly marked discourses, each ending with a Mosaic phrase, “And when Jesus had finished ...” (Matt. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1; Dt. 32:45; Ex. 34:33). Moses fasted 40 days and nights; Jesus fasted 40 days and nights (Dt. 9:9; Matt. 4:2).

For all the parallels, there are also critical distinctions. Moses delivered the law, but Jesus interpreted the law (Deut. 31:9; Matt. 5:21ff.). Both Moses and Jesus died outside of the goal (for Moses, the Promised Land - Deut. 34; for Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven – Matt. 27). But unlike Moses, Jesus returned, alive and resurrected, to bring the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 28)!

Matthew’s Understanding of the Hebrew Mission

There are multiple ways that Matthew’s gospel reports Jesus as a completion of the Hebrew mission and goal as God’s chosen people. Two clear examples are Matthew teaching that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Abrahamic charge and purpose of being blessed to be a blessing. In Genesis 12:1-3 God called Abraham (at the time just “Abram”) giving him a blessing that would extend to all the families of the earth:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

This promised mission was embraced by and fulfilled in Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus was the light for all nations:

And leaving Nazareth he [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁷ This is an example of an “allusive” Old Testament reference by Matthew, a type of reference that will be discussed later in this lesson.

the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned” (Matt. 4:13-16).

A second example of Jesus fulfilling the Jewish mission is his ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁸ Matthew writes of the popular Jewish desire for an earthly Jewish kingdom. No Davidic king had set on a throne since the Babylonian exile (587 BC). Jesus was readily acclaimed as a legitimate son of David, and he was set to rule. But while the people thought his reign would be an earthly kingdom, the truth was always that his kingship was over a heavenly one. The kingdom is a core theme in Matthew. Of the 162 usages of “kingdom” in the New Testament, over one-third (55) are found in Matthew.

Matthew’s usage of Hebrew Messianic Prophecy

Matthew repeatedly references Jesus as a fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecies. One particular prophecy is worth noting for the way Jesus applies it affirmatively, and then later applies it with a twist, changing the perspective of the prophecy to make his point. The prophecy concerns Jesus as the Son of Man discussed in Daniel 7. In Daniel 7, the Son of Man is predicted with the promise he would have an everlasting kingdom comprised of all peoples from all nations and languages:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:13-14).

Twenty-eight times in Matthew Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man. This was a title that Daniel affirmed would come to the Ancient of Days receiving dominion, glory and a kingdom. Jesus often spoke of his coming as the Son of Man before God the Father (*e.g.*, Matt. 19:28). But Jesus also turned around the Son of Man prophecy of Daniel 7. In Daniel, the Son of Man comes with the clouds *up* into heaven before the throne. When the High Priest Caiaphas confronted Jesus over his identity, Jesus replied that Caiaphas would see the Son of Man descend already enthroned in judgment upon the earth! Here is the contrasting usage of the passage. Jesus as Son of Man no longer simply coming

¹⁸ Matthew used “kingdom of heaven” in 33 different verses¹⁸, but used “kingdom of God” in only five. Some cite this as indicative of the Jewish preference to avoid speaking of God, finding alternate expressions. See, *e.g.*, Towns, Elmer and Gutierrez, Ben, *The Essence of the New Testament: A Survey*, (B&H Academic 2012), at 52.

before the Father for enthronement, but returning crowned as king to render judgment!

Matthew's Hebrew Usage of the Old Testament

We can divide Matthew's usage of the Old Testament into two categories: direct and indirect references.¹⁹ There are ten Old Testament direct citations that are easily found. They are set up with a phrase that varies only slightly in different places, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet..." (Matt. 1:22-23).²⁰ Beyond these direct quotations are many allusions to the Old Testament, where the quotation is buried in ideas and sentences, rather than set apart. Matthew's Old Testament quotations have become ripe fodder for many scholars to write upon over the centuries. At times Matthew quotes directly from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (The Septuagint). At other times, his quotations are from other translations of the Old Testament in his day. Some are Aramaic (from the "Targum"), which are actually more often paraphrases than translations (like The Message in modern terms). Some are Syriac (from the "Peshitta"). Some are mixed.²¹

In addition to the direct quotations, Matthew alludes extensively to specific phrases from the Old Testament. A lot of scholastic attention has come from the fact that the snippets used by Matthew here and there do not always align themselves fully with the Old Testament texts as we know them. If one were to read these lines, then compare them to the Old Testament passage being "quoted," one would frequently find that the "quote" seems off! The theories offered on these passages range from "Matthew was writing by memory, and his memory was not always the greatest" to "Matthew was careless in these phrases because he was not trying to quote the Old Testament accurately."

Here, as we noted in our introduction, it helps to be a renaissance man (or woman)! What might seem to some as a simple error or misstatement on Matthew's part is really something dramatically different! While modern scholars dispute whether the tax collector and apostle Matthew wrote the gospel so named,

¹⁹ Matthew quotes the Old Testament directly at least 60 times (over twice as many as any other gospel). Additionally, according to the UBS Greek New Testament, Matthew uses the Old Testament indirectly by allusions or verbal parallels 262 times.

²⁰ See also, Matt. 2:15, 17, 23; 4:4; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9. These again tie in Matthew's gospel as a culmination or fulfillment of the story of God and his people. On Matthew's theme of fulfillment, see France, R. T., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, (Eerdmans 2007), at 10ff.

²¹ These were all extensively analyzed by Robert Gundry in his dissertation subsequently published as *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Brill 1967).

a subject we consider in detail shortly, no one should dispute that whoever wrote Matthew was quite literate. Matthew is written in fluid Greek, as we have already indicated, by someone well versed in Hebrew, but now as we look at this section, we learn the author was also well versed in the usage of Scripture in writing in his day. His weaving of Scripture into narrative, using a part of a verse here or a phrase from there, was not laziness or poor scholarship. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, as Matthew wove these versions together into his narrative, he sometimes changed a word here or there. He did so, not in a cavalier or accidental way, but in a conscious and intentional way. What scholars used to cite as sloppiness on Matthew's part, has turned out to be *de rigueur* for his day.

To better understand this issue, let us consider one of the places where Matthew makes such an indirect reference. We have already considered Matthew 1:21, but we now bring it back into view on this issue:

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

This time our focus is on the phrase “for he will save his people from their sins.” Here we find Matthew making an indirect allusion to Psalm 130:8.

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities (Ps. 130:7-8).

Matthew has made some slight alterations, to emphasize his point. The Psalm reads, “he will redeem (or save) *Israel*” while Matthew says, “he will save (redeem) *his people*.” Matthew also uses an alternate word here, providing an expansion of the prophetic promise. Jesus was not set only to redeem Israel, but *all his people*. Matthew uses the Old Testament Scripture (and on closer examination it is apparent that he is making his own targumic adaptation, or paraphrase of the Hebrew) to underscore that the prophetic promise of Psalm 130 had an even broader reach than one might think!

Matthew lived in an age where writers took Old Testament passages and used them in writing, altering them in one place or another to make a sometimes entirely new point. This was not because they were poor scholars. It reflected such a high degree of scholarship and knowledge of the material that a special emphasis could be drawn by altering what people would know and making it something often altogether different. We might think of it as taking a well-known quote, altering it, and in today's writing, putting the alteration in italics. In some ways, these allusive quotations are even more revealing of Matthew's point than the direct quotations. They underscore a direct thought of Matthew.

As noted earlier, this was not something unique to Matthew; it was common in his day. The Dead Sea Scrolls have shown us this over and over. As Dead Sea Scroll authority Florentino Garcia-Martinez has noted,

the allusive quotations were not memory mistakes or carelessness, but rather a deliberate co-opting of phrasing and ideas from the Old Testament placing them into the thoughts or concerns of the 1st century writer.²²

Matthew is in line with what we should be expecting from writings emanating from the first century region of Palestine.

This issue also has implications on who wrote Matthew. For whoever it was, it was someone with dexterity in the three languages of the region of Galilee (Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic). It was also someone with intimate familiarity of not only the life of Jesus, but of Scripture as well. While we have more Hebraisms to consider in the Gospel of Matthew, we insert here a consideration of authorship. We will then conclude with a few more examples of Matthew as a Jewish gospel.

MATTHEW: AUTHORSHIP ISSUES

Most commentaries on Matthew spend a good bit of space discussing authorship, *i.e.*, who wrote Matthew? We cannot be happy simply pointing to the title, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” as there is general consensus that in the actual book of Matthew, there is no identification of the author by name. Most scholars, without comment, assume the identifying title was added after the writing, and was not in the original. (Although we should note that the title is included in the very earliest copies of the gospel still extant today.) Beyond the title, Matthew is no different than any of the four gospels in that none identify their author by name.

²² This was in response to a question I posed through email correspondence preparing this lesson. I asked about whether Professor Martinez found the idea set out in the above quotation was accurate in light of his extensive work on the scrolls. My question was prompted by Gundry’s affirmation that this idea was borne out in the Dead Sea Scrolls (in his work on the use of the Old Testament in Matthew). Gundry wrote his dissertation in 1961 and my published volume dated from 1967. Professor Martinez has published as extensively on the scrolls (including translations) as anyone alive, save perhaps Emmanuel Tov. I was curious whether the last 50 years of scroll translations had verified Gundry’s position.. Professor Martinez replied, “In this case my answer is completely positive. As we study more and more the Scrolls, the statement of Gundry proves absolutely true. Both in the Scrolls and in the New Testament, as you say, ‘the allusive quotations were not memory mistakes or carelessness, but rather a deliberate co-opting of phrasing and ideas from the Old Testament placing them into the thoughts or concerns of the 1st century writer.’” Professor Martinez included an article that is forthcoming in publication indicating this truth also in the writings of Paul in Galatians 3.

So why is Matthew considered the author? Some scholars today would not agree that the apostle Matthew wrote the gospel, even among those who see it as properly in the Bible.²³ Other scholars do consider Matthew the most likely author, especially in light of anyone's ability to name other possibilities.²⁴

We can summarize the arguments for Matthew's authorship as follows:

- *The Title* – As noted earlier, there is no hard evidence the title was included in the original gospel; however, the title should not be dismissed as if it is no evidence of authorship. Someone added the title, and it was undoubtedly added very early. Every early copy of Matthew has the title, and there is no contrary evidence of the gospel bearing a different title. Surely if the gospel circulated for decades *before the title was affixed*, especially with copies spreading like brush fires, then we would have at least one progeny of copies that either do not have a title or have a title attributing authorship to someone else.²⁵ Another important rationale for there being early titles is the early presence of many gospels. The church certainly needed to know which gospels were which, even as early as the writing of Luke/Acts when already “many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things” (Luke 1:1). A final note, this title was likely added by someone who believed in the gospel. It is hard to believe anyone who was trying to subvert the faith would attribute the gospel to an apostle instead of someone less qualified to speak! So if we concede the likelihood that a believer attached the title, then it is a bit bizarre to think someone would affix a false title to a gospel that emphasized the words of the all-knowing, soon-returning, Son of God who had in his earthly ministry warned his followers not to lie (Matt. 5:33-37), followed by “whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” Is it reasonable to think a believer lied about authorship in light of such teaching?
- *The Oddity of Matthew as a Pseudonymous Source* – If one were to surmise that Matthew was not in fact the author, but rather a deliberate choice as author of an otherwise unknown writing, then the question must be posed,

²³ Nolland, John, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew*, (Eerdmans 2005), at 2ff.

²⁴ British New Testament scholar R.T. “Dick” France sets out the relevant arguments on authorship thoroughly in his excellent book, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, (Paternoster 1989), at 50ff.

²⁵ Martin Hengel thoroughly discusses these issues applicable to all gospels in his text, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, (Fortress 1985), at 64ff.

“Why Matthew?” On the surface, Matthew was not a well-known or famous apostle in the sense of Peter, Paul, James, John, or even Phillip (or Nathaniel). Absent the gospel, Matthew would exist in relative apostolic obscurity like Thaddeus or Simon the Zealot (as opposed to the famous Simon Peter). Matthew is an extremely unlikely choice for someone looking to affix a label that stirs great interest and respect.

Yet if Matthew is the writer of the gospel, in the small details of the gospel accounts we can discern passages that suddenly raise the importance of this man. As a tax collector, he was working for the pagan Romans and was relegated by mainstream Judaism to the lowest ranks of sinners. Yet as a man also named “Levi,” he evidenced a heritage that likely came from the tribe of Levi, the source of the Levitical Priesthood.²⁶ This tension that must have existed in the life of one who was both part of the most structured Judaism and yet treated, because of his occupation, as an outcast, echoes the tension of the gospel that is both pro-Israel and anti-Jew.

A related issue to the oddity of a pseudonymous reference to Matthew is how the church could both forget the author of Matthew within a decade or so, as well as how the church could be fooled about the authorship in the same time range. This was a church that arguably had Mark (seeing it as Peter’s gospel) and during the early circulation of Matthew likely had Luke as well. Was this church deceived throughout the Roman Empire by a fake attribution to Matthew?

- *The Internal Evidence* – Matthew has some internal indicators that drive some to consider the authorship more likely than not. Among the sparse information we have of Matthew, we know that he was a tax collector from Capernaum (Matt. 9:9; 10:3; Mk. 2:14; Lk 5:27). Capernaum was on the border of Galilee and the non-Jewish towns to the northeast. As a local official responsible for collecting taxes on transported goods (“customs”), Matthew needed to be literate in Aramaic and Greek, and would have ready supplies and access to writing materials.²⁷ Some scholars note Matthew’s

²⁶ W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann suggest that Matthew’s name is better understood as “Matthew the Levite” with the reference to Levi being his tribe rather than Hebrew name. Albright and Mann, *Anchor Bible Commentary: Matthew*, (Doubleday 1971), at clxxviii^{ff}.

²⁷ See, France at 67. Cambridge Professor C.F.D. Moule does not believe Matthew wrote the gospel, but does think it likely that Matthew was the scribe talked of in Matthew 13:52 (“And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’”). Moule posits that Matthew the apostle and tax collector was a “well-educated and literate scribe” who wrote down Aramaic sayings that were later used in the composition of what we call Matthew’s gospel.

internal comments on financial matters in excess of the other gospels (Matt. 17:24-27; 18:23-35; 20:1-16; 27:3-10; 26:15; 28:11-15). Matthew references taxes more than any other gospel (14 in Matthew, 13 in the longer Luke, and 5 in the shorter Mark), and only Matthew relates the story of the temple tax (Matt. 17:24-27).

The legendary Old Testament and New Testament scholar, the late E.J. Goodspeed, wrote a captivating recast of the call of Matthew, using the narrative of Mark as his basis. He noted Jesus walking the seashore town of Capernaum when,

Presently, the tax office, with Matthew, the son of Mary and Alpheus, sitting in it at work over his books, catches his eye. The tax collector is the very man; the village or town clerk, keeping the tax books from day to day, as the Greek papyri have so pathetically shown us. He is the man for books and records, and of such a man Jesus has suddenly come to feel the need... Jesus catches the eye of Matthew and calls to him, "Follow me!" And Matthew gets right up and follows him!

Goodspeed noted that the Mark passage seems irrelevant to most, but not to Mark. Assuming that Mark was writing Peter's gospel from Rome, Mark would have written at a time when Matthew was still alive. If this was Peter's story given to Mark, Mark included it for a reason. It gives a key to Jesus' ministry and the gospel recollection. Goodspeed added,

[Jesus] now has a secretary, a recorder, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah had, to such tremendous advantage! Mark does not explain the reason and result of this impulsive action [Jesus' spontaneous call of Matthew] because he assumes that the close and attentive reader will see the point himself.²⁸

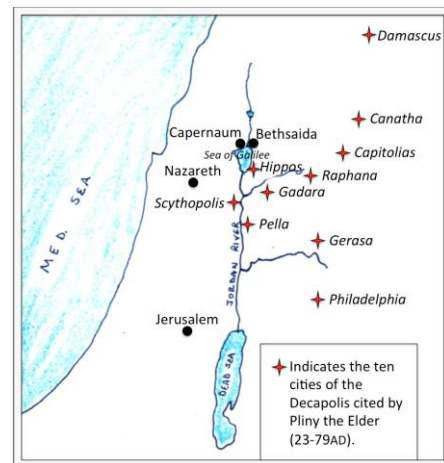
Goodspeed then pointed out the significance of Matthew's mother Mary being at the cross witnessing the death of Christ as well as the resurrection (given by Matthew in Matt. 28:5-10).

Beyond Goodspeed, Robert Gundry, one of the best New Testament scholars in the last half of the twentieth century, posits a strong theory that at least the apostle Matthew kept contemporary notes of the ministry of Jesus, and those notes formed the basis of not only the Gospel of Matthew, but also of the other synoptics as well. Gundry first wrote on this in the

²⁸ Goodspeed, Edgar J., *Matthew Apostle and Evangelist*, (Winston 1959), at 10.

1960's,²⁹ before scholars more commonly agreed on the prevalence of all three languages, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic in Palestine at the time of Christ's ministry. Discovery of burial boxes from the time period on the Mount of Olives with names written in all three languages, along with numerous similar archaeological finds lead modern scholars to a growing consensus on the prevalence of all three languages at the time (testified to by the text of the Gospel of Matthew as well).

Those finds around Jerusalem underscore the even greater prevalence of such diversity in language in the Galilee area that was home to Matthew and a ministry location for Jesus. This was an area of trade routes to the Mediterranean Sea. There were ten prominent Greek cities (the "Decapolis") on the Roman frontier running from Syria down into Judea near Galilee. These cities were centers of Greek and Roman culture.



This was the area of Matthew and a number of the other apostles as well. Philip, Andrew, and Peter all came from Bethsaida, a fishing town that would have had regular interaction with foreigners in commerce. The Lutheran theologian Gustaf Dalman, who spent a great deal of time doing fieldwork in Palestine noted,

Anyone brought up in Bethsaida would have not only understood Greek, but would also have been polished by intercourse with foreigners and have had some Greek culture.³⁰

We see in Matthew a man who not only was from an area that demanded of a tax clerk who handled transaction of all the different people in the area, but one who had to keep records and notes of those transactions as well as be conversant in all three regional languages notable in Matthew's Gospel.

It is also worth noting that at the time, there were well known schools that taught note taking, even with a simple shorthand. Teachers were well

²⁹ Gundry wrote his dissertation on this in 1961, and it was subsequently published by Brill in 1967.

³⁰ Dalman, Gustaf, *Sacred Sites and Ways: Studies in the Topography of the Gospels*, (Macmillan 1935), at 165.

known for having students or followers who took contemporaneous notes, then sharing those with other students and other followers. In later lessons, this will be explored more on the issue of the synoptic problem and how the gospels show an interdependence on quoted material. But at this point, it is important to note that Matthew, by all reasonable inferences, would have been able to take such notes. It would actually be odd to think he would not.

- *The Testimony of the Early Church* – From the earliest church references, Matthew was reported as the author of the gospel, with the earliest reference by name coming from an early Christian named Papias. Papias (c.60-130)³¹ was reportedly “a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp” who wrote five books (volumes) now long gone.³² The books, entitled *Interpretations and Sayings of the Lord*, were reportedly last seen in monasteries in Northern Italy/Southern France in the 13th and 14th centuries. We do have extensive quotations from Papias today in the writings of the early church historian Eusebius (c.260-339). In those quotations we read of Papias inquiring about the teachings of the apostles, including Matthew. Papias preferred this verbal rendition to reading the gospel stories.³³ Eusebius then adds,

Of Matthew he had stated as follows: “Matthew composed his history in the Hebrew dialect, and everyone translated it as he was able.”³⁴

The early church consistently attributed the book to the apostle Matthew, even though the details often differ. Eusebius recorded the later views of Irenaeus who wrote “Matthew indeed produced his gospel written among

³¹ These dates vary from scholar to scholar. We are using the dates from *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (Doubleday 1992), Vol. 5, at 140.

³² Eusebius quotes Irenaeus (c.140-c.202) for that historical fact. Eusebius then adds that Papias in his preface claimed to get his insights from “intimate friends” of the apostles (which would cover Polycarp) rather than from the apostles. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, Ch. 39:1-2.

³³ *Ibid.*, at 3.39:3-4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, at 3.39:16.

the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul proclaimed the gospel and founded the church at Rome.”³⁵

We do not have any direct evidence of Matthew’s history (literally “words”) written in Hebrew. Most every scholar acknowledges that the Greek Matthew we read today was composed in Greek and is not a simple translation of a Hebrew original (even though a good number of Hebraisms are translated rather literally in Matthew as we shall see later). Goodspeed believed that Jesus kept Matthew as the travelling scribe, much as described by Moule in footnote 6 above. Goodspeed went further, however, and asserted that Papias was referencing the written notes that Matthew took day to day in the journeys with Jesus.³⁶

Three main arguments recur against Matthew’s authorship of the gospel: (1) The gospel must have been written after 70AD, (generally assumed around 85 AD by anti-authentic positioned scholars) and Matthew was likely dead (or too old); (2) The early church indications that Matthew wrote Hebrew sayings of Jesus is inconsistent with the Greek gospel of the church; and (3) Matthew’s gospel relies upon Mark’s gospel for structure as well as language, and an apostle (Matthew) would not rely upon a non-apostle (Mark) in producing something for which the apostle was an eyewitness.³⁷

The first argument based on the date of authorship has been dealt with in footnote one above. In essence this argument rests on two premises: first, that the church is well developed in the Matthew narrative; and second, that Matthew includes prophetic pronouncements about the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, which is deemed impossible. The first premise of church structure is falling out of favor. Even those who ascribe a late date have refuted the idea of sophisticated church structure requiring a late date.³⁸ The idea that Matthew includes passages that foresee a destruction of the Jewish temple and Jerusalem is only as strong as one’s

³⁵ *Ibid.*, at 5.8:2. Eusebius also reported that the Gospel of Matthew (in Hebrew) was found already in India by missionaries who arrived there during the reign of Commodus (who reigned in Rome from 177-192. 5.9:1-5.10:3.

³⁶ Goodspeed, at 16.

³⁷ Feine, Behm, Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Abingdon 1966), at 85.

³⁸ Davies, W.D., *Invitation to the New Testament*, (Doubleday 1966), at 211. Additionally, Morris points out that, “the organization presupposed in these passages is of the simplest sort and does not require anything more complex than is revealed in the Pauline letters.” Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Eerdmans 1992), at 11.

refusal to believe that Jesus had the ability to prophesy.³⁹ Additionally, there are good affirmative reasons to think that Matthew was written before 70AD. For example, Matthew gives the story of Jesus instructing his disciples to pay the temple tax in Matthew 17:24-27. This was a tax that went to the temple authorities in Jerusalem for upkeep of the temple and its workers. In 70AD, the temple was destroyed, and the tax no longer went to the temple.⁴⁰

The second argument based on the early church testimony that Matthew wrote a Hebrew gospel, while our gospel was composed in Greek is similarly not overwhelming. It is noteworthy that this argument never dissuaded the early church fathers that wrote on the issue, all of who were much more informed and experienced Greek scholars than those writing on the issue today. It was the primary language for Origen, Papias, Eusebius, and Irenaeus, all of whom made the Matthew/Hebrew authorship assertion. Furthermore, as discussed above, Goodspeed, who was strong in all the Biblical languages, held to the belief that Matthew had accumulated his notes in Aramaic/Hebrew, and used those original notes as source material for his later gospel written in Greek. Alternatively, a number of scholars believe that Papias was right in assigning the gospel to Matthew, but wrong in his assertion that Matthew also composed a Hebrew/Aramaic gospel.⁴¹

The third argument, which most scholars seem to rely on most heavily, is better shown for its shallow content if we put it in more blunt language. By itself, it sounds rather sensible to say, “Why would an eye-witness (the apostle Matthew) rely on a non-eyewitness (Mark) as a source for his gospel?” A strong advocate of this position is the famous German scholar Kummel who, in his well-regarded work said,

³⁹ It goes without saying that as a miracle working Son of God, Jesus certainly could prophesy. So this view is only possible if one is willing to write off the idea of the divine Christ. Even still, however, the view is tenuous at best. In the 50’s there was considerable discontent in Jerusalem, with constant concerns over the Jews rebelling against Rome. See, e.g., Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:302; *Wars of the Jews* 2:254ff. It would be very reasonable for one to conjecture that such civil unrest could grow into Roman action.

⁴⁰ The Romans still required the Jews to pay the “temple tax,” but it then went to the Romans for use and support of pagan temples. Morris makes sense arguing that such a situation would surely have required some explanation in Matthew. The idea of paying the tax to support pagan temples is nowhere in the Matthew text. Similarly, Matthew repeatedly speaks of the Sadducees, referencing them as much as the entire remaining New Testament put together. This speaks also to the time before 70AD because after the Roman invasion, history records little of the Sadducees, and they disappear as a group. The Sadducees drew their power from their position in government. That was gone after the invasion.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Lenski, R.C.H., *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, (Wartburg Press 1943), at 10ff.

Could the Gospel of Matthew have stemmed from Matthew, the member of the circle of the twelve, and thus an eyewitness and member of the first circle of Jesus' disciples? The dependence of Matthew upon the Greek gospel of a nondisciple...make this hypothesis completely impossible.⁴²

In blunt language, Kummel and others are saying, "Personal pride and hubris would prevent any of Jesus' chosen twelve from ever thinking that someone else might be able to say something better, write something clearer, or structure something stronger such that they would use it to spread the gospel!" Now, of course that may be true of most people, and perhaps even true of the disciples in their youth. But surely vanity and conceit was not so great amongst them in later life, such that it would trump their efforts to best convey the gospel message! This viewpoint denigrates the apostles severely. This challenge also neuters the idea that Mark was simply recording Peter's gospel, as taught by the early church. If the church was honest in this teaching, then Matthew is following the gospel structure as taught by Peter, not really as taught by Mark. The premise that Matthew would find it personally offensive to follow Peter's lead in a gospel presentation would also end Matthew's preaching career since Peter preached the first gospel sermon (Acts 2)! (Would the same then hold true for the other apostles who also had to follow Peter? Of course not!) In short, the idea of discounting apostolic authorship based on pride and hubris speaks more to our nature than the nature of the apostles.

In addition, there are many scholars who pose legitimate questions to whether Matthew truly depends upon Mark for language or structure. The premise of Markan priority (the theory that Mark was written first and used by Matthew) is that Mark is shorter, and yet has much of the basic structure and many of the same phrases as found in Matthew. Scholars deduce that one might lengthen a previous gospel (hence Matthew expanded Mark), but no one would ever reduce something to a Reader's Digest Version (*i.e.*, Mark using Matthew). Of course there are many other possibilities, and these can be pursued in depth in other materials.⁴³

CONCLUSION

In Matthew, we have a gospel that cries out for renaissance scholarship and study. Every Christian who reads Matthew, should bring their study of the Old Testament to bear. Every scholar who writes on Matthew should be well equipped with his or her Hebrew and inter-testamental studies. For Matthew was not simply a

⁴² Feine, Behm, and Kummel, at 85.

⁴³ There is a thorough discussion in France, 24ff.

historical record of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is a true and early rendering of the gospel of Jesus Christ written in ways that would communicate the most important truth possible, to a real audience of people living in a specific culture and time in history. While the message resounds to the benefit of any who read and hear it, the message rings most fully and clearly the better we understand the fuller purposes for which it was written. This is a book with great opportunities for enriching study today!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “...*behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Mt. 28:20).

With these words, Matthew brought his gospel to a close. The Gospel of Matthew was never some religious propaganda concocted to support a religious movement. The church of martyrs, of people who willingly laid down their lives in deep conviction of the truth of their faith, attested to the Gospel of Matthew as their principal sacred source of truth about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus early and often. The Gospel of Matthew is referenced and quoted in the Didache, a manual of church practice variously dated by scholars as early as 70AD or as late as 150AD. Ignatius quoted and referenced Matthew in letters he wrote while journeying to Rome as a prisoner destined to be thrown to wild animals in martyrdom in 110AD.⁴⁴ Repeatedly, those who succeeded the apostles in the care and teaching of the church turned to the Gospel of Matthew in their writings to bring the historical events of our faith front and center. These are words worthy of our careful and deliberate study as they reveal to us the life and teachings of Christ.

2. “...*call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (Mt. 1:21).

⁴⁴ On the basis of Ignatius's epistle to the church at Smyrna, some scholars even believe that Ignatius had a copy of Matthew in front of him while writing. (Compare *Smyrn.* 1:1 “I Glorify God, even Jesus Christ, who has given you such wisdom. For I have observed that ye are perfected in an immoveable faith, as if ye were nailed to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, both in the flesh and in the spirit, and are established in love through the blood of Christ, being fully persuaded with respect to our Lord, that He was truly of the seed of David according to the flesh, and the Son of God according to the will and power of God; that He was truly born of a virgin, was *baptized by John, in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by Him*” to Matt. 3:13-15 “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for *thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*”). See, Morris, at 11.

What a marvelous way for Matthew to adjust the quotation from the Psalms. Jesus was sent to save not only Israel, but all his people. Every nation and tongue has salvation in Jesus. This means that each of us, Jew or Gentile, has in Jesus the answer to the problems of life *and* death. Praise God!

3. *“And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.”* (Mt. 2:23).

Jesus was not born or raised high and mighty. He was not set into the most impressive household. He did not live in the attention getting neighborhood. He was not schooled in the finest schools. He was as unassuming as an offshoot or branch growing unwanted from the roots of a tree. In the prophetic words of Isaiah,

he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not (Isa. 53:2-3).

What does this say to us in our daily lives? Paul drew personal instruction from Christ as an example in this way, and urged that same example for the believer:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:3-5).

Let that be our worthy goal!