

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 1

Matthew – Part One An Overview

I. BACKGROUND.

Who wrote Matthew?

The writer of the book is anonymous. The text gives no indication of authorship. Reliable and early church history ascribes the apostle Matthew as the author¹.

The apostle Matthew (called “Levi” in Mark and Luke) was a tax collector by trade before Jesus called him to be an apostle. As a civil servant, he most certainly would have known not only his native tongue of Aramaic, but also the Greek commonly spoken as the trade language in Galilee. Church tradition sets Matthew as a preacher of the gospel in Palestine for 15 years followed by his preaching in other lands (including Ethiopia, Macedonia, Syria, and Persia).

When was Matthew written?

We are uncertain of the precise date. We should first note that there is an early reference to Matthew having recorded a gospel in Aramaic;² yet, the gospel that we have was written in Greek. While we note that Matthew would have been able to write in either language, we should consider that perhaps his first Aramaic gospel would have been written for his time preaching in Palestine, while the gospel we have would have suited those of his later preaching outside of Palestine.

Church history has traditionally placed this book as the first of the four written gospels in our Bibles. This tradition dates back to the 100’s A.D. The placement of this gospel as first is based, at least by Origen, on the conviction that it was the first written. Some modern critics take issue with this placement because of a perceived need to date Matthew after Mark. The reasoning behind this will be addressed to some degree when dealing with the synoptic problem (week 7ish).

¹ Iraneus and Origen from the 120–220 A.D. era as well as, indirectly, Papias in the 130–140 range.

² Papias quoted in Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History, 3:39

Why was Matthew written?

Matthew is a “Jewish gospel” written primarily to Jews. Matthew quotes from or alludes to the Old Testament more than any other New Testament writer (about 65 times). Sometimes Matthew uses the Hebrew Old Testament, other times he uses the Greek translation (the Septuagint). Either way, Matthew chooses terminology consistent with Old Testament teaching and theology (ex. “Son of David” for Jesus – 9 times which is more than Mark, Luke and John combined; “Kingdom of heaven” – 33 times; “kingdom of God” – 4 times).

Matthew writes to the Jews to (1) encourage and confirm the persecuted Jews in their faith; (2) refute the Jewish opponents of the Christian faith; and (3) to show that Christ was not a contradiction to the Old Testament, but rather a consistent fulfillment. Matthew sets forth clear reasoning of the nature of Christ and Christ’s mission while refuting the objections of unbelieving Jews.

Some scholars emphasize the artistic way Matthew achieves this purpose. Matthew has built his book around five delineated discourses of Jesus. This division readily echoes the divisions of the Pentateuch/Torah—the “five books of Moses.” Matthew also retraces the history of Israel in his teaching on Jesus’ life. Echoing the experiences of Israel recorded in the Pentateuch, Jesus is called out of Egypt, through water, into the wilderness (for 40 days rather than 40 years), whereupon Jesus ascends a mountain to deliver to the Jews assimilated there the Sermon on the Mount, basically a restatement of the Law given to Moses.

II. MESSAGE.

We see in Matthew a message to Jews through his defense and well reasoned explanation of Jesus as Messiah in the following:

- A. Jesus qualifies as Messiah in both his genealogy and birth. The ancestry of Jesus is linked back through David to Abraham (1:1-17). Jesus’ birth is set forward as a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. The birth itself occurs in Bethlehem in fulfillment of Micah 5:2. Hosea’s words of the Messiah are fulfilled by the flight into Egypt shortly after the incarnation (Mt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1). This flight was

necessitated by the horrid infanticide of Herod as Jeremiah prophesied (Mt. 1:18; Jer. 31:15).

- B. Jesus is prepared as Messiah for his ministry. This starts with John the Baptist bearing witness consistent with Isaiah 40:3 (“A voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord...”) (Mt. 3:3). While the ordinary people received John, the Pharisees and Sadducees were not so open. Jesus himself comes to John for baptism with recognition by God, “This is my son,” echoing Psalm 2:7. Before Jesus begins his public ministry, he goes into the wilderness for temptation by the devil. That temptation becomes a dueling of logic and Old Testament scriptures, as Jesus is tempted by verses from Psalm 91. Jesus responds to each temptation with passages from Deuteronomy, overcoming the tempter.
- C. The next 13 chapters present Jesus as Messiah to Israel (4:12-16:20). Matthew notes it as Jesus moves through the land preaching as prophesied in Isaiah 9:1-2 (Mt. 4:15-16). Jesus begins calling his disciples and healing the sick. Matthew records the famous Sermon on the Mount, careful to note that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but rather to fulfill them (5:17). Jesus then goes on to explain the heart of the law that gives meaning to the law’s requirements. No longer then is it okay to avoid murder, one should also avoid the hatred that spawns the killing (Mt. 5:21ff).

Jesus walks through a number of Old Testament commands which the people were gutting even though the folks thought they were following them. Adultery is explained as lust, divorce as something lessening the marriage vow, oaths show a lack of general credibility and honesty that should allow a “yes” or “no” to suffice. An eye for an eye is not valid for an individual’s response to wrongdoers. Love and prayer are to take the stead of hatred for one’s enemies. Righteousness, prayer, fasting, and giving are for God, not show. Heaven is to captivate our desires and faith, not things of the earth. We are to pay attention to our shortcomings, not those of others. We are to seek God through the narrow gate watching out for false teachers. The crowds hear this teaching with amazement because Jesus speaks as one with Godly/law giving authority, not as a mere teacher.

As Jesus heals countless people, Matthew explains the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:4 (Mt. 8:17). Jesus exercises authority over not only sickness, but the weather and the demons as well (Mt. 8).

While Matthew is called to be an apostle, the Pharisees chide Jesus for his choice of company. Jesus explains his actions quoting from Hosea 6:6, while urging the Pharisees to “go and learn what this means” (Mt. 9:13).

Jesus continues to minister through teaching and miracles, including raising a sick girl from the dead, giving sight to the blind and deliverance to the possessed.

As Jesus commissions his apostles, he delivers prophetic lines of explanation from Micah 7:6 (Mt 10:35-36). Jesus explains that his ministry was foretold as that following John the Baptist found in Malachi 3:1 (Mt. 11:10). Jesus shows himself to be rest for the weary. Even more so, Jesus proclaims that he is Lord of the Sabbath itself, the day of rest (Mt 11:25-12:14).

While these deeds and words incited the Pharisees to kill Jesus, Matthew explains that, in fact, Isaiah’s words about Jesus were coming true, as one whom God chose (Is. 42:1-4; Mt 12:18-21). Despite the attempts of the Pharisees to characterize Jesus as an arm of Satan, Jesus explains himself instead as a fulfillment of the prophet Jonah’s experience with three days in the earth instead of the belly of a fish (Mt. 12).

Jesus does much of his teaching in parables, in direct fulfillment of Isaiah and the Psalms (Is. 6; Psalm 78:2 Mt 13).

When word of John the Baptist’s demise reached Jesus, Jesus pulled away for alone time. The stillness he sought was interrupted by throngs of people who needed and wanted Jesus. Jesus feels compassion and feeds the crowd with a miracle reminiscent of the manna and quail God gave the masses in the wilderness. Following this feeding, rather than part the waters, as God did in the Old Testament, Jesus walks on the waters.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law get into a scriptural debate-off with Jesus over his actions. Jesus uses Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16, Exodus 21:17, Leviticus 20:9, and Isaiah 29:13 to put the Pharisees in their place. While the Pharisees do not see Jesus with faith, Matthew takes a moment to record the story of a non-Jew who comes to Jesus and receives a miracle of faith.

This section ends with Peter declaring that Jesus is Messiah (Christ), the son of the living God (Mt 16:13-20). Jesus recognizes the understanding and confession were from GOD, NOT Peter.

- D. Matthew next shows Jesus as Messiah in the face of the crucifixion (16:21–20:34). This begins with Jesus explaining to his apostles that he will be suffering at the hands of others, losing his life so that he might come again in God’s kingdom. Jesus then goes up to the mount of transfiguration where Old Testament greats Moses and Elijah appear before him. While continuing to heal, Jesus explains over and over that he will be departing and dying soon. Jesus explains that his death will be followed by a resurrection on the third day.

In anticipation of the cross, Matthew records Jesus’ teaching as turning to the need not to offend, the need to love and even be like children in humility, and repeated teachings on the importance and nature of forgiveness. Jesus shows that people have hard hearts in the ways they treat their marriages as well as their general lack of regard for children and others. Even the “best” (the rich young ruler) do not have deeds that measure up to God’s holiness. All need forgiveness from God – some, perhaps more than others (parable of the vineyard), but all nonetheless.

- E. Matthew 21–23 shows Israel rejecting Jesus as Messiah and receiving corresponding judgment. Jesus enters Jerusalem before the arrest in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies found in Zechariah 9:9 (riding on a donkey) and Psalm 118:26 (people shouting Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord). Jesus clears the Temple quoting Isaiah and Jeremiah (Mt. 21:13) and explains the voices of the children around him as fulfilling Psalm 8:2.

Jesus then sets forward his authority over plants as well as people, indicating that failure of the people to repent would be their ultimate downfall. As the people reject Jesus, they are unwittingly fulfilling Psalm 118:22-23, setting Jesus as the capstone which had been rejected as suitable for building by the builders.

Jesus as Lord and Messiah then pronounces seven very strong “woes” upon the hypocrites and self-righteous people.

- F. Chapters 24 and 25 have Jesus as Messiah and Prophet predicting a number of coming events to his disciples. These include references to the destruction of Jerusalem, as well as events at the second coming of Christ.
- G. Matthew ends his gospel with the Passion, resurrection, and commission of Jesus as Messiah. Jesus is anointed for the crucifixion; Judas sells Jesus for 30 pieces of silver; and the Lord's Supper is instituted (Mt 26).

Jesus explains that Zechariah 13:7 is going to be fulfilled as the disciples fall away from Jesus at his betrayal. Although Peter denies that Peter will fall away, Jesus explains when it will come about. Jesus takes time in Gethsemane for prayer. It is there Jesus is arrested.

While before the Sanhedrin, Jesus finally explains that he will come on the right hand of the Mighty One. This is seen as sufficient blasphemy to justify killing Jesus. At this point, Peter does in fact disown Jesus, much to Peter's regret. Guilt also finds Judas, who goes out and hangs himself.

Pilate, who releases Barabbas, allows the crucifixion. The people call for Jesus to be killed offering "his blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). The thrust of that request is lost on those making it, but it becomes the desire of all Christians after the resurrection.

In the crucifixion, repeated scriptures are noted as fulfilled. Jesus' clothes are gambled for (Psalm 22:18) and Jesus quotes Psalm 22 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

After the crucifixion, Jesus is buried and a guard is set at his tomb. In spite of the guard, Jesus is resurrected on Sunday and reports to his disciples. Jesus commissions his disciples to go and disciple others throughout the earth, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

III. POINTS FOR HOME.

- A. Jesus is Historical.
- B. Jesus is Lord and Messiah
- C. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.
- D. All else pales in significance.