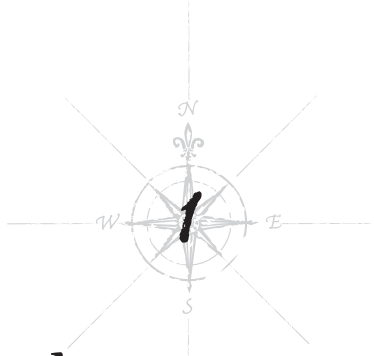




Foundations for a
Theology of Matthew



Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew

THIS BOOK is titled *A Theology of Matthew* rather than *A Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*. This implies that the book intends to summarize and describe the theology of an individual by a particular name who served as the author of this gospel. This is possible, of course, only if a man named Matthew actually wrote this gospel. Yet many scholars today contest the claim that this gospel was written by the apostle Matthew. Some theologians seek to evade potential problems in describing the theology reflected in this gospel by placing the name *Matthew* in quotation marks, indicating that *Matthew* refers not to the apostle by that name but to the assumed author, whoever he may have been. This book does not place the name *Matthew* in quotation marks. This book seeks to explore the theology of the apostle Matthew himself. This naturally leads to an exploration of introductory issues related to the Gospel of Matthew. Did the apostle really write this gospel? If so, when, where, and why?

Who Wrote This Gospel?

The Gospels in the New Testament are formally anonymous. Unlike Paul's letters, in which the introduction to each letter identifies Paul as the author, one never finds a statement such as

“Matthew, apostle of Jesus Christ, to the churches” in the body of the Gospels. Yet this is not as significant as it might seem at first. R. T. France has pointed out that most books even today would have to be considered formally anonymous by this standard.¹ Authors rarely identify themselves in the body of the work, unless the work is an autobiography. Instead, they identify themselves on the cover of the book and the title page.

Authors of ancient books sometimes identified themselves by name in the body of their work.² In many other instances, however, authors identified themselves only by titles, headings, a preface (called a *proem*), or an inscription at the end of the book called a *colophon*.³ For the gospel writers, the most important collection of books was the Old Testament. Many of the Old Testament books identified the author and the circumstances of writing only in headings. The gospel writers followed this model. The author’s name is disclosed only by the title or heading of the work.

The title *According to Matthew* appears as the heading to this gospel in the earliest manuscripts available today.⁴ Later manuscripts elaborate the title to *The Gospel according to Matthew*, to *The Holy Gospel according to Matthew*, or to a similar title. No manuscript evidence suggests that the gospel ever circulated without a title. The titles are definitely very early. From the moment that multiple Gospels began to circulate among the churches, believers would have needed a way to distinguish them, and titles such as *According to Matthew* and *According to Mark* would have been useful, even necessary. If another gospel was in existence when Matthew wrote his gospel, he might have personally assigned the gospel a title to prevent confusion with the other

1. R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, New Testament Profiles (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 50.

2. See, for example, Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.11.3 § 448.

3. Josephus identified himself as author in the proem to *Jewish War*, 1.1 § 3. Interestingly, Josephus does not appear to have identified himself as the author of the *Jewish Antiquities* in the body of that work. His authorship had to be inferred by the fact that the earlier work, *Jewish War*, and his autobiography, *Life*, were appended to *Jewish Antiquities*.

4. The codices Vacticanus and Sinaiticus, dating to around A.D. 325 and 350, respectively.

gospel. Consequently, a growing number of scholars suspect that the titles of the Gospels are original.

The earliest preserved testimony regarding the authorship of Matthew's gospel is that of Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, in his *Expositions of the Lord's Sayings*. Although some scholars date Papias's work to the mid-second century, strong evidence suggests that it should be dated to the early second century.⁵ Papias received his information about the Gospel's authorship directly from older Christians who had been personally taught by Jesus' disciples. Papias wrote, "Therefore, on the one hand Matthew arranged in order the sayings in the Hebrew dialect; on the other hand, each translated these as he was able."⁶

This statement describes Matthew as one who collected and arranged Jesus' sayings in Hebrew or Aramaic. Some scholars believe that these sayings are the major discourses of Matthew's gospel that are absent from Mark.⁷ Others believe that the word *sayings* is used in a broader sense and refers to the gospel as a whole.

Many scholars deny that Matthew or any significant portion of his gospel was first written in Hebrew or Aramaic. They further reason that if Papias was wrong in his comment about the original language of the gospel, we can have no confidence in his statement about Matthew's authorship. This, of course, is not a necessary conclusion. One can be wrong about something, perhaps even many things, without being wrong about everything. Papias could be incorrect about a Hebrew Gospel of Matthew but still correct that Matthew wrote the gospel.

It is also possible that Papias was correct about both the original language and authorship of Matthew's gospel. Rejection of a Hebrew original of Matthew is based on the assumption that the excellent Greek of Matthew's gospel could not have been

5. See Andreas Köstenberger, Scott Kellum, and Charles Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 181, esp. n7.

6. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39 (my translation).

7. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993–95), 1:xliii–xlvi.

produced by a translator. But a skilled translator would have been capable of translating an original Hebrew document into Greek of the quality that appears in Matthew's gospel. Numerous early church fathers insisted that this gospel was first written in Hebrew, and as native Greek speakers they were in a better position than modern scholars to judge whether the Greek could have been produced by a skilled translator. Furthermore, features such as the allusion to David in the number fourteen in Matthew 1:17, the comment on the significance of Jesus' name in 1:21, and the significance of Jesus' identity as a Nazarene in 2:23 are meaningful only in Hebrew. This seems to suggest that at least portions of Matthew's gospel, such as the account of Jesus' birth, were first written in Hebrew.⁸ Modern scholars are wise to acknowledge that sufficient evidence is lacking to determine with absolute confidence the original language of the gospel. Thus, arguments regarding authorship based on presumptions about the gospel's original language are necessarily weak.

A few clues from the gospel itself support the claim of the title and of early church fathers that Matthew was its author. First, abundant evidence in the gospel shows that the author was a Jewish Christian. Second, only Matthew's gospel indicates that the tax collector named Levi who became one of the twelve apostles was also called Matthew (Matt. 9:9; cf. Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). The mention of this alternative name could be a personal touch from Levi/Matthew himself. Third, although Mark and Luke use the term *denarius* to describe the payment of the imperial tax, Matthew uses the more precise expression "coin for the tax" (Matt. 22:15–22). The more precise nomenclature might express the expertise of a former tax collector.

By itself, this internal evidence would not be very persuasive. When added to the very early evidence of the title and the testimony of Papias, however, it amounts to rather impressive evidence in support of the traditional view that Matthew is the author of the gospel that bears his name. The evidence in support of Mat-

8. See "Did Matthew Write His Gospel in Hebrew?" in Köstenberger et al., *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 182–83.

thew's authorship is sufficiently persuasive that some scholars who previously denied Matthew's authorship of this gospel have now changed their minds and affirm that Matthew had some role in the composition of the gospel.⁹

When Was the Gospel Written?

Many scholars date the composition of the Gospel of Matthew to the mid- to late 80s A.D. This late date is generally based on the assumption that Jesus was not capable of predictive prophecy. Thus, his "prediction" of the fall of Jerusalem in texts such as Matthew 22:7 must actually have been a statement created by the author of the gospel, looking back in time to the destruction of the city.

Notice that this approach to dating the gospel is not based on historical evidence but rather on a modernist worldview that denies the possibility of supernatural revelation. For Christians who believe that Jesus was capable of predicting the future, a date of composition before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is entirely plausible. The historical evidence strongly suggests that the gospel was written considerably earlier than these skeptics claim.

Early Christian documents such as the letters of Ignatius (c. 35–110), the Didache (second half of first century or early second century), and the letters of Polycarp (c. 69–155) quote from the Gospel of Matthew. Around A.D. 135, the epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas quotes the gospel as inspired Scripture. The quotation of Matthew by such early sources is best explained if the gospel was written well before the late 80s.

Several features of Matthew's gospel also support a date of composition before the fall of Jerusalem. Matthew is the only gospel to record Jesus' teaching about swearing by the temple or its gold (Matt. 23:16–22). A vow that meant "May the temple be destroyed if I break my promise" would be ridiculous if the

9. Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 40.

temple had already been destroyed. Similarly, 17:24–27 contains Jesus’ instruction that his disciples should pay the temple tax to avoid offending fellow Jews. After the destruction of the temple, however, the Romans continued to collect this tax to support their own pagan temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome.¹⁰ It is hard to imagine that Matthew would have recorded this instruction in a historical context in which paying the tax supported idolatry and was thus a great offense to the Jews. Jesus’ instruction about the proper manner in which to offer sacrifice (5:23–24) would also have been most meaningful to Matthew’s readers while the temple still stood and sacrifice was still being offered.

Thus, the historical evidence best supports a date of composition before the climactic events leading to the fall of Jerusalem, probably in the late 50s or early to mid-60s. This early date fits within the early church’s claim that the apostle Matthew wrote the gospel. The date is also consistent with the earliest specific testimony regarding the date of Matthew, given by Irenaeus, who said that Matthew wrote this gospel while Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel and founding the church in Rome.¹¹

Where Was the Gospel Written?

Scholars have proposed many different sites as the likely place of origin for the Gospel of Matthew. Since B. H. Streeter argued that the gospel was written in Syria, most modern scholars have embraced that view. Streeter pointed out that Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, referred to the Gospel of Matthew more frequently than any other gospel. He also detected a reference to Antioch in Matthew 17:24–27, which equates a *stater* with two *didrachmae*, claiming that such an equation was true only in Antioch and Damascus.¹²

Although the majority of scholars have embraced Streeter’s view, good reasons exist for abandoning it. The fact that Ignatius

10. See Köstenberger et al., *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 188n27.

11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

12. B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1951), 500–523.

quotes more frequently from Matthew than the other Gospels is not surprising, since Matthew was clearly the favorite gospel of the early church. Streeter did not document his claim regarding the value of the ancient coins, and it now appears that he was mistaken. Nevertheless, for other reasons, Syria remains a possible provenance. It had both a large Jewish community and a thriving Christian church and thus would form a suitable background for Matthew's gospel.

The early church fathers generally believed that the Gospel of Matthew was composed in Palestine. Irenaeus wrote that the gospel was written "among the Hebrews."¹³ The *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* and Jerome both claim that the gospel was written in Judea. Jerome even claimed that the Hebrew original of the Gospel of Matthew was still preserved "to this day" in the library in Caesarea.¹⁴ Some early church leaders might have just assumed that the gospel was written from Palestine based on the interests of the gospel in matters of concern to Jewish Christians and their relationships to their fellow Jews, as well as the widely held view that the gospel was first written in Hebrew. But some, such as Jerome, seem to have more specific knowledge. Given the fact that the content of the gospel fits well with a Palestinian provenance and that Palestine is the only location for the composition of the gospel suggested by the early church, the balance of evidence tips slightly in favor of Palestine.

The evidence is insufficient to inspire total confidence in either view. Fortunately, the location of composition does not significantly affect one's interpretation of the book.

To Whom Was the Gospel Written?

Conclusions about the destination and the original audience for whom the gospel was intended are closely related to the question of where the gospel was written. Those who accept Palestine

13. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

14. Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, 3.

as the place of origin generally see the church in Palestine as the primary audience. Those who accept Syria as the place of origin generally see the church in Syria as the primary audience.

Although Matthew probably wrote his gospel primarily for a particular group in a particular setting, he likely intended it to enjoy wider circulation. Paul's letters were already being widely circulated beyond the churches to which they were specifically addressed. Matthew must have realized that his gospel would be useful to the church at large as well. The fact that Matthew's gospel was soon quoted in sources from all over the ancient world shows the gospel was widely circulated. By the middle of the second century, Matthew was quoted by Ignatius (Antioch), Polycarp (Smyrna), Pseudo-Barnabas (Alexandria?), Clement (Alexandria), and Justin Martyr (Ephesus).

Matthew clearly expected his original readers to be familiar with the Old Testament. He anticipated that they would understand the broader context of the Old Testament passages that he quoted and would recognize even subtle allusions to familiar Old Testament texts. Thus, Matthew plainly wrote his gospel primarily for Jewish Christians familiar with the Old Testament from instruction received in the synagogue.

What Is the Structure of the Gospel?

Scholars still debate the intended structure of Matthew's gospel. Two major theories vie for consideration. B. W. Bacon suggested that Matthew intended to divide his gospel into five major sections, plus an introduction and a conclusion. For Bacon, the key to the gospel's organization was the statement "And when Jesus finished . . .," followed by some reference to Jesus' teaching. This kind of construction appears in Matthew 7:28–29; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1. Each of the major sections demarcated by this construction has a similar makeup: a narrative segment followed by one of Jesus' major discourses.¹⁵ The major weakness

15. B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Holt, 1930), 82, 265–335.

of this proposed structure is that it reduces the account of Jesus' birth and childhood to a mere prologue and the narrative of Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection to a mere epilogue.

Jack Kingsbury saw another phrase as the key to the structure of the gospel. He pointed out that the phrase "from that time Jesus began to . . ." appeared twice in the gospel (Matt. 4:17; 16:21). He argued that this construction is the primary structural marker and demarcates three major sections of the gospel: The Person of Jesus Messiah (1:1–4:16); The Proclamation of Jesus Messiah (4:17–16:20); and The Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Messiah (16:21–28:20).¹⁶ This proposal also has its problems. It is difficult to label the middle section the "proclamation" of Jesus Messiah when two of the five major discourses appear in the final section of the gospel. The inclusion of these two major discourses in the final section shows that the label "suffering, death, and resurrection" does not quite capture the content of that section either.

Although more scholars seem persuaded by Bacon's proposal than Kingsbury's, neither schema has approached consensus. Perhaps the best view is the one recently proposed by Craig Evans. Evans points out that Matthew is essentially a "retelling" of Mark's gospel. Matthew repeats approximately 90 percent of Mark's account of Jesus' life and teaching and hardly ever deviates from Mark's sequence. Thus, Matthew essentially adopts the structure of Mark's gospel. Mark's gospel, in turn, follows a fairly simple outline based on Jesus' geographical movement: his ministry in Galilee, a journey south to Judea and Jerusalem, and at last the passion in Jerusalem.¹⁷

Matthew's structure is complex and involves a combination of several different strategies operating at once. The five major discourses are clearly important, but chronology (birth, infancy, ministry, death, resurrection) and geography (Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem) drive the progress of the gospel as well. Kingsbury was

16. Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 1–39.

17. Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

correct that Matthew 4:17 and 16:21 mark important transitions in the narrative. But 4:17 primarily serves a chronological function by marking the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry. The marker in 4:17 does not denote geographical movement, since Jesus was already stationed in Galilee (first Nazareth, then Capernaum) and the ministry described following 4:17 is likewise in Galilee. On the other hand, 16:21 marks a geographical transition (Jesus says that "he must go to Jerusalem") as well as a chronological function (Jesus' ministry is drawing to a close and he must "suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised"). These transitions point to the chronological and geographical progression of Mark's gospel. At the same time, the construction "and when Jesus finished" marks the conclusion of each of the five major discourses with content largely absent from Mark. These features suggest a broad outline:

1. Introduction (1:1–4:16)
 - a. Genealogy, Birth, and Childhood of Jesus (1:1–2:23)
 - b. Preparation for Jesus' Ministry (3:1–4:16)¹⁸
2. Galilean Ministry (4:17–16:20)
 - a. First Stage of Jesus' Galilean Ministry (4:17–25)
 - b. First Discourse: Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)¹⁹
 - c. Second Stage of Jesus' Galilean Ministry (8:1–9:38)
 - d. Second Discourse: Instruction of the Twelve (10:1–11:1)²⁰
 - e. Third Stage of Jesus' Galilean Ministry (11:2–12:50)
 - f. Third Discourse: Parables about the Kingdom (13:1–53)²¹
 - g. Rejection and Withdrawal to the North (13:54–16:20)²²
3. Journey to Jerusalem (16:21–20:34)²³
 - a. Return to Galilee (16:21–17:27)

18. "From that time Jesus began to . . ." (4:17).

19. "And when Jesus finished these sayings . . ." (7:28).

20. "When Jesus had finished . . ." (11:1).

21. "And when Jesus had finished . . ." (13:53).

22. "Jesus . . . withdrew" (14:13; 15:21). Jesus travels to Gennesaret (14:34), the district of Tyre and Sidon (15:21), and the district of Caesarea Philippi (16:13).

23. "From that time Jesus began . . ." and "he must go to Jerusalem" (16:21).

- b. Fourth Discourse: Parables of the Kingdom (18:1–35)
- c. Journey through Judea (19:1–20:34)²⁴
- 4. Jerusalem Ministry (21:1–28:20)
 - a. Final Ministry in Jerusalem (21:1–22:46)
 - b. Rebuke of the Pharisees and Abandonment of the Temple (23:1–39)
 - c. Fifth Discourse: The Fall of Jerusalem and the Coming Kingdom (24:1–25:46)
 - d. Jesus' Passion (26:1–27:66)
 - e. Jesus' Resurrection (28:1–20)

What Is the Purpose of the Gospel?

Some recent works on Matthew have tended to emphasize ecclesiology more heavily than Christology. Robert Gundry gave the second edition of his commentary on Matthew the subtitle *A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. In his section on “The Theology of Matthew,” he argues that Matthew’s primary concern behind his gospel was the mixture of true disciples and false disciples in the church of his day. Consequently, Matthew wrote to emphasize the characteristics of true Christian discipleship. Gundry claims that the emphasis on Christ in Matthew merely supported Matthew’s greater ecclesiological concerns: “To accentuate the authority of Christ’s law Matthew paints an awe-inspiring portrait of Jesus.”²⁵ Gundry apparently regards Matthew’s ecclesiological concerns as primary and his Christological concerns as secondary.

Far better is the approach of Frederick Dale Bruner, who titled the first volume of his Matthew commentary *Christbook* and the second volume *Churchbook*.²⁶ But even this approach falls short of properly expressing Matthew’s purpose. From the first

24. “Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” (19:1).

25. Robert Gundry, *Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 9.

26. Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1–12*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13–28*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

line of Matthew's gospel, it is apparent that Matthew intends to focus his gospel on Jesus Christ. The description of Jesus as the Son of David and Son of Abraham indicates that Matthew intends to explain multiple facets of Jesus' identity. Thus, Matthew's gospel is Christocentric, and any responsible treatment of the theology of his gospel must emphasize Matthew's Christology.²⁷

Some readers might object that the present work is wrongly titled, since the book focuses largely on Matthew's Christology rather than his broader theology. Yet this focus is intentional and necessary. Matthew's primary concern is to reveal Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham, Savior, Son of God, and Immanuel, to his readers. Matthew has other concerns—theological, soteriological, ecclesiological, and so forth—but these are subordinate to his focus on Jesus. This book will focus on Matthew's portrait of Jesus, even if this means that some theological stones are left unturned and room remains for detailed treatment of some aspects of Matthew's theology elsewhere.

On the other hand, this book is more than a mere Christology of Matthew. Many other theological themes are so tightly integrated with Matthew's Christology that separating them is practically impossible. For example, Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the new Moses is closely related to his doctrine of salvation, his teaching about the new covenant, Jesus' identity as the Servant of Yahweh who will die for the sins of God's people, and Matthew's call to repent of sin and believe in Jesus. *A Theology of Matthew* attempts to preserve Matthew's integrative approach. The list below shows important titles and theological themes that are treated in each section.

- New Moses
 - liberation from slavery to sin
 - new covenant
 - Jesus' identity as the Servant of the Lord who dies for the sins of his people
 - the necessity of repentance and faith

27. Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 36; France, "The Ecclesiastical Gospel?," in *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 242–44.

- New David
 - the Davidic covenant
 - the kingdom of heaven
 - the Son of Man
 - Jesus as eschatological Judge
 - the necessity of submitting to Jesus' authority
- New Abraham
 - God's rejection of unrepentant Israel
 - the church as the new Israel
 - gracious election
 - the inclusion of Gentiles in God's redemptive plan
 - the holiness of God's people
 - the necessity of evangelism and missions
- New Creator
 - Jesus' deity
 - Jesus' supremacy
 - Jesus' virginal conception
 - Son of Man
 - personified Wisdom
 - Lord
 - Son of God
 - Immanuel
 - the miracle of new creation