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Matthew Introduction (Part 3)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this introduction to the Gospel of Matthew, Steve Gregg discusses the authorship, composition, and style of the first book of the New Testament. He notes that the book is likely written by the disciple Matthew, a former tax collector who was called by Jesus to follow him. Gregg also highlights Matthew's use of Aramaic and his sensitivity to Jewish customs in his writing, as well as how Matthew's arrangement of Jesus' teachings differs from the Gospels of Mark and Luke.

Transcript

Let's talk now about the Gospel of Matthew, the first book in the New Testament and the first of the Gospels as they are arranged for us, as they've come down in antiquity for us. This is the first great witness we encounter to the life of Jesus of Nazareth as we turn to the pages of the New Testament. And we need to know, of course, if we're really interested in knowing about this man Jesus, whether the source we're reading is reliable.

Is the Gospel of Matthew truly an authoritative source on this topic that he has written so much about? Well, in order to answer that question, we have to answer certain related questions. First of all, who is Matthew? Or, more properly, who wrote the book? You see, the book is anonymous in its original form. We call it the Gospel according to Matthew, and your Bible probably has those words over the first page of the Gospel.

But in the Greek manuscripts originally that go back, that it came from, there is no mention of Matthew as the author. And the belief that Matthew is the author is a tradition that goes back to the early church. The book is itself anonymous and does not give any evidence of who its author is.

However, before we would reject the tradition of the early church, I think we should have strong reasons. Remember that the early church means people going back far enough to have actually known Matthew. And we have a very consistent and unanimous consensus on the part of all the earliest church fathers that Matthew was the man who wrote this book.

Now, unless we had compelling evidence to overthrow that consensus from early people,

many of whom may have known him, I think we can accept this at face value. There is actually no alternative theory that ever has come down to us from antiquity, so it's not as if Matthew is a contender for the title of author of this book. He is the only candidate that has been ever suggested from ancient times.

Modern people, of course, sometimes wonder whether, especially liberal scholars, wonder whether Matthew wrote it. In fact, they'll even deny that he wrote it. They'll sometimes say it was written too late to have been written by Matthew.

But there's really no evidence of that that is compelling at all. And the early church certainly would have had better way of knowing that than somebody now 2,000 years distant looking back trying to decide those kinds of issues. Now, the next question is, if Matthew wrote it, who was Matthew? We know of Matthew from at least three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all mention him.

And interestingly, he was known by two different names. He was called Levi in Mark's Gospel and in Luke's, but in his own Gospel he refers to himself as Matthew. Now, this should not be a problem.

Many people in the Bible were known by a variety of names. Jacob and Israel were two names for the same man. And there were many other names.

Jedidiah was another name for Solomon. There was, of course, Simon Peter. His actual name was Simon from birth, but Jesus called him Peter.

And therefore, he was sometimes called Simon and sometimes called Peter. So, this man Matthew was also known as Levi. It was not uncommon in biblical times for a man to be known by one or more than one name.

Now, Levi was a tax collector. Matthew was a tax collector. That means he worked for the Roman government.

You have to come to this book with the appreciation of the fact that the Jews hated tax collectors. Because the Jews hated the Roman government that oppressed them. About 63 years or so before Christ, the Romans had conquered all the regions around Palestine, including Palestine, where Jesus grew up.

And they had set their own political officials over the region. So that Herod, at the time Jesus was born, was an appointee of the Roman government. He was not a Jew.

He was an Edomite. And the Jews very much resented him being there. And they resented the fact that Caesar in Rome really was the final authority over the matters of their life.

They felt that God alone should be that. And so many Jews, although some had

compromised with the Romans and accepted and collaborated with them, those were called the Sadducees, many of the Jews were very zealously opposed to the Roman occupation and Roman control. There were the Pharisees who opposed it, but not actively in a political sense.

They simply remained aloof from the Roman presence and lived their lives without respect for it. There were also the Zealots. One of Jesus' disciples came from this party, Simon Zelotes.

And the Zealots actually were the followers of a man who's not one of the disciples. His name was Judas of Galilee. And this man, Judas of Galilee, in the year 6 AD, started the party of the Zealots to try to overthrow the Romans.

And they were sort of like a guerrilla warfare kind of group that ran raids on Romans and tried to kill as many as they could. Of course, the Romans also tried to kill as many Zealots as they could, too, and sometimes would retaliate by persecuting the Jews en masse. And so many Jews would not join the Zealots because of the danger involved, but many of them were quite in sympathy with the Zealots' resentment of the Roman presence.

Now, a Jew like Matthew, who had become a tax collector for the Romans, was one who not only was not opposed to the Roman presence, but he collaborated. He worked for the Romans, collecting taxes from his own people. And people in that condition, called publicans, or tax collectors, another term for the same thing, were considered to be traitors to Israel.

And this is the kind of man that Matthew was before he became a Christian. There was a day when Jesus came walking by the place of business where Matthew was collecting taxes, and he simply said to him, follow me. And Matthew left his occupation.

He didn't even give two weeks' notice. He just jumped over the table and followed Jesus and was a follower of his ever after. And while Jesus had very many followers, sometimes numbering in the thousands, this man, Matthew, became one of the few whom Jesus selected to be specially trained and to spend more time with him than others.

He was one of the twelve that Jesus called apostles. The word apostle means one who is sent. In the Greek word apostolos, one who is sent.

And Matthew was one of twelve men who were specially sent by Christ to represent him and to carry his message to the world. And Matthew wrote this book as part of his effort to do just that. Now, since Jesus had picked this man to be an apostle and especially authorize the apostles to speak for him, then when we find a book written by Matthew, we're finding a book not only by an eyewitness, but by an eyewitness who is authorized to write and to tell this story by Jesus himself.

Now, that is the man who wrote this book, as near as we can tell. When was it written? There really are a wide variety of opinions. There is an old tradition that places the writing of this book as early as about 38 A.D. That would only be about eight years after the crucifixion.

Most modern scholars do not accept this early date. Some would say it was written as early as the 50s, but it's more common for people to say it was written in the 60s or the 70s, or even there are some radical scholars who'd like to say it was written in the second century, 100 and something A.D. Now, with all these opinions about, one might ask, how can we know which is true? Well, I would say to place the writing of the gospel any later than the first century, of course, is not possible since Matthew would not have lived into the second century, and if he is the author, as the early church firmly believed, then he couldn't have written it after his own lifetime. He had to still be alive.

There is an early writing, a man named Pappius, who lived in the first century, who may have known some of the apostles, and indeed knew many who had known the apostles and interviewed them. Pappius has left us a record that Matthew wrote his book originally in Aramaic, and it was not in its present form. Aramaic was the language that Jesus and the disciples spoke, but the gospels have come down to us today in Greek.

In fact, the entire New Testament is written in Greek, but the language of Jesus that he spoke was Aramaic, and according to Pappius, a very early source, Matthew wrote down a collection of the sayings of Jesus in Aramaic, which was the language Jesus actually made these sayings in. Apparently, Matthew later re-edited this work in Greek and added things besides the sayings of Jesus, namely the historical information that's here. Therefore, we have some testimony that Matthew very early on was maybe the first person to write down anything that Jesus had said in Aramaic, and then later it was incorporated into this gospel when Matthew wrote it in its complete form in Greek.

Now, what year was it written? We cannot say. One thing we can say is this. It was certainly written well within the lifetime of many who had heard and seen Jesus.

Since Matthew was a contemporary with Jesus, his readers would be contemporaries with Jesus. It seems clear that he wrote it to a Jewish audience. Although he wrote in Greek, this does not mean that his readers were not intended to be the Jewish people.

Greek was universally spoken throughout the Roman Empire, at least as a second or third language for some peoples, and it was the language that was used for most communication internationally. And Jews were all over the Roman Empire, spoke many languages, but all of them spoke at least Greek. And therefore, the fact that Matthew wrote it in Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic would suggest that he intended it for people who were not confined to Israel, but people throughout the Roman Empire could read it.

But the fact that these people he had in mind were Jewish seems evident from the emphasis that he places on certain things. The other gospels, Mark and Luke, tell much of the same story that Matthew does, but Matthew places emphasis on some things that others do not. For example, he opens his gospel by saying, The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Now, to say that Jesus was the son of David and the son of Abraham would be particularly important to Jewish people. Gentiles, who were not yet Christians, would not particularly care who David was or Abraham was. These are famous men of high regard among the Jews, but not among the Gentiles.

And so it would seem that he's right from the beginning pointing out that the Jewish people should pay attention to this man, Jesus, because he had a worthy pedigree, going back to such Jewish heroes as David and Abraham. But there's more. There are passages where Mark, a different writer, of course, of a different gospel, will explain to his readers, who are apparently not Jewish, Jewish customs.

But Matthew, in telling the same story, does not tell the customs. For example, in Matthew 15, there is the story about how Jesus' disciples were criticized by the Pharisees for not washing their hands before they ate. Matthew does not explain anything about this.

Mark does, though. Mark is writing to a Gentile audience. And when he tells the same story about the Pharisees criticizing Jesus' disciples, Mark tells his readers, he says, the Jews wash things all the time.

He says they wash their cups and their bowls and their couches and their tables and everything. They don't even come in from the house without washing. Now, you see, Mark had to explain to his readers this Jewish custom and what the basis of this criticism was that the Pharisees brought against the disciples.

But Matthew makes no attempt to explain the custom. He assumes his readers know it already because they're Jewish. He also, more than any of the other gospels, Matthew quotes things from the Old Testament, which would, of course, impress Jews more than Greeks.

The Jews, of course, believed in the Old Testament as their Bible. Unconverted Gentiles did not. And therefore, when Matthew continuously, approximately 47 times in the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew says, this was done to fulfill what was written in the prophets or in some other place in the Old Testament.

And he would quote almost 50 times in his gospel from something in the Old Testament to show that what Jesus did was a fulfillment of that. That would have the greatest impact on a Jewish readership. And Matthew does that more than Mark or Luke do.

And we know that Mark and Luke wrote to Gentile readers. So there are some of these features in Matthew that indicate that his readers were Jewish people throughout the Roman Empire. He even observed some Jewish sensitivities of his readers that Mark and Luke do not.

For example, whenever Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, Mark and Luke simply used the term kingdom of God. But when Matthew quotes Jesus, he often changes the term to kingdom of heaven because the Jews had a sensitivity about using the name of God too frequently. They were afraid if they used it too frequently, they might profane it.

And so they often substituted the word heaven for God. They might say, heaven bless you. Or the prodigal son says, I have sinned against heaven.

We would say, God bless you, or I've sinned against God. But the Jews conspicuously, scrupulously avoiding frequent reference to God would often use the word heaven in place of God. Now, this is seen in Matthew's gospel.

Only Matthew contains the phrase kingdom of heaven. The other gospels just stuck with the regular term kingdom of God all the time. But Matthew seems to be trying not to make his Jewish readers wince too much.

And he's observing their sensitivities about the overuse of the word God. And therefore, he substitutes it with the word heaven on many occasions in his gospel. Now, therefore, we can say the author was Matthew, one of the 12 apostles.

He wrote it sometime, obviously, within his lifetime. And therefore, within the lifetime of many others who could have heard and seen these things. And that's an interesting point because he wrote it to Jewish people.

And that was the environment in which Jesus actually lived his life. If Matthew had told the story inaccurately, he actually published it early enough that many people who had been there could have said, hey, wait a minute, that's not what happened. I mean, the fact that all four of the gospels were, in fact, in circulation within the first century, when there were still people around who could have seen Jesus.

And yet they were never refuted by people who said, hey, I was there. I didn't hear those words spoken. I didn't see that miracle occur.

You know, the fact that this gospel circulated around people who could verify or in some cases could, we would think, falsify the information if it was false. And yet no one ever falsified it. No eyewitnesses ever said, no, that's not what happened, is a very strong indicator that Matthew is writing the truth about what he saw and heard.

Now, why did he write it? Well, I think the answer is fairly simple. He was authorized by Christ to preach the gospel. Now, so were the other apostles, and they didn't all write

gospels.

So I think we could say that Matthew, perhaps he didn't preach as much as some of the others did. We know that Peter and John especially preached a great deal, but they didn't write as much. They wrote a few short epistles for us.

Matthew perhaps didn't do as much preaching and relied more on the written page. I don't know, maybe he preached as much as the others. But his reason for writing it was certainly to fulfill his apostolic commission, that he preached the gospel to, you know, far and wide.

And in this case, to Jewish people throughout the Roman world. There does seem to be one slant that Matthew frequently brings up. And that would be perhaps in order to challenge Jewish people to get over their prejudice against Gentiles.

Because there are many things in Matthew's gospel that show that the Gentiles are part of God's plan in Jesus too. For example, it's Matthew and none of the other gospels that record the coming of the wise men to worship Jesus at his birth. The wise men were Gentiles, they were not Jews.

And yet they came and worshiped Jesus when he was a baby, when many Jews had not yet even recognized him. Now, there's also the story of the Roman centurion whose servant was sick in Matthew chapter 8. And Jesus makes the comment that the faith of this centurion, who was a Gentile, was greater than the faith of any of the Jews he had seen. And he commended the man and healed the man's servant.

And there are many things like this that you'll find in the gospel of Matthew, recorded stories and sayings, where it becomes clear that although he's writing to Jewish people, he's trying to rattle their cage a little bit, trying to stretch their open-mindedness a little bit to recognize the fact that God cares about the Gentiles as well, and that Gentiles can become worshippers of the Messiah, Jesus, as well as Jews can. And that may have been one of the main reasons he wrote it. Now, I need to say a little something before we're out of time about the way the structure of the book is.

We have in Matthew two chapters at the beginning that tell what we could call birth stories about Jesus. You might think that all the gospels should have birth stories, but they don't. Only two of them do.

Matthew does. He devotes two chapters at the beginning to the birth stories. And Luke also does.

Luke devotes two chapters at the beginning of his gospel to birth stories, though Mark and John do not contain birth stories at all. Now, what's interesting is that the birth stories recorded by Matthew are different birth stories than the ones in Luke. The two gospels that actually tell us stories about Jesus' birth tell us different stories.

Now, there's nothing really contradictory between the stories. It's just that they made a different selection of details to give. And it's interesting that Matthew always tells the story from Joseph's side, whereas Luke always tells the story from Mary's side.

In Luke, the birth stories always involve Mary. In Matthew, the birth stories always involve Joseph. I'm not sure exactly why that would be.

Perhaps Matthew had met Joseph, maybe, or whatever, or Joseph's family. It's hard to know where the information was gleaned. But Matthew shows an interest in what happened in Joseph's experience, probably because Joseph was the one who, in the sight of the Jewish people, would have given Jesus his legal status as the son of David, because Joseph was from a royal line, as we see in Matthew chapter 1. And in order to show that Jesus, therefore, had royal status, Matthew seems more interested in telling us about Joseph, who gave Jesus his legal position as an adopted son of Joseph, of course, of the legal line of kings in Israel.

Now, there are five major discourses of Jesus in Matthew. These five discourses have similarities in structure, although they're different in length. And they have another similarity, too.

They seem to be composite discourses. Rather than writing in chronological order and recording everything Jesus said at the particular time he said it, Matthew seems to have gathered the sayings of Jesus in topical arrangements. And we can say that because we can look at these arrangements and realize by comparing them with Mark and Luke and other places, where the same things are recorded, that they are recorded in a variety of places in Mark or Luke, but they're gathered together in a topical collection of sayings in Matthew.

There are five such discourses in Matthew. One is, of course, the famous Sermon on the Mount. It occupies three chapters in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. That sermon seems to be a composite of more than one sermon.

Luke gives a portion of that sermon in Luke chapter 6, but it only takes up half a chapter. Matthew takes up three chapters. But the extra material that's in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is also found in Luke in many cases, but scattered throughout the ministry of Jesus, sayings he gave on different occasions.

So, the Sermon on the Mount would appear to be a composite of Jesus' sayings put together by Matthew as a collection. The next discourse is in chapter 10, where Jesus sends out the disciples on a short-term mission. Then in chapter 13, the third discourse is a collection of parables about the kingdom of God.

The fourth discourse is in Matthew chapter 18, where Jesus gives some instruction about forgiveness and relationships in the church. And then the final fifth discourse is Matthew

24 and 25, what we sometimes call the Olivet Discourse, where the disciples asked him when the temple would be destroyed and when the end of the age would come. And so he gave his answer in Matthew 24 and 25.

Now, in each of these discourses, we will find that when we compare the sayings in them to those found in the other Gospels, they are collections from various times in Jesus' ministry gathered into compact collections. And that seems to be what Matthew was concerned to do. You'll find the same sayings found in the other Gospels interspersed in different settings.

But this is the Gospel as Matthew chose to write it. Apparently, he found it beneficial to collect the sayings of Jesus topically. And in our next session, we will look at these sayings.

We will, well, we won't look at the sayings directly. We'll get to them. We will be looking at the opening chapter of Matthew and the genealogy of Jesus and some of the birth stories in Matthew.

And we'll be looking at some of the interesting elements that are unique to Matthew's relating of the events. And they are truly interesting. There's more interesting there in that genealogy of Jesus than most people have ever dreamed.

You might think of genealogies as something rather boring. But they can be. They can be quite tedious.

But in this genealogy, we will find there are some points of very great interest that tell us much about Jesus, who he is, and what his status was, even among his own people, before any of them recognized him as the Son of God. But that study will have to wait until next time because this session, we have run out of time. And therefore, I hope that you will be with us next time as we continue studying through the Gospel of Matthew.

And then after we finish Matthew, we intend, if the Lord wills, to go through the remainder of the New Testament and take the other Gospels as well.