

# THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

## Lesson 1, Introduction

The New Testament contains 4 gospel accounts of the life, purpose, and meaning of the most unique man in history: Yeshua of Nazareth, known better within the Western Christian Church as Jesus Christ. The creation and ordering of this New Testament addition to the Bible occurred early in the 3rd century A.D. (and until that time the Bible consisted only of what gentiles call the Old Testament). What I just told you about when the New Testament was created is not in particular dispute among Bible scholars; however it does tend to startle and worry many lay Christians and Pastors when they learn this. So I can be clear in what this means for modern Believers, let me expand upon what I just stated. While it is true that the 4 gospels and some of Paul's letters and many more documents were circulated among the dozens of congregations of Believing Jews and gentiles in the 1st century (that is, in the first few decades following Christ's birth, death, and resurrection), the only authorized document that was the Bible for these Believers continued to be the Hebrew Tanakh.... the Old Testament. The 4 gospels and the several letters from Paul were considered important (as were other documents that have been lost to history, and some preserved but not accepted by the modern Church as inspired), and they carried the same kind of authority as any edict of religious leadership bore in that era. However.... and this is so important to understand..... at that time these gospels and letters were NOT considered to be new Holy Scripture nor were they seen or intended as the contents of a new and different Christian Bible. In fact, the person that suggested such a radical idea was a gentile named Marcion.

The first recorded attempt to actually consider Paul's letters and certain of the Gospels as "Holy Scripture" happened in 144 A.D. Marcion, a European, was a recent Christian convert; a wealthy and powerful shipping magnate. He was not a

church leader but he did write a book that struck a cord among the now thoroughly gentile-dominated church. In his book entitled “Antithesis” he put forth his personal theology and it began with the proposition that all things of Jewish origin and flavor must be eliminated from the Church; the Church father Ignatius agreed with this view. Therefore according to Marcion and Ignatius the Church needed to create a new gentiles-only Christian Bible and once created declare the Hebrew Bible as null and void for gentile followers of Jesus. Marcion also declared that the Christian Bible should consist only of the Gospel of Luke plus certain of Paul’s epistles. But even then it should not include the ENTIRE Gospel of Luke; what amounts to the first 4 chapters were to be eliminated since they dealt with the Jewish lineage of Christ.

Marcion was widely denounced but he also gained a substantial following. No known church body formally adopted his proposition (at least not in the form he suggested and not until many years passed). Even when the Gospels, Paul's letters, and the Book of Revelation were finally adopted by the Church, canonized, and declared inspired of God early in the 3rd century in order to form the first New Testament, the Old Testament was retained as the foundation of the Christian Bible. So, as an important context and background for us to correctly discern the meaning of the Gospels and all of the New Testament, we must accept that while today we (rightly) look upon the New Testament as inspired of God and as infallible in its original as is the Old Testament, in no way was that how the writers of these New Testament books saw their own literary works, nor did the early readers of these documents assign to them the same divine and inspired status of the venerated Old Testament.

Which of the several gospels and other documents would be included in the New Testament vacillated over the years, depending on the branch of the Church and which Bishop was in charge. The books and the order they are presented in that we see today in the West is either the Protestant version or it is the Catholic version that contains several Apocryphal books not included in the Protestant version. Even more, the books of James, Hebrews, and Revelation have been removed, added back in, removed again, and so on over the centuries depending on the Church branch. However for the sake of simplicity we can generally say that in our time the order of the New Testament books is the same for nearly all Christian denominations and branches.

Therefore, virtually all New Testaments open with the 4 Gospels, and in the order of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and then John. Interestingly, the first 3 Gospels are seen

as having a different approach to telling about the life of Christ when compared to the 4th Gospel (the Gospel of John), such that the first 3 are lumped together and called the Synoptic Gospels. The word synoptic is taken from the Greek and it means "to see together". So the idea is that the first 3 Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are similar to one another and more or less seek to tell a simple story in an easy to read style. Yet, despite the similarities, there are differences and a number of complexities when comparing them.

The Gospel of John is seen by Bible scholars as substantially different enough in approach and style so as to not be included as among the Synoptics. This is in no way an attempt to diminish the importance or impact of the 4th Gospel. Even so, I question this scholarly attempt to make John's Gospel as a sort of outlier as compared to the first 3. When one researches various Bible academics' explanations for why it is proper for the Gospel of John to be seen as different enough from the others so as to be considered as a separate category, one begins to understand how subjective and arcane the arguments are. For instance, John's is usually said to be "the spiritual Gospel". I have no idea what that means. Are the first 3 absent of any spiritual element? Hardly. In defense of that dubious label, Bible scholars point out that while the Synoptic Gospels all begin with an important event in the human life of Yeshua, John starts with Yeshua's eternal and divine nature by saying: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". Yet, John quickly veers into many acts of Yeshua during His life on earth. Bottom line: I think the grouping of the first 3 Gospels together and separating out John's as something substantially different is overblown and little more than an academic attempt to rethink (if not revise) these Gospel accounts. In fact, this grouping of the 3 into something similar and common, and therefore different and apart from the 4th, only occurred shortly before the beginning of the 19th century and only in the West. From my viewpoint, each of the 4 Gospels brings its own distinctive perspective to the life, purpose, and meaning of Messiah Yeshua. Since they are all telling the story of the same man, there is natural overlap and repetition. At the same time, since not everything Jesus did can possibly be included in these modest sized documents, each author picked and chose what he thought to be the most significant events his readers ought to know about, and to a degree he presented events that helped put together a logical progression and history of Christ's life to best explain who He was, and the impact He made.

Over the next many months, we will be examining only the Gospels, and of them only the first: the Book of Matthew. Before we begin in earnest we need to get

some important housekeeping matters out of the way by dealing with some issues that are going to come up. And the first is: why is Matthew the first Gospel?

Naturally, Bible scholars are divided on this issue. The oldest extant New Testament manuscripts we have, have Matthew as the first Gospel. Although we have large fragments of the 4 Gospels going back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the oldest complete New Testament is from the 4th century and is given the name Codex Sinaiticus. So the only evidence available is that Matthew is not only the first book of the New Testament, but it is the first of the 4 Gospel accounts. Why was it put first in that order? The most logical explanation is that it was the first Gospel written. Yet the majority of modern scholars don't accept that Matthew is the oldest; rather they say it was Mark.

The Gospel accounts all contain similar stories about events in Yeshua's life and many of the same sayings. Sometimes the accounts and sayings are identical, and at other times they vary. How is this explained? Let's begin by grasping that none of the 3 Synoptic Gospel writers were eyewitnesses to Christ's life, but the author of the 4th Gospel, John, claims that he was an eyewitness.

**CJB John 21:20-25** <sup>20</sup> *Kefa turned and saw the talmid Yeshua especially loved following behind, the one who had leaned against him at the supper and had asked, "Who is the one who is betraying you?"* <sup>21</sup> *On seeing him, Kefa said to Yeshua, "Lord, what about him?"* <sup>22</sup> *Yeshua said to him, "If I want him to stay on until I come, what is it to you? You, follow me!"* <sup>23</sup> *Therefore the word spread among the brothers that that talmid would not die. However, Yeshua didn't say he wouldn't die, but simply, "If I want him to stay on until I come, what is it to you?"* <sup>24</sup> *This one is the talmid who is testifying about these things and who has recorded them. And we know that his testimony is true.* <sup>25</sup> *But there are also many other things Yeshua did; and if they were all to be recorded, I don't think the whole world could contain the books that would have to be written!*

It is claimed in our time that the actual authors of the 3 Synoptic Gospels are anonymous. And that only long after the Gospels were anonymously written were they finally, somewhat arbitrarily, assigned names. Margarete Davies in her book "Studying the Synoptic Gospels" uses the typical rationale for saying that the Gospels only received their names at a late date. She says: "The Gospel writers, it will turn out, did not follow the usual Greek and Roman practice of naming

themselves, but rather the tradition of anonymous publication, a practice frequently followed in Jewish literature." Like with a couple of other issues we'll explore, this one is interesting in light of how modern Bible scholars have come to this conclusion.

Let's begin with evidence that is outside of the Bible itself. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, wrote his great work "Against Heresies" not later than 180 A.D. In that work he not only quoted specific Gospel passages that match what we have in our New Testaments today, but he also named each Gospel by the same names we use today: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If we go back another 40 years, to about 140 A.D., Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis also alludes to at least some of the Gospels as he mentions Matthew and Mark by name, and says he got some of this information about the Matthew and Mark documents from an (unnamed) but earlier church elder. No matter; the fact that these two Gospels are named by around 110 A.D. or so says that Matthew and Mark were called by those names no later than the generation following their creation. However, even with this evidence sitting before our modern Bible scholars, again Margaret Davies assumes the same conclusion they do: "In the period 90 - 150 A.D., though our Gospels probably had been written, the author's names were not known.... in this period Papias stands alone". Papias stands alone. In other words, during this time period of 90-150 A.D., since the only written record of the Gospels already being named is Papias, then this evidence has to be thrown out. To my thinking if Papias was a liar (for what possible purpose?) he was also clairvoyant in predicting what the Gospel names would be in the future!

And yet, do these Bible scholars have some kind of firm evidence that the Gospels were NOT named by this time? To contradict Papias they use what writers of that same era do NOT say when quoting Gospel passages that are similar to what we find in the Gospel accounts today. That is: since some of the writers in the 90 - 150 A.D. timeframe do NOT mention the Gospels by name, but only quote some passages, then many modern Bible scholars say that this is proof positive that the Gospels could not have been named (and thus were still anonymous), even though Papias of that same era DID list the Gospels by name! But because he was only 1 person, and his testimony doesn't arrive at the conclusion these scholars seek, it is discarded. No record exists of any Early Church Fathers challenging the notion that the authors of the Gospels were known and attributed to each Gospel from the time of their creation. So as preposterous as it seems that some modern scholars refuse to take the historical record to settle this matter, this is not the only issue concerning details about the



creation of the Gospels where modern Bible scholars use the same strategy of simple denial of the written historical evidence.

Since we find the same, or very similar, quotes from Christ used among the Synoptic Gospel accounts, then the question is this: which Gospel was written first such that the later ones borrowed from it? Right or wrong, it is generally the belief of modern Bible scholars that Mark is the earliest Gospel written with Matthew (especially) drawing heavily from it. This would be a good time to explain something important about these Synoptic Gospel accounts: since very likely none of the authors were eyewitnesses to Christ's life, then where did they get their information? Clearly this is a valid question. Some say that if Mark was the first Gospel written, when we find the same or similar quotes used in Matthew and Luke, then it means Matthew and Luke must have used Mark's Gospel as one of their chief sources of information. But then this also begs the question: what were Mark's sources if indeed his was the first? The answer is that it is not known; but it can be reasonably deduced that documents containing quotes from Christ and other details of His life events had to be in existence prior to the Gospel accounts being written. How many of these other sources existed, what they were and who wrote them down we don't know.

I won't bore you with the tiny details of just how modern Bible scholars have come to the conclusion that it was Mark who wrote his Gospel first, and Matthew especially drew from his. However, the method is that generally similar quotes from Mark and Matthew are held up side by side and modern experts choose which one they think is the most authentic. Often this choice is made on the assumption that the shorter quotation is always the correct one, and the longer is merely modifying the shorter. What evidence is there for this? None; all is subjective analysis. So while the academic world tilts heavily towards Mark being the first Gospel written, and thus Matthew and Luke drew from it, there is a substantial minority who insists that it was the Matthew Gospel that came first and Mark and Luke drew from him. It is unlikely that this debate will ever be fully settled since there is no absolute proof either way.

But a related issue is this: while all the existing copies of the Gospels that we have today were written in Greek, there are hints and implications within the Matthew Gospel that suggest that it could have been originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and then very soon translated into Greek. And connected to that matter is this: was Matthew a gentile or a Jewish Believer? The gentile Church from as early as the mid 2nd century wanted little connection between the Jewish

people and Christianity, and therefore desired to have a separate Christian Bible that emphasized gentile authority and preeminence. So in modern times a broad-based wish that is expressed in the strong opinions by Bible scholars and Church authorities of the Gospel authorship, does not take kindly to the idea that ANY of the Gospel accounts were written by Jews. If indeed the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew or even Aramaic, then it is very nearly indisputable evidence that Matthew was a Jew and the Gospel was written for Jewish readers. Therefore every effort is made to prove that Matthew was a gentile. Is there firm evidence to settle this matter? There is some evidence within the Gospel itself, but external sources are the more powerful.

Eusibius, Bishop of Caesarea (around 300 A.D.) makes a statement that he attributes to having originally come from Papias over 150 years earlier. He says this: "Now Matthew made an ordered arrangement of the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each one translated as he was able." Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, in around 180 A.D. also referred to Papias in regard to the Gospel of Matthew: "Matthew, also among the Hebrews, published a written gospel in their own dialect, when Peter and Paul were still preaching in Rome and found the church there".

These ancient records state unequivocally that the Gospel of Matthew was written while Peter and Paul were still alive (early 60's A.D.), and that Matthew was a Hebrew, and that he published a Gospel in his own dialect (which could have been either Hebrew or Aramaic as they are close-cousin languages and both were spoken fluently among ordinary Jewish folk in the 1st century A.D.). And so from the reference to Peter and Paul we can rather easily deduce that Matthew was almost certainly the first Gospel account written, and thus Mark and Luke had to have drawn some of their information and quotes from him. And if this is fact, it would seem to offer insight as to the reason that the Christian council decided the order of the Gospels to open the New Testament as they did: to their knowledge Matthew should be first because it was written first; Mark is second because it was written second; Luke is third because it was written third; and John is 4th because it was the latest Gospel written.

Surprisingly, many notable Bible scholars since the early 19th century say that Eusibius, Irenaeus, and Papias are all wrong. These earliest Church Fathers are thought to be in error, even though they were but a few generations from the time when the Gospels were written, and Papias may have been living when the Apostle John was still alive as he implies that he personally heard him speak. I

hope you're seeing a pattern here. Any ancient attestation against what some modern Bible scholars wish to prove is brushed aside. Too much in our time, especially linguistic experts are certain that they know the ancient languages and their meanings better than those who lived and spoke them 2000 years ago and more. Despite what eyewitnesses said occurred and recorded it in their ancient documents, including such details as who was involved, when and in what order events happened, and what it meant to those who lived it, modern historians often believe that they are better equipped hundreds even thousands of years later to give us a more accurate account and meaning. Not to be too harsh, but the word I would use to describe such chutzpah is revisionist history. So while many of these highly regarded modern era Bible scholars have indeed aided in my study, and that of many hundreds of others, I cannot side step that such conclusions are based primarily upon their own opinions and doctrinal beliefs that at times go directly against the written recorded evidence.

The point is this: personal study and research make it my viewpoint that Matthew was a Jew and his Gospel is aimed primarily towards Jewish Believers. Daniel Harrington in his commentary on Matthew entitled "Sacra Pagina" says this in the introduction: "This commentary on Matthew's Gospel has been written from a Jewish perspective..... one that I believe is demanded from the text itself". Obviously I agree with Harrington; and as his commentary and other fine commentaries expose, the Gospel of Matthew is filled with semitisms (that is, Jewish cultural expressions) that can be masked by their translation into Greek and then later into other languages, mostly notably English. But even more important, these Jewish expressions can be misunderstood especially when taken out of their 1st century Jewish context.

Further, while the other Gospels also contain some amount of semitisms, Matthew without doubt also pays closest attention to the Torah; both oral and written. This can be best expressed by the curious reality that Christ's seminal speech during His few years of ministry, a speech Christians rightly venerate and call The Sermon on the Mount, is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. So important was it to Matthew that he devoted 3 chapters to it.

I want to take just a moment to state that while it is possible that Luke was a gentile, Mark certainly wasn't and of course neither was John. So I'm not making the contention that of the Gospels only Matthew had a Jewish author. Rather I'm saying that of the 3 Synoptic Gospels, Matthew can be said to be "the most Jewish" in its form, approach, and in addressing matters that were critically



important to the Jewish community. In fact, Matthew used much Jewish rhetoric and several themes that only Jews would have inherently understood. Thus as 21st century readers of the Bible, expanded explanations of certain subject matter that we hope would have been there, aren't. Why? Because for Matthew's intended Jewish audience, no expanded explanation was necessary. We'll talk about this considerably more as we begin to explore the text of the Matthew Gospel chapter by chapter and verse by verse.

Although I've already explained that some Early Church Fathers that lived only a generation or two after the time that the Gospel writers lived stated and recorded that Matthew was the first Gospel written, the question of exactly the year it was written needs to be answered. There are two trains of thought in Bible academia about this. The first is that it was written before the destruction of the Temple that happened in 70 A.D., and the second is that it was written after. The first takes into account the ancient records that say Matthew was written first in Hebrew or Aramaic and while Peter and Paul were still alive. And since we know that Paul died somewhere in the mid-60's A.D., then the record of the Early Church Fathers makes it clear that Matthew had to have been written prior to the Temple destruction of 70 A.D., which came around 5 years after Paul's death.

The second train of thought is that Matthew was written after the Temple destruction. This is because such a timeframe fits in better with the modern era Bible academic belief that Mark (and not Matthew) was the first Gospel written. Their lone piece of biblical evidence for this firm conclusion comes from a statement in Matthew 24:1, 2 (that is also used in Luke's Gospel).

**<sup>CJB</sup> Matthew 24:1 *As Yeshua left the Temple and was going away, his talmidim came and called his attention to its buildings. <sup>2</sup> But he answered them, "You see all these? Yes! I tell you, they will be totally destroyed- not a single stone will be left standing!"***

Therefore since Matthew (and Luke) included this prediction from Christ in their Gospels (and Mark didn't), then for most 20th and 21st century Bible scholars this is proof enough that this statement was inserted only because the writer of Matthew wanted to prove that Yeshua's prophecy actually came true.

What we find all too often in modern commentaries on Matthew (and all the Gospels for that matter), is a sort of pseudo-forensic study of the minds of the authors of the Gospels, in which the commentary writer claims to know what the

Gospel writer was thinking at the time, and his motives behind saying the things he did, or in some cases for omitting other pieces of information. I don't mean to be rude, but I find such an attempt at dissecting the minds of people of another culture, who lived 2000 years ago, as a bridge too far. What these scholars decide cannot, of course, ever be proved or disproved; but they can persuade and that makes such a practice dangerous. Today's new standard is that if a preponderance of Bible scholars share the same opinion, it amounts to fact. But the fact is that none of the Synoptic Gospel accounts make direct mention of the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.; that much is certain. Admittedly, no mention of it is not proof positive that the destruction had **not** already occurred by the time of the Gospels' creation. After all: the Gospel accounts were meant to be about the life of Jesus, who died around 40 years before the Temple was destroyed by the Romans. So speaking of the destruction of the Temple would have been outside the context of the purpose and scope of their work. Thus the only direct statements we have as direct evidence from which to judge when Matthew may have been written are from people who are the likeliest to have known, and who had no discernable motives to lie or make up a story like this from thin air. The earliest Church Fathers Eusebius, Irenaeus, and Papias all say that the Gospel of Matthew was written during a time that Peter and Paul were still preaching in Rome (which was in the mid-60's A.D.). The Church Father Origen of Alexandria, Egypt also agreed with Papias (Origen lived during the time that the New Testament was first organized and canonized early in the 200's A.D.). Therefore I can only conclude that Matthew's Gospel was written in the mid-60's A.D., concurrently with the ministries of Peter and Paul in Rome.

While we can trust all the Gospel accounts, I think Matthew's is especially important because of its early date, and because he was obviously (to my thinking) an educated Jew who was very familiar with the Torah and with Jewish religious tradition and social structure. But was he a Holy Land Jew, or was he a Diaspora Jew that lived in a distant land? It matters because it deals with what kind of culture he was steeped in; a Hellenized Greek speaking culture, or a more traditional Hebrew and Aramaic speaking Jewish culture. Interestingly, of those scholars who accept Matthew's Jewishness, the bulk label him as a Palestinian Jew. For them, the term Palestine is a substitute for Holy Land, or for Judea and Galilee. This means that he was geographically residing near to the Temple such that he could be involved with its many activities, but was also near the center of Synagogue authority such that he was well versed not only in the Law of Moses, but also in the traditions of the Pharisees who were the dominant religious sect within the Synagogue system.

While we'll discuss at length the religious and social systems of both the Holy Land Jews and the Diaspora Jews in following lessons, I do want to close out our time together with this. During at least the last 150 years leading up to Christ's birth, all during His lifetime, all during the lifetimes of Peter and Paul and of the original Disciples, and until the fall of the Temple to the Romans in 70 A.D., the Jewish people operated under a dual, generally complementary, religious system. However this dual system was run by two different sets of authorities and they couldn't have been more different. The one system was the Temple system, under the authority of the Sadducees. These were aristocrats who inherited or purchased their positions of authority. The other system was the Synagogue system under the authority of educated rabbis and scribes; the common class who, nearly universally, were members of the sect of the Pharisees. These two systems were not necessarily rivals, but each occupied a certain space in the overall Jewish religious scheme that was, generally speaking, inseparable from every day social life. A natural tension existed between the two.

The Temple was where biblically mandated Feasts and sacrifices occurred, and where the judicial system operated. The Synagogue system was a result of the Babylonian exile, when the Temple and its system went defunct for a time. Organized religion was a critically important part of every person's life in that era..... pagan or Jew. So for the Jews up in Babylon, they could not tolerate not having some sort of religious system operated by some kind of authority that was Hebrew in its nature. Priests were only authorized to rule in the Temple so the new system was run by what the Church would call lay persons.

Especially after their release from captivity in Babylon, about 95% of all Jews chose not to return to the Holy Land but rather to live in foreign nations. Even though Ezra and Nehemiah had led the rebuilding of the Temple and reinstatement of its Priestly system, the bulk of Jews remained far away from the Temple and its influence. Thus, for them, the Synagogue authority and system emerged and it became the center of their Jewish religious expression. Only later, perhaps 70 or 80 years before Yeshua was born, did the Synagogue finally take hold in the Holy Land. But when it did, it became popular and every bit as important to the Jewish people as the Temple system; just in different ways.

Clearly, of all the Gospel writers, Matthew was the one most familiar with the full scope of Jewish religion..... the religion and culture of our Savior, Yeshua the Christ..... and it is why his Gospel is the one we will study.