

Introduction to Matthew

The *Lutheran Study Bible's* introduction to the Gospels and Acts says, “The word *gospel* means ‘good news.’ The four gospels in the New Testament tell the good news of Jesus Christ. . . . It is commonly thought that the four gospels, as we have them today, were all written in the last third of the first century. That means that several decades passed between the final days of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection (about 30 CE) and the writing of the gospels. According to most leading scholars today, the Gospel of Mark was probably the first to be written, around 70 CE or perhaps a few years earlier. The gospels of Matthew and Luke are based in part on Mark and were written between 80 and 90 CE.”

It is believed that the Gospel of John was written within a decade after that. Each gospel also made use of additional sources—both written and oral—with a mix of shared and unique material.

The result is that the Gospel of Matthew tells a similar story to Mark and Luke, in a distinct way appropriate to the context and concerns of the community to which Matthew was writing and to the author’s own theology and interpretation of Jesus’ life. Although the Gospel of Matthew is traditionally attributed to Jesus’ disciple Matthew, the later writing of this text (80–90 CE) makes this unlikely, though for ease of communication this writer will be referred to here as Matthew. What we can know about Matthew is that he lived somewhere in the Roman Empire and was most likely a Jewish believer of Jesus who resided in a community of like-minded followers.

This gospel was most likely intended for similar followers of Jesus: Jewish people who believed in Jesus as their Messiah, and were therefore undergoing major cultural and theological changes. Scholars are divided as to whether the Gospel of Matthew was written from within Judaism—meaning that the author considered himself and his community to be Jewish followers of Jesus—or, after a parting of ways between Matthew’s community and the local synagogue, from within a newly “Christian” community that still valued their Jewish heritage but no longer considered themselves Jewish. Either way, there is strong evidence that the author of this gospel was deeply rooted in the Jewish faith and traditions, even while embracing the new gentile (non-Jewish) believers who were apparently joining the community.

More than any other gospel, the Gospel of Matthew refers to God’s reign as the “kingdom of heaven,” a term popular in Jewish apocalypticism of the time. Additionally, Matthew emphasizes the continuity of Jesus’ teachings with the Jewish law and covenant, as well as Jesus’ role as Messiah and fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. For this reason, Matthew interprets multiple scriptural texts as fulfilled in Jesus. While some later Christian interpreters have taken Matthew’s fulfillment texts as evidence for the gospel community’s separation from and supersession of first-century Judaism, the practice of interpreting ancient texts to apply to contemporary contexts was a common rabbinic approach to reading scripture. Rather than seeking to replace Judaism, Matthew’s interpretive approach is located firmly within Judaism.

Nevertheless, some of Matthew’s texts are particularly harsh toward the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day, especially the Pharisees and scribes. After the Jewish revolt that led to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, Roman distrust and persecution of Jews increased. Such hostility was further fueled by a new proselyte movement emerging from Judaism, following a man called the Christ (Greek for “Messiah”), despite the Roman dictate that Jews not proselytize. These conditions likely increased tensions between Matthew’s community and their fellow Jews and led Matthew to portray his opponents in a negative light. Additionally, if the Gospel of Matthew was written after a break with the synagogue, the fulfillment nature of Matthew’s

prophecies would have been important for persuading the fledgling community that it was possible to faithfully follow the God of Israel through Jesus, even without remaining Jewish themselves.

Again, *Lutheran Study Bible* says, “The author’s challenge was to produce a gospel that would make the story of Jesus meaningful to people who were dealing with the tensions that such cultural upheaval always brings. Matthew emphasizes both the ways in which Jesus must be understood in light of Jewish tradition (as the Jewish Messiah who fulfills Jewish scriptures) and the ways in which he represents something new.” In this study, we will explore the gospel’s message with attention to Jesus’ actions and teachings that connect him both with his Jewish community and with generations of followers to come.

