

## An Introduction to Matthew's Gospel

### **Who?**

It may come as a slight surprise to you that the text of Matthew's gospel makes no mention of its author. Traditionally it's been supposed that the tax collector called by Jesus in chapter 9, and mentioned again as an apostle in chapter 10, was the writer of the book, but for various reasons, modern scholars believe this to be unlikely.

One of the reasons for doubting that the apostle Matthew wrote the gospel comes out of a scepticism regarding the accurate prophecy of future events. In Matthew 24, Jesus predicts the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem, and because of the accuracy of this prediction, it's argued that Matthew must have been written after the event in 70AD. This, though, it seems to me, is not an incredibly strong argument.

More convincing, perhaps, is the fact that Matthew's gospel makes use of the material in Mark, sometimes using incredibly similar phraseologies, such as in the account of the calling of the first disciples. If Matthew was the apostle and was witness to the events of Jesus' life at first hand, it does seem strange that he'd be so faithful to another writer in composing his own work.

What does seem clear, from the text of the gospel, is that the author of the work was Jewish. We can assume this on the basis of the extensive quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, which are used to confirm the status of Jesus as the Messiah. It's also fairly safe to assume that Matthew was written by a man, but this is probably as far as we can go on the evidence that we possess.

The name of the gospel has been fixed for a long time, even going back as far as the Church Fathers, in around 300AD. But even that is over 200 years after its composition, and it's now improbable that we'll ever have definitive proof of the gospel's author.

### **When?**

The majority of scholars believe Matthew's gospel was written in the fourth quarter of the first century. If you're convinced by the argument that its author must have seen the destruction of the Temple, then it was written after 70AD, but at least it's accepted that it was written after the gospel of Mark.

Now the earliest date for the composition of Mark's gospel is roughly 60AD and we can probably place Matthew, therefore, within 25 years of that date. So, what was happening between 60 and 85AD? The two big events taking place when Matthew was most likely to have been written were the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which we've already mentioned, and the breaking away of the early Christian church from its Jewish roots.

Until around this time in the first century, Christianity had been regarded as a sect of Judaism and, as such, the early followers of Jesus had continued to meet in Jewish synagogues.

### **Why?**

Matthew's gospel is the only one of the four to include the Greek word 'ecclesia', which is the word we translate as 'church' in English. In chapter 16, Jesus tells Peter that he's the rock on which he'll build his church and then, in chapter 18, Jesus presents the church as the arbiter in disputes arising amongst his followers. What this suggests is that Matthew was writing, as a member of a church, presenting his gospel as a means of instruction for the Christian community to which he belonged.

Along with his quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, Matthew also displays an openness to Gentiles who respond to the message and person of Jesus. His is the gospel which includes the wise men right at the start – the magi – in the Nativity narrative.

So, if we piece together all these bits of evidence that we have, it seems likely that Matthew was a Jew, writing for Jewish Christians at a time when a split was appearing between the emerging church and the synagogues.

Why did he write it? He wanted to assert the continued relevance of the Jewish tradition whilst at the same time affirming that Gentiles are welcome to join the fold.