

Matthew -- Part 1

- 1. Who is the writer? What do we know about him from this gospel account and others?** The writer is Matthew the apostle. Although there is no specific statement within the book attributing it to Matthew, it is easy to substantiate that Matthew wrote this gospel account. The early "church fathers" were unanimous in attributing this book to the apostle Matthew. Since they lived in a time that was near to the writing, it makes sense that they would know. Also, it is interesting that in the gospels of Mark and Luke, the name Levi is used when Matthew is first called by Christ to be a disciple -- see Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27. Both of these books speak of Matthew as one of the twelve apostles. A comparison with the book of Matthew really points to this book being written by Matthew himself. In the list of apostles, Matthew's account specifically refers to "Matthew the tax collector" -- see Matthew 10:3. In Matthew 9:9, instead of the name Levi being used, Matthew is the name given to that tax collector. It appears that after becoming a follower of Christ, Levi went by the name Matthew. He then refers to himself always by that name, even when speaking of his past before becoming a disciple of Jesus. It is neat to see that when Jesus called him, he immediately left his career to follow Christ. Everyone who wants to be a true disciple gets to make the same sort of choices -- see Matthew 10:37-39. As a sidenote, it is worthy of notice that among the twelve apostles, Jesus chose a former tax-gatherer and a former tax protester (Simon the Zealot).
- 2. Who is the primary intended audience of this gospel account?** Ultimately, the Holy Spirit intended this to be for all of God's people throughout church history. However, it seems apparent that Matthew directed this book to the Jews. In contrast to the gospel of John, Matthew seems to use Jewish time rather than Roman time -- compare Matthew 27:45 with John 19:14. Matthew calls things by their Jewish names rather than Roman names -- Matthew 4:18, John 6:1, John 21:1. Matthew doesn't typically explain Jewish customs whereas Mark does -- for example, cf. Matthew 15:1-2, Mark 7:1-4.
- 3. What sort of issues would be important to address with a Jewish audience?** It would be important to make the point that Jesus was the Messiah of Old Testament prophecies. It would also be fitting to show that Jesus was a descendant of Abraham, and that He was the "Son of David."
- 4. How does Matthew address these issues?** Matthew drives home the point that Jesus is the Christ as foretold in the Old Testament. Matthew has more quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament than any other New Testament writer (he quotes from the OT about 60 times). These include prophecies of Jesus' birth referred to in 1:23 and 2:6, His ministry in Galilee -- Matthew 4:15-16, His miracles -- Matthew 11:4-5, His teaching in parables -- Matthew 13:35, His entry into Jerusalem on the donkey -- Matthew 21:5, His crucifixion -- Matthew 27:46, His resurrection -- Matthew 12:40, and His ascension -- Matthew 26:64. Matthew also establishes that Jesus was a descendant of Abraham with an account of His genealogy in chapter 1. Matthew also communicates that Jesus was of the lineage of David in the same passage of chapter 1 (see 1:1), as well as numerous times that he emphasizes the role of Jesus as the "Son of David" (9:27, 12:23, 15:22, 20:30-31, 21:9,15, 22:41-45).

- 5. What sort of cultural issues should be considered when reading Matthew?** To grasp a full understanding of any information, we must take into consideration the background of the culture, events, and circumstances of the time and place at which it was communicated. Remember that Matthew was addressed primarily to a Jewish audience who would have understood the customs of their day without any explanation. We need to put ourselves into that time and place to fully "get it." I consulted Kevin Simpson (our resident "expert" on these sorts of things), and he gave me some key issues we need to bring into consideration. These only scratch the surface, but are a good example of things we need to think about.
- a. The land of Palestine. This land was divided into four main parts as can be clearly seen on the maps in the back of many Bibles. These regions are called Judea, Samaria, Perea, and Galilee. Judea was considered to be the heart of the "clean" land as perceived by the Pharisees. Samaria obviously was considered to be outside of "the land," while Galilee was bordered by "unclean" lands. This explains Jesus' instructions to the twelve in Matthew 10:5-6. It also allows us to make sense of the attitude shown in the gospel of John toward the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, and that of Nathaniel toward Nazareth of Galilee. Each of Jesus' disciples was chosen from the land of Galilee, which is consistent with God's choosing of the "foolish" to "shame the wise." This also explains many of Jesus' retreats into areas such as the land around the Sea of Galilee, because He knew that the Pharisees wouldn't follow Him there. This negative attitude of the Pharisees toward Galilee is clearly portrayed in John 7:48-52.
 - b. Betrothals. Unlike the culture of our day where most people live together with no commitment of marriage, the Jewish culture of marriage was heavy on commitment. A betrothal was binding as marriage, but wasn't consummated until the actual marriage feast or ceremony. This explains the description of Joseph as Mary's husband and his consideration of "putting her away" (divorce) even though he wasn't yet technically married to her -- Matthew 1:18-25. During this betrothal period, communication was typically carried out by the friend of the bridegroom. Thus we see John the Immerser described as a friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29), and we see Jesus pictured as the bridegroom (Matthew 9:15, Matthew 25:1-13).
 - c. Rabbinical teachings that were extrabiblical. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks of the need for our righteousness to surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees were interested in keeping the external letter of the Law, but they completely missed the spirit behind it. Thus, we see that in Matthew 5:43, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" "Love your neighbor" is found in Leviticus, but "hate your enemy" is found nowhere in Scripture. This was added Talmudic teaching that was upheld as part of Jewish ethic. This attitude of exalting tradition above Scripture is railed against by Jesus in Matthew 15 as well as Matthew 23.
 - d. Upper rooms. The roof or upper room was usually accessible by an outside stairway so that the inhabitants of the house wouldn't have to be disrupted for meetings which took place there. The roofs of most homes were built in such a way that one could move from roof to roof. This means of travel was called by the Pharisees "the road of the roofs." At the last house near a city wall, a person could climb down the stairs and exit the city. It seems that Jesus was referring to this

when He commanded His disciples to flee Jerusalem at the first signs of the Roman siege that would take place close to AD 70 -- see Matthew 24:17.

6. **What is the main point of this book?** The main point of the gospel of Matthew is to establish that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The fulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament along with the miraculous power of Jesus' ministry and the truth and authority of His teachings are a potent combination which proves that Jesus is the Christ. So it is that Jesus confirms before Caiphas that He is the Christ, the Son of God -- 26:63-64. It also is interesting that the inscription of the charge against Jesus read "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." Even the Roman centurion present at the crucifixion was struck with Jesus' divinity as he said, "Truly this was the Son of God." Finally, immediately preceding His ascension, Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Jesus is indeed the Christ!
7. **Thoughts about Jesus' teachings will follow in part 2.**