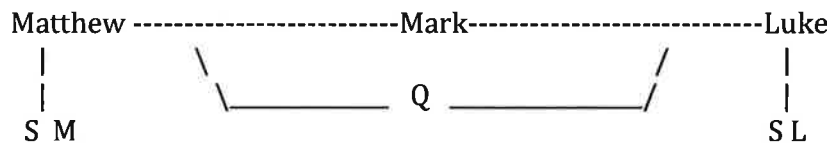


The gospel according to Matthew is one of the synoptic gospels. Basically, this means that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all follow the same basic outline or synopsis of Jesus' life and ministry. When scholars study the synoptic gospels, they place each manuscript in the original Greek side by side in order to see how they differ and what they have in common.

What has been found using this method of study and comparison is that Matthew and Luke both have included 90% of Mark, some of it word for word. Also, there are many sayings of Jesus that are included in both Matthew and Luke but are not found in Mark. While Matthew and Luke may not use the same words, the content is clearly the same. A good example of this would be the Lord's Prayer; another would be the Beatitudes. Finally, through this comparison of the texts, it is also clear that both Matthew and Luke have material unique to them. For example, they both have birth narratives but the details of each are very different. Clearly, neither Matthew nor Luke knew how the other was telling the story.

The sayings material that is common to both Matthew and Luke is referred to as "Q"—the first letter in a German word meaning "source." Also, the material that is unique to Matthew is referred to as "special Matthew," and the material that is unique to Luke is called "special Luke." (See diagram below)

This being the case, we can graph the relationships between the synoptic gospels in the following way:



The above method of study is called "source criticism" because its intent is to discern any sources that may have been used in the composition of the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As we have already seen in our study of the gospel of John, this version of Jesus' life and ministry is so different that it was clearly written without the use of the synoptic gospels. The gospel of John was written within the context of what is called "the Johannine community" and this group had its own sources. The community was thought to have been founded in Ephesus by the Apostle John after the Jewish/Roman war of 70 AD. Since Jerusalem was destroyed during this war, Christians in Jerusalem left, as did many Jews.

In order to properly understand the composition of the canonical gospels, especially Matthew, it is important to know what happened to Jewish religion after this war.

During Jesus' lifetime, which was approximately 4 BC to 30 AD, there were several Jewish sects. For example, the Sadducees were from the upper classes in Jerusalem and

they believed that only the books of Moses were authoritative. Because of this, they did not believe in a resurrection from the dead. This idea does not exist in the books of Moses known as the "Torah" (meaning "teaching"). Rather, a doctrine of a final resurrection and judgment before God was made clear in the book of Daniel, written in the 2nd century BC. For the Sadducees, the center of Jewish faith and religion centered on the Temple and its system of sacrifices. However, when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, this group (the Sadducees) disappeared from history.

Yet another sect, part of which existed in Qumran near the Dead Sea, were the Essenes. They were an ascetical group who rejected the leadership in Jerusalem as "corrupt." For them, the land of Israel was the central symbol of Jewish identity. They too were wiped out during the war and no remnant remained after 70 AD.

One more group should be mentioned. The Zealots were a largely political group, and it was they who probably instigated the war in the first place. The central symbol of Jewish identity for them was the King. They too were wiped out during the war.

The only major group who survived this disaster was the Pharisees and their scribal interpreters of the law. Because the central symbol of Jewish identity and life was the Hebrew Bible, which for them included the Torah, the prophets, and the writings, they survived to rebuild Jewish identity and life. So even though the Jews were largely dispersed throughout the empire, they nevertheless preserved their identity as a people by living in the same sections of cities such as Rome, Alexandria, and Ephesus. They would gather in places called "synagogues" where the Torah would be taught and its meaning debated. This became what is known today as "normative Judaism." We will discuss some of their doctrines when we get into the theology of Matthew because the latter was heavily influenced by the former.

The other group that survived the war was, of course, the Christians. In fact, by then the Christian faith had spread throughout the Roman Empire with Christian home churches in every major city and in rural areas as well.

The Christian faith was centered on the proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection. After the apostles had encountered their Lord risen from the dead, and after they had been gifted with the Holy Spirit, many of the original apostles, together with the addition of the apostle Paul, proclaimed what came to be known as "the Gospel" throughout the Roman Empire. Using their own Jewish Bible, the Greek version known as "the Septuagint," they interpreted their experience of the ongoing presence of Jesus Christ in their lives as their Lord and Savior by understanding his death as the atonement for the sins of all who repent and turn to Him in faith. Thus "the Gospel," which means "good news," was that Jesus, the Son of God, was sent by God the Father to suffer and die for us so that we could be forgiven and freed from sin—that which kept us separated from God and under the penalty of death. Because he rose from the dead and now lives in us through faith—a gift of the Holy Spirit, we are reconciled to God, considered righteous and innocent in his sight, and we are therefore inheritors of eternal life. This is the good news of Jesus Christ—the Gospel—that was spread

throughout the empire so that Christian communities (which eventually came to be called “churches”) could be created wherever the apostles were able to go.

Part of this story is told by Luke in the Book of Acts. Luke focuses mostly on the ministries of Peter and Paul whose mission work centered mostly in the western part of the empire. So, while Acts is limited in its perspective, it contains much valuable information regarding the years before the war in 70.

The letters of Paul are the earliest documents we have pertaining to this story—the spread of the church from 30 - 64 AD. During this period, the center of the Christian faith was the proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and what that meant for us. So while the teaching of Jesus were preserved by some of the eyewitnesses to his ministry, and while Paul, who must have learned what he knew of Jesus’ teachings from the other apostles, quotes Jesus on occasion, there were no comprehensive records of what Jesus taught in written form during this period. They were passed on orally, and preserved in the communities where people who knew Jesus lived and worked.

However, after the Jewish war, most of the eyewitnesses were deceased. James, the brother of John was the first to be martyred in Jerusalem in the 40s AD. Jesus’ brother James, the bishop of the Jerusalem church, was martyred around 60 AD. Both Peter and Paul were put to death by Nero during the first Christian persecution around 63 or 64 AD.

Moreover, since it looked like it might take some time for the Lord to return, it became clear to the Christian community that written records of Jesus’ ministry were now a necessity. Therefore, the composition of the gospels began right around the time of the war in 70 AD. One other factor needs to be mentioned. For a short time after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Christians who happened to also be Jews were referred to as “Messianic Jews.” While the relationship between the newly developing Jewish synagogues and community of the “Messianic Jews” was tense, nevertheless, they coexisted as acknowledged Jewish communities. After the war, all that changed. Messianic Jews were expelled from the synagogues and an official curse was included in synagogue worship. Moreover, Christianity was spreading mostly in gentile areas, and the church was starting to look like a primarily gentile community. Christianity began to be considered a gentile religion.

The conflict between Messianic Jews, and emerging normative Judaism eventually led to the disappearance of Jewish Christianity. However, since the gospels were being written during this period, some of the material in the gospels reflects this conflict, particularly the gospels of Matthew and John. We have already seen how John refers to Jesus’ enemies as “the Jews.” Moreover, John’s version of the crucifixion puts all the blame on the Jews, leaving the Romans somewhat unscathed in this story. We are going to see this conflict reflected in the gospel of Matthew as well.

I already mentioned the method of study referred to as “source criticism.” The historical information I have shared is referred to as “historical criticism.” When we get

into the text of Matthew, we will also use methods of study related to individual “pericopes” (pe ric’ o pe) a single story or section of teaching. This is called form criticism. And most important will be the so-called “redaction criticism.” This method is intended to uncover the underlying reasons that a gospel writer organized his material as he did. It is therefore interested in the writer’s overall perspective on the meaning of Jesus’ ministry and how to understand who he is.

First, let me briefly discuss some preliminary concerns. The methods of study and interpretation of the gospels already discussed were the product of the so-called “enlightenment” of the eighteenth century. This was a time when, philosophically, there was a decisive turn to reason and investigation into subjects that could be validated by evidence. The most important subjects that began to develop at this time were the sciences. However, history, and the investigation of literary texts were also subject to the scrutiny of a disciplined study whereby the conclusions could be backed-up by evidence that was available to everyone.

Up to this point, the Bible was considered to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit. That is, the writers were directly inspired by God to write what they did, and therefore everything in the Bible is to be considered a revelation from God. However, when western intellectuals made this philosophical shift to the priority of reason, and when it was pointed out that revelation was based on faith, not evidence that could be verified, biblical scholars began interpreting the biblical books in the same way they analyzed any other ancient document. They looked for sources, historical evidence, and literary forms in the task of exegesis (a critical explanation or interpretation of a text based on a careful, objective analysis).

Personally, I think these methods can be very helpful in terms of dating particular books like Matthew, understanding Matthew’s purpose for presenting Jesus’ ministry as he does, and uncovering the sources Matthew used as he composed his gospel.

However, no matter how much conceptual and historical information we have, this does not help us determine the truth value of Matthew’s presentation of who Jesus was and is. The gospels are not simply literary creations. They are proclamations concerning God and how God has acted in human history. There is no such thing as evidence that verifies the presence and activity of God. Only faith can discern the presence of God, and what God is up to in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, while we will use modern methods of interpretation as we study Matthew, we will be looking primarily at this text through the eyes of faith. The extent to which we can understand or discern God’s presence and will is dependent on God’s gift of His Spirit. With a prayer for God’s Spirit to open our eyes of faith, we are going to read through Matthew so that our faith may be further strengthened.

Thus endeth Chapter 1

Timeline of Early Christianity

1) Life of Jesus: 4 BC – 30 AD

2) Apostolic Period

- A) Paul establishes churches throughout Asia Minor (Turkey) and Greece starting in the mid 30's until his death in Rome in 63 or 64 AD. His letters are earliest New Testament documents, written mostly in the 50's.
- B) Oral transmission of Jesus' saying and deeds by other eyewitness apostles from the 30's to the late 60's.
- C) Mark, the first gospel, was written somewhere between 67-70 AD. Rome
- D) Jerusalem destroyed in 70 AD. The still surviving members of the mother church disperse. The apostles James, Peter, Paul, and James, the Lord's brother have already been martyred. Tradition says that John, together with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and others flee to Ephesus and establish the "Johannine" community which preserves their own memories of Jesus.
- E) Normative Judaism forms from the remnants of the scribes and Pharisees. The Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots disappear from history. (70 – 100 AD)
- F) Conflict breaks out between the two surviving Jewish groups: Normative Jews and Messianic Jews (Christians) (80 – 90 AD). Messianic Jews are expelled from the synagogues and a curse is proclaimed against them.
- G) Matthew is written between 80-85 AD. Matthew's sources are Mark, Q (sayings source), and Special Matthew. Matthew's community may have been located in Galilee. His gospel reflects the conflict with other Jews.
- H) Luke is written between 85-90 AD. Luke's community was mostly gentile and may have been located in Greece. His sources were Mark, Q (sayings), and Special Luke.
- I) John's gospel is written around 90 AD. As noted, John's community was in Ephesus, Asia Minor. He used his own sources which were very different from the other gospels.

- J) The so-called "general letters" (non-Pauline) were written mostly from just before to mostly after the end of the first century. This includes such epistles as James, Hebrews, Jude, Titus, and Revelation.

- K) The New Testament period is followed by the period of the Apostolic Fathers which was characterized by both rapid growth of Christianity and sporadic persecution. Many of the martyrs from this period are now canonized saints in Roman Catholicism.