

In the early church, it was thought that the disciple Matthew authored this text. His story is told in Matthew 9:9. Of course, there is no independent historical information to verify this claim so we really have to say that we don't know who wrote this gospel.

However, we can say a lot about when it was written and what kind of community its author was representing. First, since we know that Matthew used Mark to a large degree, and since Mark was most probably written between 67-70 AD (when the apostles were being martyred, and when the mother church in Jerusalem was destroyed), Matthew was probably written between 80-85. This of course, is a guess. But it would have taken time for Mark's gospel to have been disseminated, and it would have taken time for Matthew to gather all the sources he used. Not only that, the gospel was written during the time when Messianic Jews were being forced out of Normative Jewish synagogues. This period represents a best-guess scenario. When it comes to ancient history, the best we have is "probabilities."

In my humble opinion, it is certainly possible that the community identified with the reformed tax collector Matthew was responsible for this gospel. In fact, I would go further, much to the chagrin of a strict scholar, and say that the community wherein Matthew was written was probably Galilee. This was a Jewish area. It was also an area where the earliest church was active and where Messianic Jews would have lived. Moreover, since the character of Matthew and its contents presumes a knowledge of Jewish religion and scripture, Galilee is as good a place as any to locate Matthew's gospel.

That Matthew's gospel is Jewish in origin becomes clear when we take an overall, big picture view of the gospel. First and foremost, Matthew depicts Jesus as another Moses who brings the Torah with a new interpretation. For example, after the birth of Jesus, we have the story of Herod killing all the children. This mirrors the story of Pharaoh doing the same thing when Moses was born. We then have the holy family fleeing to Egypt, and then coming back from Egypt just as Moses did. In chapters 5-7, Jesus climbs a mountain and delivers a sermon based on the law so that the people receive instruction on the Torah in the same way they received it from Moses. This is called "The Sermon on the Mount." Luke includes a variation of this sermon except that he has Jesus speaking on a level place.

Other important pointers to Matthew's Jewish concerns include his frequent quotation from the Hebrew prophets. Only a Jewish audience would have cared to hear this. Also, and a very interesting observation, is the fact that Matthew edits his gospel so that it can be divided up into five separate discourses—just like the five books of Moses. Finally, Matthew includes various versions of commentaries on the Torah by Rabbis, only he changes them to fit his point. For example, there is a Rabbinic saying,

"Where two or three are gathered studying the Torah, there is God in the midst of them." Matthew changes that so that Jesus says, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This is only one of several such citations.

In any case, it is very clear that Matthew's community was mostly Jewish, that Matthew was clearly presenting Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, and that much of the material in Matthew's gospel relates to Jewish law or right living. So, while John's gospel was clearly focused on spirituality, and on Jesus as "the man from Heaven," Matthew is concerned with the meaning of Jesus as he relates to specific Jewish concerns. It was Matthew who said, "Not one iota of the law will pass away." "The Son of Man did not come to deny the law, but to fulfill it." This last statement will be very important with respect to my own interpretation of Matthew. But before we get to that, I want to remind you of one of the important rules of biblical interpretation according to Lutheran Tradition.

Martin Luther rightly pointed out that any given text in scripture can be either in the form of a law or in the form of gospel (good news). This is true whether we are in the Old Testament or the New. There are, for example, many gospel texts in the Old Testament. Psalm 23 comes to mind. There are also many examples in the Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, not to mention the stories of the Patriarchs, i.e., the promises given to Abraham.

A law text is one where we are required to do something. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." A gospel text is one that speaks of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and new life. "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ." (Paul, Romans 8).

A law text is meant to convict us of our sin. When we read the way in which Jesus interprets the law in Matthew, we are going to feel inadequate to the task. That's the way it's supposed to be. These texts are meant to show us our need for God's grace and mercy. They are meant to drive us to the gospel.

The gospel texts, on the other hand, are meant to free our conscience from the fear of judgment. They are meant to give us faith in God's love and mercy. They are meant to bring us closer to God so that we trust and rely on him in all things.

It is clear from God's expectations that we are all sinners. If it were not so, neither would we need a savior. And so, the purpose of having both law and gospel is to create faith in our hearts, faith in the love, mercy, and saving power of God in Christ. Being able to make this distinction is very important as we read Matthew's gospel.

## Commentary

Matthew opens his gospel with a genealogy. He states his purpose for doing this in the first sentence. "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham."

There are two concerns here. First, he wants to identify Jesus as a Jew by showing that he descended from Abraham. Secondly, he wants to identify Jesus, as the fulfillment of the promise given to David, namely, that a king would come from his line whose kingdom would have no end.

Notice how he divides this up into three sets with fourteen generations each. Recall that the number 7 is significant in Hebrew numerology so that having three subsections of fourteen generations is very important. (Matt. 1:17) It represents "the fullness of time."

In verse 18, Matthew proceeds with his version of the infancy narrative. There is nothing here that is in common with Luke except the names of Jesus' parents. It is told from the perspective of Joseph. Like the Joseph of the patriarchs, he has a dream which he immediately understands. While he had considered quietly divorcing Mary, having found her pregnant without knowing anything of Jesus' miraculous conception, an angel informs him of the fact that they are going to be the parents of "Jesus" who will save the people from their sins. The name Jesus means "Yahweh saves."

All this, of course, needs to fulfill a prophecy which Matthew takes from Isaiah, who at the time was speaking to the king of Israel and trying to convince him that he need not enter into a self-defeating military alliance. In any case, Matthew recontextualizes the prophecy so that it applies to Jesus.

Joseph is advised that this child will also be called "Emmanuel" which means "God is with us." This opens the gospel. It ends with Jesus saying, "Lo, I am with you always..." I believe the importance of this story is the following. First, Jesus, like his patriarchal forbearers, is a child of God's promise and therefore the product of a miraculous birth. More than that, coming from the Holy Spirit, he is a divine child. His origin is not just in God's promise. His origin is in God himself. He has a divine nature. Secondly, born of Mary, he is also human just like us. Matthew doesn't give us a doctrine of the Incarnation, but the story certainly says as much. Thirdly, this child is identified as a "savior." "He will save his people from their sins."

Assuming that Matthew's understanding of sin is based on Genesis, it means Jesus has been sent to overcome the separation and alienation humans have with their Maker. He is coming to reunite humanity with God.

This is most definitely a "gospel" text because it says that our salvation is something God is even now accomplishing through this child Jesus. This is therefore an act of God

that is inaugurating a whole new era in history. The time of salvation has come. The promises given in Old Testament times are now being fulfilled. These were promises given by Jeremiah, Isaiah, and other prophets; it is the promise first given to Abraham that all the people on the earth would be blessed. God is acting to set in motion a whole new era in salvation history.

Joseph, like Mary in Luke, simply believes what he is told and does what he is instructed to do. He marries her and raises the child. This is a story of faith. Joseph was given a promise from God, just as Mary had according to Luke, and he accepted it through faith. And so, Matthew begins his gospel by showing us an example of what it looks like to once again be reconciled to God: faith in God's promises.

*Thus endeth Chapter 2*