

An Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew

The Book That Houses the Sermon

Introductory Session · Critical front matter to Part One; companion to Sessions 2–3

BEGINNING WITH A MAP

Before we climb the mountain with Jesus, we ought to know the country we are entering. The Sermon on the Mount does not float free in the air. It sits inside a carefully built book, set there by an author with purposes of his own, written for a community with particular wounds and particular hopes, in a particular time and place. To hear the Sermon as the charter of God's reign — and not merely as a scatter of noble sayings — we must understand the Gospel that houses it. Honest historical study is no enemy of faith; it is one of faith's most patient servants. So we begin where any careful reader begins: with the historian's questions. Who wrote this Gospel? When, where, and for whom? And, above all, why? Let's search the Scriptures together — starting with the book itself.

The Gospel Among the Gospels: Sources and the Synoptic Problem

Matthew, Mark, and Luke share so much material — in content, in wording, and often in sequence — that they can be laid out in parallel columns and “seen together.” That shared perspective is what earns them the name Synoptic, and it generates the literary puzzle every Matthean introduction must address: who used whom? The dominant solution, held by the great majority of critical scholars for more than a century, is the priority of Mark. Mark was written first; Matthew and Luke each used it independently as a primary source. Matthew reproduces roughly ninety percent of Mark, ordinarily following Mark's sequence, tightening its rough Greek, abbreviating its narratives, and softening passages that might trouble a later reader.

Beyond Mark, Matthew and Luke hold in common a substantial body of largely sayings material that Mark does not contain — the so-called double tradition. The two-source hypothesis attributes this to a lost collection of Jesus' sayings, conventionally designated Q (from the German *Quelle*, “source”). Much of the Sermon on the Mount derives from this stream; its nearest relative is Luke's Sermon on the Plain, and the differences between the two are most economically explained as two evangelists shaping a common deposit of Jesus' teaching toward their own ends. To these B. H. Streeter added two further bodies of special

material — M, unique to Matthew, and L, unique to Luke — yielding the four-document hypothesis that still frames the discussion.¹

Intellectual honesty requires naming the alternatives. Q is a reconstruction, not a manuscript; no copy has ever been found. A vigorous minority dispenses with it altogether: the Farrer hypothesis, advanced by Austin Farrer and pressed more recently by Mark Goodacre, holds that Luke knew and used Matthew directly, making Q unnecessary. Others revive the Griesbach or Two-Gospel hypothesis, in which Matthew is first and Mark last.² The two-source theory remains the working consensus, and this study adopts it, but as the best available explanation rather than a closed case.

The payoff for our classes is considerable. If Markan priority and a sayings source stand, then the Sermon on the Mount as we have it is a Matthean composition — a deliberately arranged anthology of Jesus’ teaching rather than a stenographic transcript of one hillside address. The evangelist has gathered, ordered, and framed the dominical sayings into a coherent whole. This does not diminish the Sermon’s authority; it clarifies the kind of text we are reading. We are studying the considered theological architecture of an inspired author at work with his sources, building a charter for the people of God.³

Authorship: Tradition and Critical Assessment

The Gospel is formally anonymous. The familiar heading “According to Matthew” (kata Matthaion) is not part of the original text; such titles were affixed in the early-to-mid second century as the four Gospels began to circulate together and required distinguishing. The earliest external testimony to authorship comes from Papias of Hierapolis (c. 125), preserved by Eusebius: Matthew, he reports, “compiled the oracles [ta logia] in the Hebrew dialect, and each interpreted them as best he could.”⁴ Irenaeus, late in the second century, adds that Matthew published a Gospel among the Hebrews in their own language while Peter and Paul

¹On Markan priority and the four-document hypothesis, B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924).

²Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002); for the Two-Gospel view, William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

³On Matthew as a scribal composition shaping its sources, Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew, ICC* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–97), vol. 1.

⁴Papias, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16. The Greek ta logia and Hebraidi dialekto are the disputed terms discussed below.

were preaching at Rome.⁵ The tradition identifies this Matthew with the tax collector called from his booth (Matt 9:9; cf. 10:3), a figure Mark and Luke name Levi.

The traditional ascription faces serious difficulties, and they are worth stating plainly. First, our Gospel was composed in fluent Greek and shows no marks of being a translation from Hebrew or Aramaic, which sits awkwardly with Papias's notice of a "Hebrew dialect." Indeed, Papias's words are themselves a crux: *ta logia* may mean "sayings" rather than a full Gospel, "Hebrew dialect" may denote a Semitic rhetorical style rather than a language, and "each interpreted them" may describe oral delivery rather than translation. Papias may therefore be describing a sayings collection — conceivably something Q-like — and not the canonical Gospel at all. Second, and more decisively for many, our Matthew depends on Mark; it is difficult to explain why an apostle and eyewitness would lean so heavily on the account of a non-eyewitness. Third, the developed church order and the post-70 horizon of the Gospel point beyond the lifetime of the first generation.

The majority view, accordingly, holds that the Gospel was written by an anonymous author of the late first century — a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian of considerable learning, plausibly a trained scribe or teacher. Many have seen a self-portrait in the saying about "every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven" who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (13:52).⁶ A capable minority continues to defend a connection to the apostle — noting that the patristic testimony is early and unanimous, that an apostle could have written in Greek and consulted Mark, and that Papias deserves more credit than he is often given.⁷ The honest verdict is that authorship cannot be settled with certainty. Throughout this study we will speak of "Matthew" and "the evangelist" as a convention of convenience, without prejudging the historical question.

The Date of Composition

Dating proceeds by fixing outer limits and then weighing internal evidence. The *terminus a quo* — the earliest possible date — is set by Matthew's use of Mark; if Mark is placed around 65–75, Matthew must be later still. The *terminus ad quem* — the latest — is fixed by the Gospel's early reception: it is echoed in Ignatius of Antioch around 110 and in the Didache, and so must predate roughly the turn of the century.

⁵Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

⁶So, among many, Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 208–11; the scribal self-portrait at 13:52 is widely noted.

⁷For a measured defense of the tradition's weight, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), introduction; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1993–95), vol. 1.

Between these limits, two features push most scholars toward the decade 80–90. The first is the parable of the wedding banquet, in which an enraged king “sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city” (22:7) — widely read as an allusion after the fact (a *vaticinium ex eventu*) to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70.⁸ The second is the Gospel’s sharp and sustained conflict with “their synagogues” and with “the scribes and Pharisees” (notably chapter 23), which fits the period when the Pharisaic movement was consolidating its leadership of a Judaism reeling from the loss of the Temple. On these grounds the consensus settles near the 80s.⁹

A respectable case is made for an earlier date. Donald Hagner and others argue for a setting around 70, even slightly before, observing that 22:7 trades in stock siege imagery common in prophetic and Greco-Roman literature and need not presuppose the event; Robert Gundry has contended for the mid-60s.¹⁰ The arguments deserve a fair hearing, and the difference is not trivial for how we imagine the community’s circumstances. On balance, the weight of evidence favors a date in the 80s, but the matter is one of probability, not proof, and a careful reader holds it loosely.

Provenance: The Question of Place

Where the Gospel was written is bound up with the character of its community: urban, Greek-speaking, deeply Jewish in formation, and engaged with a Gentile world. The single most favored candidate, since Streeter, is Antioch on the Orontes, the great cosmopolitan city of Roman Syria. Several considerations converge there: Antioch housed a large and mixed Jewish-Gentile church (as Acts and Paul attest); it was a natural cradle for a Gospel at once thoroughly Jewish and open to the nations; and the earliest demonstrable use of Matthew appears in Ignatius, bishop of Antioch.¹¹ Matthew’s notice that Jesus’ fame spread “throughout all Syria” (4:24) and his interest in the temple tax paid with a Tyrian stater (17:24–27) are sometimes adduced as faint corroboration.

Yet certainty eludes us. Others have proposed a Phoenician coastal city such as Tyre or Sidon, a setting in the Galilee or lower Syria near the Jewish heartland, Caesarea Maritima, or even

⁸On 22:7 as an allusion to 70 CE, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001–07); Davies and Allison, *Matthew (ICC)*, vol. 1.

⁹Brown, *Introduction*, 216–17; Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), on dating and early reception.

¹⁰Hagner, *Matthew (WBC)*, vol. 1, argues for c. 70 or slightly earlier; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), for the mid-60s.

¹¹Streeter, *Four Gospels*, proposed Antioch; cf. Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).

Edessa. The truthful conclusion is modest: the Gospel arose in a Greek-speaking, urban, predominantly Jewish-Christian community somewhere in Roman Syria or the adjacent territories, with Antioch the best single guess but no more than that.¹²

Audience and Community

The Jewish Matrix

Everything about the Gospel bespeaks a community rooted in Israel. Matthew opens with a genealogy tracing Jesus to David and to Abraham (1:1), saturates his narrative with citations of the Hebrew Scriptures, presupposes readers who know the Law and the Prophets, debates the right interpretation of Torah, and assumes the practice of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (6:1–18) as a given. This is a Gospel written by a Jew, for a community of Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah, in conversation — and increasingly in conflict — with the larger Jewish world after the catastrophe of 70.

Intra Muros or Extra Muros?

The decisive scholarly debate concerns that community's relationship to the synagogue. One school reads Matthew's community as still inside the Jewish fold — *intra muros*, "within the walls" — a reforming sect contending for its vision of Israel against a rival Pharisaic leadership in the volatile years of formative Judaism. On this reading the ferocious polemic of chapter 23 is a family quarrel, the bitterness of siblings rather than of strangers. Anthony Saldarini, J. Andrew Overman, and David Sim have made this case with force.¹³

A second school reads the community as having recently and painfully separated from the synagogue — *extra muros*, "outside the walls" — so that the polemic carries the rawness of a fresh and contested break, and references to "their" or "your" synagogues mark a boundary already crossed. Krister Stendahl, Graham Stanton, and Ulrich Luz represent this view.¹⁴ Older treatments often anchored the break in the *Birkat ha-Minim*, the synagogue "benediction against heretics" once thought to formalize the expulsion of Jewish Christians; current scholarship treats that reconstruction with real caution, doubting both its date and

¹²For the range of proposals and a cautious verdict, Davies and Allison, *Matthew* (ICC), vol. 1, on provenance.

¹³Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

¹⁴Stendahl, *School of St. Matthew*; Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*; Luz, *Matthew* (Hermeneia).

its reach.¹⁵ The likeliest picture lies near the boundary itself: a community in the agonized process of separation, neither comfortably inside nor cleanly outside, defining its identity in the heat of the parting.

The Gentile Horizon

If the community is Jewish to the core, it nonetheless faces outward. Gentiles keep appearing at decisive moments: the magi who worship the newborn king (chapter 2), the centurion whose faith outstrips Israel's (8:5–13), the Canaanite woman who bests Jesus in argument and wins her daughter's healing (15:21–28). The tension is real and unresolved within the narrative — Jesus restricts his own and his disciples' mission to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5–6; 15:24) — yet the risen Christ commissions the eleven to “make disciples of all nations” (28:19). Matthew's church is living through that turn, working out how a thoroughly Jewish gospel becomes good news for the world.

A Necessary Caution

Because Matthew's polemic against “the scribes and Pharisees” and his fateful line “His blood be on us and on our children” (27:25) were later wrenched from their setting and turned into weapons of Christian anti-Judaism, a faithful reading must be vigilant. These are intra-Jewish disputes, the sharp words of a Jewish writer arguing with other Jews about the destiny of Israel — not a charter against the Jewish people, and certainly not against the living faith of Judaism.¹⁶ To read them otherwise is to betray both the text and the One it proclaims. We will return to this with care whenever the Sermon's contrasts with prevailing interpretation come into view.

Purpose: Why the Gospel Was Written

No single aim accounts for so rich a book; Matthew writes with several purposes at once, woven together.

Catechesis: A Gospel for the Church

Matthew is, above all, a teaching Gospel — the church's book, built for instruction. Its most conspicuous architectural feature is the gathering of Jesus' teaching into five great discourses: the Sermon on the Mount (5–7), the mission charge (10), the parables of the kingdom (13), the discourse on community and forgiveness (18), and the woes and last-things discourse

¹⁵On the cautious reassessment of the Birkat ha-Minim, see, e.g., Reuven Kimelman, “Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity” (1981); and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

¹⁶Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, on the reception history of Matthean polemic and its later distortion.

(23–25). Each closes with the same solemn refrain — “when Jesus had finished saying these things” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1) — a deliberate seam stitched into the narrative. B. W. Bacon famously read these five books as a new Pentateuch and Jesus as a new Moses, and while the scheme can be pressed too hard, the catechetical intent is unmistakable.¹⁷ Tellingly, Matthew is the only Gospel to use the word “church” (ekklesia, 16:18; 18:17); it supplies a community with instruction for discipleship, discipline, and common life.

Fulfillment and Legitimation

Matthew labors to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah in whom Israel’s entire story comes to its appointed goal. Ten or more “formula quotations” punctuate the narrative — “all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet” — binding the events of Jesus’ life to the Scriptures of Israel. Jesus is Son of David and Son of Abraham (1:1), the new Moses, the embodiment of Israel who relives and redeems its history. The aim is at once apologetic and pastoral: to assure a beleaguered community that in following Jesus they are not abandoning the faith of their ancestors but inheriting its fulfillment.

Boundary, Mission, and Pastoral Formation

Other purposes interlace with these. Over against a rival leadership, Matthew defines the community’s identity and its distinctive righteousness — the righteousness that must “exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20). Looking outward, the Gospel grounds and authorizes the Gentile mission in the risen Lord’s commission (28:16–20). And throughout, Matthew writes to form a faithful people under pressure — a church facing persecution from without, laxity and false teaching from within, and the unsettling delay of the Lord’s return. The Gospel summons such a community to endurance, mercy, and a doing of righteousness that reaches down to the root.

The Christological Center

Beneath every purpose lies a confession. Matthew frames the whole Gospel within a single promise: the child is named Emmanuel, “God is with us” (1:23), and the risen Christ’s final word is “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). That inclusio — God with us at the beginning, Christ with us at the end — declares the book’s deepest claim. The Jesus who teaches on the mountain is not merely a sage or even a prophet, but the abiding presence of God among his people, vested with “all authority in heaven and on earth.”

The Kingdom of Heaven: Matthew’s Governing Theme

¹⁷Benjamin W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Henry Holt, 1930); on the Moses typology, Dale C. Allison Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

All of this converges on the theme that will govern our classes. Matthew’s signature phrase is “the kingdom of heaven” (he basileia ton ouranon), which recurs some thirty-two times and appears nowhere else in the New Testament. It is best understood not as a place called heaven to which souls travel, but as a reverent Jewish circumlocution — “heaven” standing in for the divine Name — for what the other Gospels call “the kingdom of God,” a phrase Matthew himself also uses on occasion (e.g., 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43). The kingdom of heaven is the reign of God: God’s effective rule breaking into the world to set things right.¹⁸

This reign is the burden of the whole Gospel. John the Baptist, then Jesus, then the disciples all proclaim the identical message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). The verb is decisive — the kingdom has drawn near, has arrived in the person and work of Jesus, even as its consummation remains future. This is the already-and-not-yet that organizes Matthew’s theology: God’s reign is genuinely present and at work now, not deferred to a distant heaven, and yet awaits its full and final coming. Jack Dean Kingsbury has shown how the whole narrative turns on this proclamation, with Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom standing at the structural heart of the book (4:17).

Read against this background, the Sermon on the Mount is no anthology of impossible ideals or private pieties. It is the charter of the kingdom — the description of life as it is lived under the reign of God, the constitution of the people summoned to embody that reign on the earth. Jesus ascends the mountain like a new Moses and delivers the Torah of the kingdom, yet as one greater than Moses, speaking on his own authority. And because God’s reign confronts every rival rule, the Sermon carries an unmistakable edge against the dominating powers of its world. Warren Carter has read Matthew’s kingdom as a deliberate counter to the kingdom of Rome — the reign of God set against the reign of Caesar, the meek against the mighty, mercy against the machinery of empire.¹⁹

That is the country we are entering. When we open Matthew 5, we are not picking up detached ethical maxims. We are reading the founding charter of a people called to live, here and now, as if God reigns — because in Jesus, God has drawn near to reign. The whole of this study rests on that conviction.

From Introduction to Sermon

¹⁸On the kingdom as God’s reign rather than a place, and the Sermon as its charter, Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998); Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

¹⁹Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); idem, *Matthew and Empire* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

History does not domesticate the Gospel; it returns it to us in sharper focus. Knowing that Matthew wrote a generation after Jesus, in a wounded and contested community, with sources in hand and a church to teach, does not lower the Sermon's claim on us — it raises it. We are reading the considered work of a faithful teacher who gathered the words of his Lord and shaped them into a charter for a people learning to live under the reign of God. That is what we are about to study, verse by verse. We come not as critics grading an ancient text, but as apprentices ready to be remade by it. Let's search the Scriptures together — and let us begin.

Questions for the Class

1. If the Sermon on the Mount is a carefully composed charter rather than a verbatim transcript, does that change how you hear its authority — and if so, how?
2. Matthew's community lived in the painful space between the synagogue and the wider church. Where do you see your own faith community caught between an inheritance it cannot abandon and a future it is being called toward?
3. Matthew insists that following Jesus fulfills Israel's story rather than replacing it. Why does it matter, for the way we live and speak today, that we read his polemic as a family argument and never as a weapon against the Jewish people?
4. If "the kingdom of heaven" means God's reign breaking in now rather than a place we go when we die, what in your week would look different if you truly believed it had drawn near?

A Practice for the Week

Read the Gospel of Matthew straight through in a single sitting, as its first hearers would have received it whole. Do not stop to study; let the book wash over you. Watch for two things as you read: the five great blocks of teaching, each sealed with "when Jesus had finished saying these things," and the recurring refrain "this was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet." Notice where the Sermon on the Mount falls in the whole — first of the five, the opening charter — and ask what it means that Matthew chose to place it there, at the threshold of Jesus' public teaching. Bring one observation to share when we gather.

For Further Study

A selection of the principal works behind this introduction. Full page-level citations are confirmed against each edition in final editing.

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