

# INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Matthew was placed first in the New Testament canon, and not without reason. By the time the canonizing process began in earnest in the fourth century AD, Matthew was the most popular and widely used Gospel for a whole host of reasons. [Son of a Carpenter] In the Western Church, certainly one of these reasons was because the book gave especial prominence and a special role to Peter in relationship to the community of Christ. This Gospel was also popular because it begins with a genealogy of Jesus' lineage, it offers a church order of sorts, and it is the only Gospel to mention the *ekklesia*. It also had a fuller Easter story than we find in the earlier Gospel, Mark. Indeed, it was a much fuller Gospel in most respects, having 18,305 words compared to Mark's 11,242, yet it was still was of such a length that it could fit on one papyrus roll.

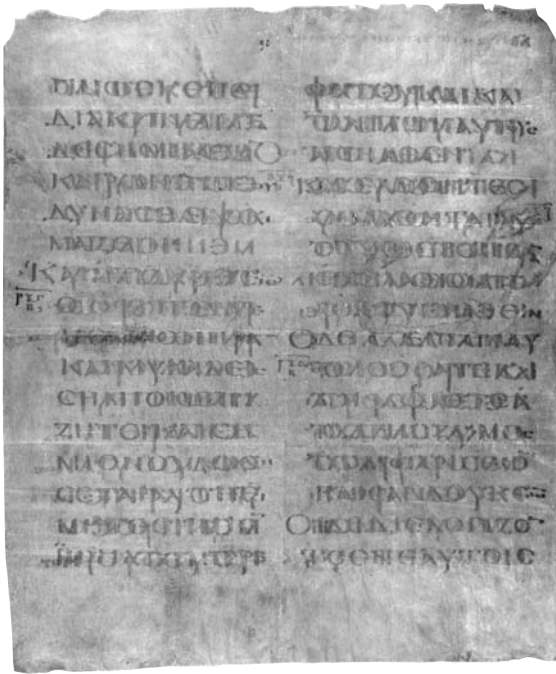
We know that in the second century Matthew was already put into codex form, and whether in codex or papyrus roll form, it was often copied in a careful or even elegant hand like other sacred and especially revered texts. The seven earliest papyri of Matthew suggest that this Gospel was used both in private and public settings; it was not considered by some of those who copied it and used it in the latter half of the second century to be of second-class status, quite without literary pretensions. The care lavished on the papyrus preparation reflects their authoritative status for the life and worship of the communities in which they were treasured.<sup>1</sup>

There is also the evidence from 2 Clement 2.4, a sermon from the early second century in which Matthew 9:13 is called "Scripture" along with the Old Testament. Or consider for example the many funerary inscriptions and papyri used as amulets that have on or in them some part of the Matthean form of the Lord's Prayer meant to protect the Christian against disease or harm.<sup>2</sup> But it was not just in

## Son of a Carpenter

**ΑΩ** One of the clearest proofs of the popularity and influence of this Gospel is found in examining textual variants. For example, probably the earliest and correct reading of the key phrase in Mark 6:3, our earliest Gospel, has Jesus being called a carpenter. This should be compared to Matt 13:55, where he is said to be "the son of the carpenter" (i.e., Joseph). However, P<sup>45</sup> in the 3rd century, some Caesarean manuscripts, and some old Boharic and Latin manuscripts all have the reading "son of the carpenter" at Mark 6:3. In all likelihood, this is an example of scribes conforming the reading in Mark to the reading in what was viewed as the "primary" Synoptic Gospel, Matthew.

See K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.



### Codex Petropolitanus

Text page of Gospel of Matthew, written in Greek. (Single leaf from "Codex Petropolitanus" at the Public Library in St. Petersburg, Russia). Asia Minor (probably Syria), 6th century. M.874 verso.

[Credit: The Pierpont Morgan Library / Art Resource, NY]

antiquity that Matthew's Gospel was influential. As H. Clarke stresses, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that despite an undistinguished Greek style, words from Matthew have been pronounced, prayed, and intoned more often than those of any author we know; and when we hear "the Bible says" we will hear more often from Matthew than from any other book of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Phrases that have become part of the common parlance such as "casting pearls before swine," "salt of the earth," "burning the midnight oil," "waiting until the eleventh hour," "beware of wolves in sheep's clothing," "the blind leading the blind," or "the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing" we owe to the Matthean portrayal of Jesus. It is thus a book that, while often commented on, continues to reward close attention.

But this Gospel was and is far more than a bolster for a particular

view of church life, church history, or even the end of the life of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel is, in many ways, the most obviously Jewish of the four canonical Gospels, and intentionally so. As A.-J. Levine has whimsically put it, Matthew "can seem so redolent with such 'Jewish' concerns that one wonders if the five thousand were fed with pickled herring and a nice piece of challah."<sup>4</sup> The First Evangelist is not only interested in Jewish issues of various sorts (sabbath, food laws, Corban), but he even seeks to conform his source material to a reverential Jewish way of speaking, for example predominantly speaking of the kingdom of heaven as opposed to the kingdom of God, unlike what we find in the other Gospels. In fact, as we shall see, the Gospel of Matthew is a presentation of the story of Jesus and his followers viewed through the lens of a Jewish sapiential way of looking at the believing and spiritual life. This Gospel seeks to give not only information or inspiration, but wisdom for believing and living a godly life, and as such it lends itself to being used in spiritually formative ways.

## The Sources of Matthew and the Question of Authorship

The Gospel of Matthew was, in all likelihood, not the first Gospel to be written, even though canonically it is placed first. The reasons for this conclusion are many and varied, but here we simply summarize the argument.

(1) More than 90 percent of the Gospel of Mark's substance appears also in the Gospel of Matthew, and of that common material more than 50 percent is word for word. The vast majority of scholars of whatever theological persuasion recognize that this means there must surely be some sort of literary relationship between the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. This much overlap, and especially verbatim overlap, did not happen by accident. This has led either to the conclusion that Matthew used Mark or vice versa, though a few scholars have supposed they both drew on a common source, which is not impossible.

(2) Luke's preface (Luke 1:1-4) tells us that he used sources in the composition of his Gospel—consulting eyewitnesses and preachers of the word. There is no reason to doubt that the author of Matthew's Gospel did the same; indeed the correspondences between Matthew and Mark seem to require some such conclusion. In fact, the evidence seems to require that one of the Gospels draws on material from the other in the form of a literary dependency (i.e., the verbatim agreements suggest reliance on a stable written source).

(3) Though some scholars have argued that Mark used Matthew, this conclusion seems unlikely in light of Mark's own emphases and agendas. For instance, Mark does indeed want to depict Jesus as a teacher, and offers us two major blocks of teaching material (ch. 4, parables; ch. 13, apocalyptic discourse).<sup>5</sup> Yet the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) is nowhere to be found in Mark. Is it really believable that Mark would have omitted all that material had he known it, to make room for mere verbal expansion of miracle stories? [\[Mark's Miracle Stories\]](#)

(4) Various editorial, grammatical, and theological issues that arise when one compares Mark and Matthew, and in all these cases it seems more probable that Mark presents us with the most primitive version of the common material. A few examples will have to suffice. In the presentation of Jesus' baptism, Matthew's Gospel presents the matter as a public event. "This is my Son" is what the voice from heaven asserts (Matt 3:17).

### Mark's Miracle Stories



In general, Mark's miracle stories are a bit longer than Matthew's versions of the same narratives, and in a world of limited text space, due to the length of a papyrus roll, it is difficult to believe that Mark would omit such material as Matt 5-7 (or for that matter all of Matt 1-2), material that suited his purposes, in order to leave room for lengthier miracle tales. It is far easier to believe that the process went the other way around—Mark's miracle stories were edited down by the First Evangelist to leave room for things like the Sermon on the Mount.

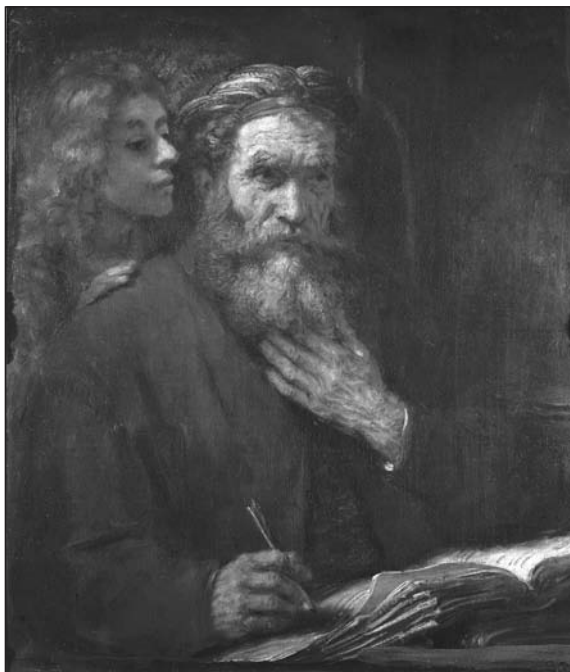
Compare this to the Markan telling of the story, where not only does the voice say directly to Jesus, “You are my Son,” but the event in general is presented as an apocalyptic visionary experience of Jesus—the sky opens, the Spirit descends, and the voice speaks only to Jesus. Since public testimony to Jesus is a motif we find in Matthew that is largely absent from Mark, it is surely more likely that the Markan account is nearer to the original form of the story.

Or again, if we compare the dramatic utterance by Jesus to the rich young man in Mark and in Matthew, the account in Mark is clearly harsher and more abrasive than in Matthew. In Mark 9:18 Jesus responds, “Why do you call me good? No one is good save God alone,” but in the Matthean parallel he says, “Why do you ask me about what is good?” (Matt 19:17), which raises no questions about whether Jesus is good or God. Or in regard to the portrayal of the disciples, in Mark they are frequently depicted and castigated for having no faith, but in Matthew the criticism is ameliorated by calling the disciples “you of little faith” (*oligopistoi*; see, e.g., Matt 17:20). In the account of the women fleeing from the tomb on Easter, Mark has them fleeing only in fear, but Matthew has them fleeing with fear and joy (cf. Mark 16:8 and Matt 28:8). Or again, in Mark 10 Jesus says “no divorce” for those whom God has joined together, but in Matthew 5 and 19 an exception clause is appended. It is surely easier to believe Mark’s account is the earlier one since Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus and the disciples is less offensive or less difficult to swallow. Matthew ameliorates Mark’s Gospel, or whittles down its rough edges. It can also be stressed that grammatically and also in terms of vocabulary, Matthew’s Gospel seems to be an improvement on Mark’s account (e.g., there is little connective tissue between sections of Mark, indeed some 89 sections of 105 in Mark begin with the simple connective *kai* [and]; Mark uses the historical present some 151 times and often begins a narrative with the adverb “immediately” even though what he really means is “next”).<sup>6</sup>

Once the conclusion is accepted that Matthew’s Gospel is the later one and that the author has used Mark, then one has to ask the question: Why would an eyewitness like Matthew the tax collector, if he wrote this Gospel, feel compelled to follow Mark so closely, when Mark’s Gospel is written by a non-eyewitness named John Mark? It is not sufficient to argue that since Mark drew on Peter’s preaching, it would be natural for Matthew to use Mark.<sup>7</sup> Why not? Because in the material Peter might have especially contributed to Mark’s Gospel (e.g., the account of the Transfiguration, cf. 2 Pet 1:16-18), even if Peter added some things that Mark

might not have learned elsewhere, this hardly accounts for why Matthew would follow Mark in detail on occasions when Matthew himself was present as an eyewitness! Why, for instance, would Matthew need to follow Mark so closely in the story of the raising of Jairus's daughter and the healing of the sick woman when Matthew himself, as one of the Twelve, would have heard this story or perhaps even been present on the occasion (see Matt 7:9-13, 18-20)? The detailed use of Mark so much of the time in the First Gospel intimates that the composer of this Gospel was not an eyewitness or one of the Twelve.

How then, did this Gospel come to be ascribed to Matthew? Why choose Matthew's name out of a hat when there are other more prominent members of the Twelve who might be better suited (Peter, James, or John, for instance)? It must be remembered that the ascription in the superscript, "the Gospel according to Matthew," is not part of the text of the Gospel itself. The Gospel itself is formally anonymous, unlike Paul's letters where the author mentions his name in the text of the letter. This ascription was appended to the Gospels at a later date, as is clear from the phrase "the Gospel according to. . ." which implies there are multiple Gospels circulating and associated with differently named people. It appears likely that the phrase *kata Matthaion* was added to this Gospel late in the first or early in the second century when the four canonical Gospels were collected and grouped together for use in the church.<sup>8</sup> There is no obvious reason why Matthew's name would have been chosen over more well-known members of the Twelve unless he was actually known to be the source of some of the material in this Gospel. The most plausible explanation is that some or all of the special Matthean material (e.g., Matt 1-2) goes back to Matthew, and since he was the first and most prominent contributor to this Gospel's substance (first in the sense that the beginning of the Gospel was from his hand), the Gospel was named after him. This then was not a matter of mere guessing or pseudonymity coming into play, but a following of the ancient practice in which the most prominent contributor to a collective document was the one whose name would be appended to the document by those who used it, as is the case with 2 Peter. [Matthean Association with the First Gospel] This explanation deals with all the facts of the case, accounting not only for the heavy correspondence between Matthew and Mark but also for the naming Matthew in connection with this Gospel in the first place.



### Saint Matthew Inspired by an Angel

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). *Saint Matthew Inspired by an Angel*, 1661. Louvre, Paris, France. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY]

### Matthean Association with the First Gospel



The case for Matthean association with this Gospel can be strengthened, as A.-J. Levine has remarked to me, by noting the following point: the Gospel does seem to have a special interest in money (noting the unique passage on the temple tax; the disciples are told not to take any gold with them when they travel; Joseph of Arimathea is described as a rich man only in this Gospel; and cf. the saying on Mammon).

## The First Evangelist as a Scribe

It has often, and rightly, been said of the First Evangelist that he is a rather conservative editor of his source material.<sup>9</sup> This is in keeping with the conclusion that he was a Jewish scribe whose task was not to create traditions out of whole cloth, but rather to creatively edit and amplify his sources and arrange them into a effective literary whole. But what sort of scribe was this Evangelist? Let us say at the outset that the term *grammateus* itself has a range of meanings, as we shall see, but all of them presuppose a person who is literate, one who can read and write, and so a person who educationally is in the upper echelons of society, since only 10 percent of all ancients could read and write. There was considerable power in being a scribe in those sorts of social circumstances. But was a Jewish scribe simply a copier of documents?

One might attempt to compare the work of the First Evangelist to the work of later Christian scribes,

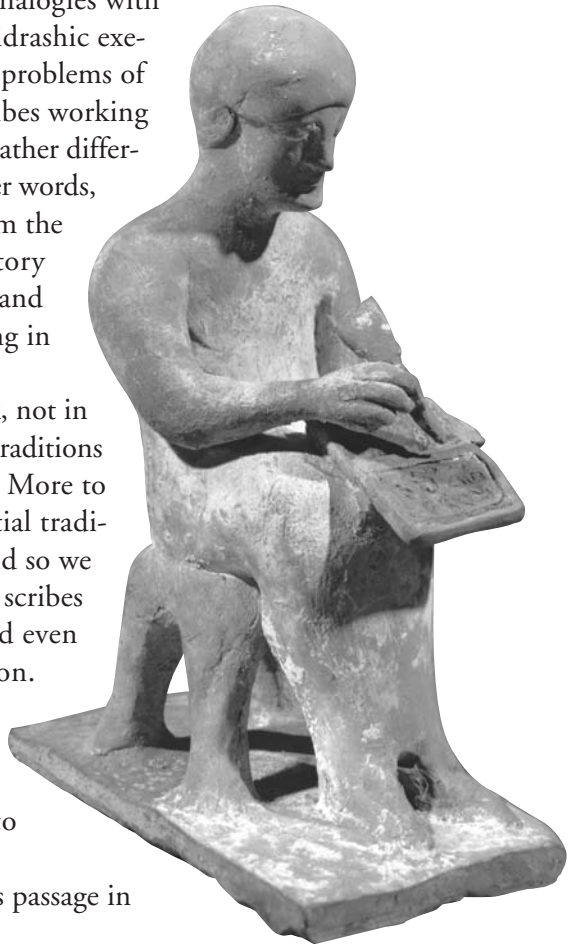
who can be divided into three groups, though obviously some scribes could multitask: (1) there were scribes who took dictation using a system of abbreviations (those skilled in so called “fast-writing”); (2) there were copyists, whose main task was to copy ordinary documents such as receipts, bills of sale, ordinary letters, and the like; and (3) there were calligraphers, those skilled in “beautiful writing,” a skill used by elite and well-to-do patrons to make copies of classic literature and other documents of great importance, such as formal decrees and the like.<sup>10</sup> The problem with trying to apply this division of labor to a document like Matthew’s Gospel is that it reflects the practices of the Greco-Roman world, especially the practices of Christians and others after the first century AD, and neglects altogether the long history of

scribal activity in the ancient Near East and in Jewish settings in particular.

By the same token, we need to recognize that one also cannot simply draw direct analogies from the practices of scribes during and before the monarchial period in Jewish history<sup>11</sup> with our scribe, because there was a significant shift in Jewish culture not only due to the Babylonian and Persian exile, during which period Aramaic gradually became the spoken language, but also because of the Hellenization of the region in the wake of Alexander. Then too, trying to draw analogies with later rabbinic practices in regard to midrashic exegesis and the like also suffers from the problems of anachronism.<sup>12</sup> Jewish writers and scribes working in the Mishnaic era and later operated rather differently than earlier Jewish scribes. In other words, we are looking for Jewish analogies from the post-monarchial period in Jewish history leading up to the New Testament era, and preferably analogies that involve writing in Greek. **[Sitting Scribe]**

Matthew's Gospel is written in Greek, not in Hebrew or Aramaic, and it reflects the traditions of Jewish writers who wrote in Greek. More to the point, it reflects the Jewish sapiential tradition in that era in regard to scribes, and so we need to look more closely at sapiential scribes such as Qohelet and later Ben Sira and even the author of Wisdom of Solomon. Fortunately, in Sirach we have quite clear evidence about the way Jewish scribes worked in the intertestamental period and continuing on into the New Testament era. **[Sirach 39:1-11]**

Many things could be said about this passage in Sirach, but most importantly note that the Law is talked about in a context in which law, prophecy, parable, proverbs, and the like are all viewed from a sapiential point of view, which is to say as one or another sort of divine wisdom meant to give guidance to God's people. It is after all Ben Sira who first clearly identifies Torah with Wisdom, indeed suggests that Wisdom became incarnate, so to speak, in Torah.<sup>13</sup> I would submit that the



#### **Sitting Scribe**

*Sitting Scribe.* Greek terracotta figurine from Thebes, Boeotia. 1st quarter 6th bc. Louvre, Paris, France. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY]

**Sirach 39:1-11**

Sir 39:1-11 speaks of the ideal Jewish sapiential scribe:

He who devotes himself to the study of the Law of the Most High

Will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients,

And will be concerned with prophecies,

He will preserve the discourse of notable men

And penetrate the subtleties of parables;

He will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs,

And be at home with the obscurities of parables.

He will serve among great men and appear before rulers . . .

If the great Lord is willing, he will be filled with the spirit of understanding;

He will pour forth words of wisdom

And give thanks to the Lord in prayer.

He will direct his counsel and knowledge aright,

And meditate on his secrets,

He will reveal instruction in his teaching,

And will glory in the Law of the Lord's covenant,

Many will praise his understanding,

And it will never be blotted out;

His memory will not disappear,

and his name will live through all generations,

Nations will declare his wisdom,

And the congregation will proclaim his praise . . .

First Evangelist sees himself in the light of this sort of description of a Jewish scribe, and so sees his task as interpreting and presenting the life and teachings of Jesus as revelatory wisdom from God. Indeed he will argue that Jesus himself, rather than Torah, is the incarnation of God's wisdom, and that it is therefore Jesus' own wise teaching that provides the hermeneutical key to understanding Law, proverb, prophecy, parable, and other things.

Of course it must be remembered that the First Evangelist, who ought more appropriately to be called the First (Christian) Scribe, saw Jesus as an eschatological and royal sage, not just another wise man. But the issue here is not the content of Jesus' teaching but its form. In form, Jesus' teaching is overwhelmingly sapiential in character, even when the content may involve eschatology, and we must remind ourselves that at least from the time of Daniel, if not before, there had been this sort of cross-fertilization of wisdom, prophecy, and apocalyptic.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, such literature that reflected this cross-fertilization had become enormously popular and influential and may even have helped spawn or at least spur on a whole series of "wise men" or sages in the era just prior to and contemporaneous with Jesus (cf. e.g., Hanina ben Dosa, Honi the circle drawer).<sup>15</sup>

Thus I must differ from D. E. Orton's characterization of our author as being an apocalyptic scribe more in the line of the authors of some of the Enochian literature than in line with Ben Sira.<sup>16</sup> To the contrary, the description we find in Matthew 13:52, which most scholars think provides a clue to help us understand the First Evangelist, points us in the direction of Ben Sira, not Enoch. It states, "Therefore every teacher of the Torah who has been instructed about the Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as

old.” Notice that the person in question (1) is a teacher; (2) knows the Law and teaches it; and (3) has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven (a, if not *the*, major subject of Jesus’ parables and other teachings). I would submit that the “new” has to do with what the teacher has recently been instructed about (the kingdom), whereas the old refers to Torah. This teacher in other words does not limit himself to the Torah, but also deals in new treasures, namely the various teachings of Jesus. In this regard it is understandable why the author of this Gospel is such a strong critic of Pharisees and their scribes. It is not the noble task of a scribe that he objects to; he *is* a scribe. Our author has issues with the Pharisaic scribes who dwell on Torah and its amplification and refuse to recognize the teaching of Jesus and his perspectives on earlier Jewish wisdom, including the Law. Our author is operating in a profoundly Jewish milieu where the teachings of the Pharisees rival the teachings the First Evangelist seeks to offer. [Anti-Jewish Elements in Matthew?]

Another helpful clue to the modus operandi of our author is found in Ecclesiastes 12:9-10. The sapiential scribe is one who must weigh or assess, study, and arrange or set in order the *meshalim*, the parables, proverbs, aphorisms, riddles of the wisdom tradition. This description reflects the three stages of literary composition—experimenting with, refining and shaping, and then arranging in a collection. The scribe is not merely to record but to enhance the wisdom examined by arrangement and elegance of expression, though always expressing himself with care. Wisdom is meant to be both a guide and goad in life, both a handhold and something that helps one get a grip on life (Eccl 12:11).<sup>17</sup> The scribe is an inspired interpreter and editor of his sources, but he is self-effacing and points to others as the sages or teachers whose material he is refining, restoring, and presenting.

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### Anti-Jewish Elements in Matthew?



The charge that our Gospel writer is anti-Jewish is oxymoronic. Our author is a Jew, and the fact that he disagrees with some tenets of some Jews, particularly Pharisees but also some Sadducees, does not make him either anti-Jewish or an anti-Semite. What can be said is that he does vigorously reject certain aspects of the Pharisaic program (and some of Sadducean theology) and is appalled by hypocrisy that exists in places within that movement. What can also be said is that he seeks to promote a different form of early Judaism centered on Jesus, and so having different views on the Law, the temple, and the land than Pharisees did. See A.-J. Levine, “Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of Matthew,” in *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels*, ed. William R. Farmer. Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1999: 9-36. I would differ with this essay where it says there are anti-Jewish elements in Matthew. That is too broad a claim; there are anti-Pharisaic and some anti-Sadducean elements in this Gospel to be sure.

### Greek-speaking Readership



The fact that the tax collector is called Matthew rather than Levi in this Gospel does not count against the theory that he re-Judaized his material. This is because the Evangelist is writing in Greek, and it is important to him that his most crucial characters, not only Peter, but also Matthew, have names that make sense for the Greek readers. The substance of his Gospel could be Jewish, but his main protagonists needed names recognizable in Greek. It could be asked, why is he writing in Greek if his immediate audience is in Galilee? The answer seems to be that the author takes seriously the mandate of the Great Commission and wants this Gospel to be used in Jewish Christian communities beyond just his own, which is to say in the Diaspora.

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If we were to list our Matthean scribe's editorial tendencies, they would certainly include the following: (1) this Evangelist re-Judaizes his Markan and Q material, making it more useful for his Jewish Christian audience [Greek-speaking Readership]. (2) There is an ameliorating tendency when it comes to dealing both with the portrait of Jesus and of the disciples. The harsher edges of Mark's account and some of the secrecy motif involving Jesus' identity is omitted or ameliorated. Jesus is more directly and clearly testified to even on public occasions like his baptism. He is also more directly said to be Immanuel, Son of David, Wisdom, and the like. The disciples, while still depicted as obtuse, are said to have at least a little faith on several occasions, and it is the Zebedee's mother, not the brothers, who ask for the box seats when Jesus' kingdom comes. (3) There is a considerable focus on the fulfillment of Scripture, especially at the outset of the work, but also notably in the Passion Narrative. (4) An apologetic motif comes to the fore especially in the Passion and Resurrection narratives. The empty tomb stories are especially amplified in this direction. (5) As shall be shown in detail in a moment, this Gospel has a thoroughgoing sapiential agenda and perspective through which the entire Gospel tradition is being read. (6) The focus on Peter and his role as well as on the formation of Jesus' community so that it will carry on beyond Jesus' own day is notable. (7) The tendency of doubling things is noteworthy—two blind men are healed, Jesus apparently rides on two animals, the demoniac of Mark 5:1-17 becomes two demoniacs in Matthew 8:28-34. (8) The First Evangelist rarely shortens or omits any Old Testament references he finds in his sources. To the contrary, he frequently adds quotations and expands allusions. As D. Allison and W. D. Davies say, this evangelist obviously knows and treasures the Old Testament more than other evangelists, and more to the point, he feels compelled to use it and stress its fulfillment.<sup>18</sup> This points to both a Jewish Christian author and audience, in all likelihood. When we couple these

features with the heavy focus on teaching material in Matthew, we begin to see what distinguishes this Gospel from Mark and Luke. But much more can be said about the First Evangelist as a scribe. What we have said thus far makes clear that we cannot see him as a mere copier of earlier documents. If we were to characterize him, we would have to say he is remarkably like the description of the sapiential scribe we find in Sirach.

All the canonical Gospels are like portraits, and as such are inherently interpretative, presenting Jesus from their own particular angles of incidence. The First Evangelist wishes to stress the Jewish character of Jesus and his ministry while at the same time insisting on a high christological take on that ministry. He wants to insist that it was a good thing for Jesus to focus on a ministry to Jews, without in any way denying the goodness of the later mission to Gentiles. He wants to show the newness of much of Jesus' teaching while still insisting that Jesus was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies, and indeed the Law would not pass away until he had fulfilled everything in God's plan. It is not surprising then that the Evangelist, like his Master, was amplifying on the sacred traditions once given in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>19</sup> But this raises the question of the genre of Matthew's Gospel in an acute way.

### **The Genre of Matthew's Gospel**

Readers, throughout much of church history, have understood Matthew's Gospel to be some sort of biography, and recent study of ancient biographies has helpfully shown how Matthew fits into such a genre.<sup>20</sup> One suspects that the modern rejection of this thesis by some scholars is often caused by the assumption that since Matthew does not look like a modern biography (an exhaustive womb to tomb account of a person's life complete with detailed analysis of the development of the person's personality and career), it could not be any sort of biography. Ancient biographers however did not feel compelled to spend much if any time on a figure's early years or youth, for in general it was not much believed that human personality developed over time. Personality was rather something one was born with, and it was revealed over time. This being the case, the adult person could be focused on, and this was more often than not the character of ancient biographical accounts. It was also the case that ancient biographers did not feel compelled to present their material in strict chronological order. Rather, they frequently arranged the material topically, as we see the First Evangelist doing; he alternates narratives with blocks of teaching material (see below).

One of the things that in fact distinguishes Matthew from the Qumran literature and some rabbinic literature is that while it is God-centered literature in one sense, the more specific form is christocentric in character. Jesus, whatever else one wants to say about him, certainly had a human story capable of being written up as a biography, which would not be true of the one Jesus called “Abba.” The Qumran literature, like Old Testament literature, is about a God who intervenes in human history, not one who also has a human story. Thus, Matthew’s Gospel presents us with a new kind of Jewish literature—a biography about a person who is both human and has a human story, but who also is thought of as divine.<sup>21</sup>

Ancient biographers in general were not writing for a technical audience but a more general and popular one, and their focus was on using accounts that best revealed the character and virtues of the person in question. The issue of the figure’s identity and character was of utmost importance. Plutarch puts it this way:

For it is not histories I am writing, but lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, no a slight thing like a phrase or a joke often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fell. . . . Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul of a person, and by means of these to portray the life. . . .” (*Alex.* 2-3)

Several things are striking about this quote in relationship to Matthew in particular. (1) Notice that Plutarch stresses that often what a person says best reveals his character—a turn of phrase or a joke. The Matthean Jesus is of course famous for his major discourses, but he is also famous for certain key phrases like “Son of Man” and “kingdom of heaven,” and even for the occasional humorous one-liner (“it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle . . .”). (2) The author of an ancient biography was trying to reveal the soul of the person in question, who that person truly was at the core of their identity, through the indirect method of portraiture using words and deeds of the figure rather than extended commentary or direct interview. [\[Direct Interview for Biography\]](#) It is no accident that the central issue of Matthew’s Gospel is revealing who Jesus actually was—Immanuel, Son of David, Son of God, Son of Man, Wisdom. (3) As Plutarch says, the focus in an ancient biography is on character and virtues and vices. One of the

### Direct Interview for Biography



Direct interview or dialogue with the subject of the work was rare in an ancient biography because of the encomiastic natures of such biographies. They tended only to be written after the person was dead, not least because it was believed by many in antiquity that how a person died best revealed their character. Best to not write the story until one saw how it ended.

major purposes and functions of such biographies was mimesis, the imitation of the virtues of the great person. It is no accident that there is such a stress in Matthew's Gospel on following and imitating Christ; indeed, this is precisely what becoming a full-fledged disciple entails. Matthew's Gospel, in one sense, can rightly be called a manual for discipleship (35 percent of this Gospel is comprised in just the first five discourses). It is thus correct to say that one of the main aims of Matthew's Gospel is hortatory, but what is not so often recognized is that the focus on Christology is not an end in itself, but rather a means of portraying the Christ as an example for the sake of imitation. How Jesus behaves sets the pattern for how his followers should behave—they should take up their crosses and follow him.

Thus, the strong stress of the First Evangelist on making clear who Jesus was (Son of God, etc.) and what he was like reflects the biographer's eye and interest. Unlike Luke, whose concern is sometimes with synchronisms (relating the micro-history of Jesus to the macro-history of the day—see Luke 2:1-3 or 3:1-4), Matthew is more concerned with adequately and accurately revealing Jesus' character and career. The genre of biography includes a concern for historical accuracy, without making the issue of causation between historical events the main focus. People, personality, character, and career rather than historic events are paramount. As C. Keener says,

Matthew did not write his Gospel without forethought: he was a historian-biographer and interpreter not just a storyteller. . . . If Matthew's basic genre suggests historical intention, his relatively conservative use of sources (where we can check them, especially Mark) indicates that Matthew's other purposes did not obscure an essential historical intention.<sup>22</sup>

Keener, rightly in my judgment, concludes that Matthew's Gospel should be considered an ancient biography.

## The Structure of Matthew's Gospel

This Gospel was written when there was still a living relationship in Jesus' community with forms of Judaism that did not involve a belief in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. A considerable concern in this Gospel is with the observance of the commandments, the Mosaic Law, and indeed there is even the famous uniquely Matthean sentence about none of the Law passing away until all comes to pass (Matt 5:18). In short, this Gospel seems to be written by and for a community of Jesus' followers who were overwhelmingly Jewish not only in their ethnic extraction but also in their orientation and patterns of daily living. Let us first consider some of the emphases in and the structure of this Gospel as clues to the audience the First Evangelist was likely addressing.<sup>23</sup> [A Chart of Matthew as Biography]

### A Chart of Matthew as Biography

The following chart comes to us from R. Burridge's landmark treatment of Matthew as biography.

Chapters	Verses	Topic	Percentage of Work
1–2	48	Prologue and Infancy	4.5
3–4	42	Preparation and Beginnings	3.9
5–7	111	Sermon on the Mount (discourse)	10.4
8–9	72	Ministry	6.7
10–11:1	41	Mission of the Disciples (discourse)	3.8
11:2–12	79	Ministry and Conflict	7.4
13:1–52	52	Parables of the Kingdom (discourse)	4.9
13:53–17	136	Ministry and Peter's Confession	12.7
18	35	Christian Community (discourse)	3.3
19–23	195	Journey to Jerusalem	18.2
24–25	97	Eschatology (discourse)	9.1
26–28	161	Last Supper, Passion, Resurrection	15.1
	<b>Total 1,069</b>		<b>Total 100 percent</b>

R. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 197.

There has been considerable debate about what to make of the structure of Matthew's Gospel. Not surprisingly, it has most often been noted how the alternating between narrative and discourse, with the discourses tending to group material topically (e.g., a collection of parables in Matt 13 or an eschatological discourse in Matt 24–25),<sup>24</sup> lends this Gospel a certain back and forth kind of flow or motion. In fact, this very structure makes clear that the First Evangelist is not simply telling a story. There is a certain chronological order to the material, which can be seen to have

three divisions (4:17; 16:21; 26:16), each demarcated by the phrase “from then on” just as there is a rounding off of all but one of the discourses with the phrase “when he had finished speaking” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

What exactly are we to make of the fivefold or sixfold division of the discourse material? Is this really a new Moses motif? [Discourse in Matthew] It could just as easily be said to be a Wisdom literature motif, for both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes have a fivefold division, as does Psalms. The issue then becomes whether we should see these blocks of teaching as some kind of *lex nova* or new law. Perhaps a case can be made for some of the material in Matthew 5–7 being viewed that way, but the collections of parables and the eschatological discourse hardly suits such a description. Indeed, in terms of substance, much of the material is sapiential in character even within Matthew 5–7. Perhaps it is best to say then that the First Evangelist is trying to portray Jesus as a giver of revealed truth in various forms—law, prophecy, wisdom utterances—indeed a giver of truth in all the major forms truth took in the Hebrew Scriptures (Law, Prophets, Writings). Jesus is like Moses, only greater; like the prophets, only greater (being the fulfillment of prophecy and not merely the one who utters predictions); and like Solomon, only greater, for he is Wisdom come in the flesh. In other words, in Jesus we find the fulfillment of all the converging lines of sacred literature and teaching. But it is right to especially emphasize that the way this Gospel is voiced or nuanced or presented gives it a particularly sapiential flavor, as will be demonstrated in some detail in a moment.<sup>25</sup>

First, we need to say something about whether there are actually five or six discourses in Matthew. In my view, there are definitely six, not five, although five of them end with the formula mentioned above. Matthew 23 needs to be seen for what it is—a stand-alone discourse offered to a different audience and in a different setting than the apocalyptic discourse in Matthew 24–25. As Matthew 23:1 shows, this discourse is directed to both outsiders and insiders—disciples and the crowds—whereas the other discourses, including chapters 24–25, are directed to the disciples (see Matt 24:1). The woes on the religious officials make sense in the temple precincts where Jesus is said to have been teaching

### Discourse in Matthew



While there is some teaching material in other places in Matthew (e.g., in Matt 23), it is clear that Matt 23 is to be seen as separate from Matt 24–25, and Matt 23 is not portrayed as the same sort of discourse. It does not have the fixed formula we find at the end of the five discourses (see the end of the discourse in Matt 7, 10, 13, 18, and 25). As Allison and Davies point out, the material in Matt 23, like the material in Matt 12:25-32 and 39-42, is more debate material with those who are not followers of Jesus rather than instruction for the disciples. This makes Matt 23 an extension and conclusion of the polemics in Matt 21–22. Yet it is clearly some sort of discourse or teaching material, even if directed to a different audience.

D.C. Allison and W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, v.1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 2004), 61 n. 31.

(Matt 21:23), but the teaching beginning in 24:1 responds to the remarks of disciples and is directed to disciples in another venue, outside the temple precincts. Since then there are six discourses and not five, this could be said to show Jesus is one greater than Moses or David or Solomon, to each of whom was attributed a fivefold collection of sacred writings (Law, Psalms, Proverbs), but it does not fit the argument that suggests Jesus is primarily portrayed as following a Mosaic paradigm in this Gospel.

### **The Character of Matthew's Gospel: A Sapiential Reading**

This commentary emphasizes the sapiential character of the Gospel of Matthew, and in the material that follows a complete sapiential reading of the entire Gospel is provided. Here the nature of Matthew's Gospel as a sapiential work is discussed.

It is my conviction that a significant lacuna in the study of Matthew's Gospel is that this Gospel has too often been related to the idea of Christ as a new Moses—which in my judgment is not really a major motif in this Gospel—and is too seldom read as a sapiential presentation of the life of Jesus. [Matthew as Sapiential Presentation of Jesus' Life] This is not to say there have been no helpful studies on Matthew involving Wisdom literature and a sapiential reading of the presentation of Jesus. The works of M. J. Suggs, C. Deutsch, and M. D. Johnson come immediately to mind, to mention only a few.<sup>26</sup> But these sorts of studies have concentrated on too few passages and have not tried to read the whole Gospel in light of such considerations. Here in this introduction, we intend to give the reader a bird's-eye view of what such a reading reveals. This can be taken as something of a road map to the interpretation offered in the commentary as whole. Let us begin with general considerations.

The First Evangelist carefully constructs his Gospel as a word to the wise (or at least to Jewish Christians, some of whom probably were already teachers). Matthew does not see himself as like later rabbinic scribes<sup>27</sup> but rather as standing in the mold of the sapiential scribes described in Sirach 39:1-3: "He seeks out the wisdom of

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#### **Matthew as Sapiential Presentation of Jesus' Life**



As A.-J. Levine has remarked to me, since by the time this evangelist wrote Moses could be seen as something of a philosopher or sage himself, having been co-opted by the wisdom tradition, this sapiential presentation need not be an either/or proposition. The dominant orientation is not the idea that Jesus is like or imitates Moses.

all the ancients, and is concerned with prophecies; he preserves the sayings of the famous and penetrates the subtleties of parables; he seeks out the hidden meanings of proverbs. . . .” It would appear that our author is indeed much like the scribe or wise teacher mentioned in Matthew 13:52, “who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven [and is] like the owner of a house who brings out of the storeroom new treasures as well as old.” The Evangelist has skillfully woven together his source material to produce a compelling portrait of Jesus as both sage and Wisdom, as both the revealer of God and as Immanuel, as well as drawing on other major images of Christ as Son of God, Son of Man, and Christ.

The Evangelist does not allude to himself as a sage but rather as a scribe, as is probably the case with some of his audience. This distinction is important to the First Evangelist because he wants to portray Jesus as the great sage and master teacher, but himself and his audience as only recorders and passers down of the tradition. Scribes are not the originators of the tradition but rather the transmitters, interpreters, and appliers of it. It is not an accident that Peter, the first key disciple of Jesus, is portrayed in Matthew 16:17ff. as the one given the authority to bind and loose in the sense of making decisions and giving certain commandments about what one is bound to do and what one is free to do. In other words, Peter is portrayed as the disciple given the task of interpreting the Jesus tradition for the church. There is a deliberate contrast between his teaching and that of the Pharisees who, instead of using (hermeneutical) keys to open the gate to the kingdom as Peter does, do not allow people to go into the kingdom (Matt 23:13, 15). The commissioning of Peter in this role provides the climax of the first main part of Matthew’s narrative. Of course, the climax of the whole work may be compared to Matthew 16 in this matter, for 28:18-20 indicates that it is the duty of disciples in general to make other disciples, which involves teaching them. In Matthew, but not in Mark, Jesus instructs his disciples on the dos and don’ts of being teachers (5:19). The whole point of mentioning the scribes’ and Pharisees’ righteousness in 5:20 is that they are rival teachers. Again in Matthew 10:24-25a, a passage not paralleled elsewhere, a disciple is said not to be above his master teacher (Jesus), but rather is called to be like his teacher.

It is plausible that the First Gospel arose out of a school setting and was meant to be used as a teaching aid for Jewish Christian teachers to use with their flocks. It is no accident that Jesus is most clearly presented in this Gospel as a teacher with learners (the meaning of *mathētēs*, which we translate as disciple). For example,

the term *mathētēs*, which occurs only in the first five books of the New Testament, we find some seventy-three times in Matthew, but only forty-six times in Mark and thirty-seven times in Luke. It is also not an accident that in Matthew discipleship is defined as keeping Jesus' commands or words (cf. Matt 18:19; Matt 28:18-20). It is obvious enough that Matthew's Gospel focuses on instructions for disciples. Notice too how Matthew's Gospel ends with stories about how the disciples both doubt and believe even after Jesus is raised from the dead.

The First Evangelist focuses on Jesus as a Jewish sage and concentrates on his public forms of wisdom teaching—parables, aphorisms, riddles, beatitudes. Matthew's Gospel, like other Jewish wisdom literature, highlights the use of Father language for God or Father-Son language. In Matthew, "Father" is used of God some forty-two times, compared to only five times in Mark (none of which occur before Mark 8:38) and only fifteen times in Luke, some of which come from Q. This usage is closely tied not only with an understanding of Jesus as the Son of God, but also of disciples as sons and daughters of God. Theology, Christology, and discipleship are linked in this Gospel through the use of Father language. When one believes Jesus is God's Son, one can come to relate to God as Father, as Jesus did. Matthew stresses this in a text like Matthew 11:27b, where it is made clear that one can only come to know the Father truly through the Son.

Thus Matthew edits and arranges his material in careful fashion to present a certain kind of portrait of the central character in the narrative—Jesus. In general, as was common in ancient biographies, the method of portraiture is indirect, allowing words and deeds and relationships to reveal the identity and qualities of the main character. A close examination of the editorial work shows the type of pedagogy the author has in mind. Strikingly, in Matthew's Gospel, while the disciples repeatedly address Jesus as "Lord" (cf. e.g., 8:21, 25; 14:28; 16:22), when a stranger or a Jewish leader addresses Jesus it is as "rabbi" or "teacher" (cf. 8:19; 12:38; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36). Notice that only the betrayer Judas among the disciples calls Jesus "rabbi" (26:25, 49). What this tells us immediately is that the First Evangelist does not see titles or terms of respect like "rabbi" or "teacher" as adequate to describe Jesus.

This is not to say such titles are inaccurate, for indeed texts like Matthew 23:8-10 make plain that Matthew does want to say Jesus is a sage or teacher, indeed the teacher of the disciples. Thus the disciples, who will in turn disciple others, should not seek to label

themselves as rabbi or use the customary term of endearment “abba” or “Father” sometimes used of Jewish teachers or wise men. Note too, that in Matthew 26:17-19 near the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry Jesus, calls himself “the teacher” with the assumption the audience will know immediately who this is. The setting apart of Jesus as sage, and more than sage, from other potential teachers is also seen in the contrast found at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, where Jesus, who teaches with independent authority, is contrasted with *their* scribes. The point here is twofold—Jesus is no mere scribe, and also the problem is not with scribes in general but with “their” scribes.

The image of Jesus as sage or teacher is so crucial for Matthew that in editorial summary passages, he cites teaching ahead of preaching and healing as Jesus’ chief task (cf. 4:23; 9:35; 11:1). This is all the more striking when one compares the parallel Markan summary at Mark 1:39 where there is no mention of teaching, and when one compares Matthew 11:1 to Luke 7:1 where in the Lukan passage there is no use of the term “teaching.” The content of this teaching is seen repeatedly to be parables, aphorisms, and wisdom discourses. This image of Jesus as sage or teacher and his disciples as scribes or teachers is crucial and gets at the heart of some of things that make Matthew’s contribution to the christological discussion distinctive.

Of course, much has been made of the suggestion that Matthew’s central idea is that Christ is the new Moses, offering five great discourses, the first even from a mount. Without totally discounting this idea, too much has been made of it. For one thing, it seems clear that there are probably six discourses (depending on what one does with Matt 23 in relationship to Matt 24–25), and for another in the famous antitheses the Evangelist seems as interested in contrasting Jesus with Moses as comparing the two. After all, Moses did not ban oath taking, all killing, or adultery of the heart! Nor did Moses teach in parables and aphorisms. Even in the birth narratives where a Moses motif has sometimes been detected, it is surely a secondary motif because Matthew 1 is by and large about how Jesus can be called Son of David, and Matthew 2 is about how he can be called Son of God (cf. below). Moses is not a Son of David or of God, and he is certainly not a Son of Man figure; these are the three primary titles Matthew applies to Jesus.

We must conclude that the “new Moses” idea is at most a secondary theme and in fact may be raised only to show that Jesus was greater than Moses, not a clone of Moses, so one must look elsewhere to discern Matthew’s distinctive contribution to the



**Christ Teaching**

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). *Christ Teaching*, from the Hundred Gilder Plate, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, Austria. [Credit: Art Resource, NY]

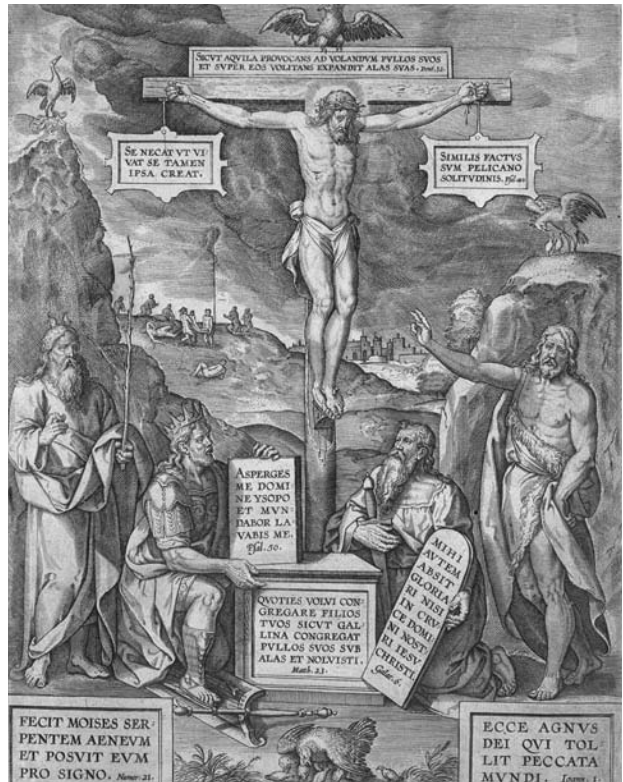
christological discussion. Far more prominent is the theme that Jesus is some sort of Davidic royal figure. But what sort? I would argue that our Evangelist makes his most distinctive christological contribution by showing (1) how Jesus is a messianic Son of David, like but greater than Solomon, offering even greater Wisdom; (2) how he is Wisdom come in person and so embodying and conveying the very presence of God to God's people (Immanuel); (3) how he is Son of God whose characteristic intimacy with the Father is modeled in part on the relationship of Wisdom to God in Jewish sapiential literature; and (4) how he is the great eschatological or apocalyptic sage, offering God's final teaching for salvation.

What then happens when an early Jewish Christian wishes to tell the story of Jesus as being a person like Solomon but even greater, being the very embodiment of Wisdom on earth? I would suggest that for a largely Jewish audience such as he has, he would stress that Jesus is *the* Son of David in a way his source did not (note the phrase is found eleven times in Matthew but only four in Mark and Luke and *none* in John). The Jewish tone of this Gospel is set right from the beginning where Matthew expands on his Markan source by adding the birth narratives, which stress that Jesus is the

Son of David, the seventh son of the seventh son.

It was also the case, however, that in Jewish tradition, ultimately Wisdom was the teacher of God's people (cf. Prov 1:20-30; 8:10-16; Sir 4:24; Wis 6:14; 8:4). Matthew assigns this role of Wisdom as the teacher to Jesus himself, which explains how Matthew can portray Jesus as both sage and Wisdom. In calling Jesus the Teacher, a sapiential Christology would be implied to those steeped in Jewish Wisdom material (cf., e.g., Wisdom of Solomon where the teacher is ultimately Wisdom who inspires Solomon but also Solomon as great sage).

A sapiential reading of the entire Gospel of Matthew is given in the commentary of the following chapters. Please see the sidebar inserted at the beginning of each section.



### Christ on the Cross

Jerome Wierix (1553–1619). *Christ on the Cross*, surrounded by Moses, David, Saints Paul and John the Baptist. Undated. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany. [Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.]

## The Provenance, Audience, and Date of the First Gospel

In view of the nature of Matthew's Gospel, the questions of provenance and audience are somewhat easier to adjudicate, though all these matters are intertwined. The Jewish character of the Gospel favors a context in which the Christian audience to whom the First Evangelist writes is in a location where there is a considerable Jewish presence, and furthermore a place where the majority of the audience itself is Jewish. At the same time, as D. Hagner has pointed out, the audience seems to have been in something of a no man's land. They were a double minority. On the one hand they were Jews, but a minority sect of Jewish followers of Jesus. On the other hand they were Christians, but by the time this Gospel was written most Christians were Gentiles.<sup>28</sup> So these Jewish Christians are struggling to continue to justify not only their own existence but an ongoing witness to Israel, whom God had not forsaken.

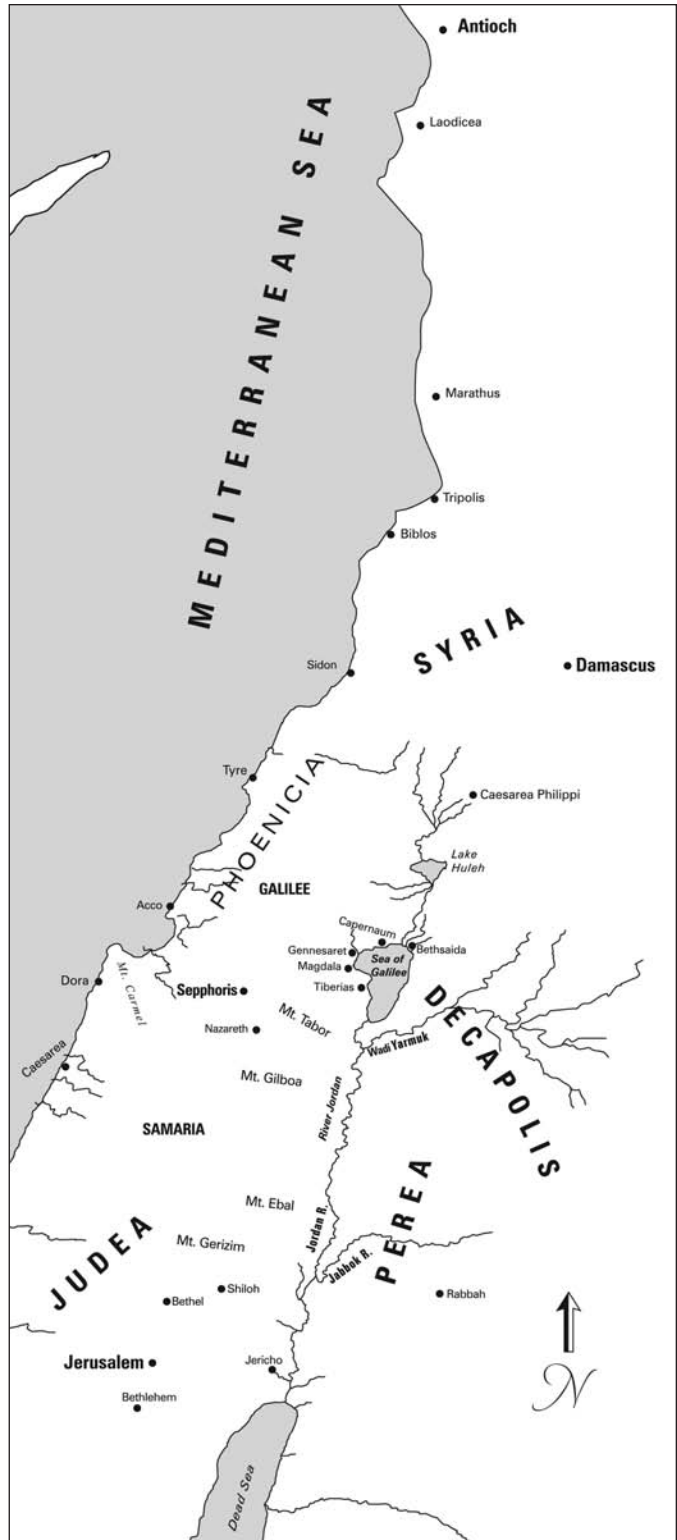
This probably narrows down our locale options somewhat, and more often than not places such as Syria (either Damascus or Antioch) or Galilee or its vicinity have been suggested as locales for the composition and delivery of this Gospel. While Antioch seems to be the preference of many commentators on Matthew, there are problems with that conclusion. For one thing, we know there was, long before Matthew's Gospel circulated, a Christian community in Antioch that included both Jews and Gentiles (see Acts 11–13), and indeed it included so many Gentiles that Luke tells us this was the first place where followers of Jesus were called *Christianoi* (Acts 11:26). For another thing, Paul's letter to the Galatians makes clear that already in about AD 50 or not long thereafter, Jews like Peter were fellowshipping with Gentiles in Gentile homes in Antioch until a protest was lodged by "the men who came from James." It was also the Antioch church that first sent out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to the Gentiles. This tells us, I think, that we should not see the Christian community in Antioch as predominantly or overwhelmingly Jewish. Even if there was some retrenchment or partial separation between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Antioch after the debacle recorded in Galatians 2, there is no reason to think of separate communities. Is it really convincing to suggest that a Christian audience in Antioch after the fall of the temple in AD 70 would be more likely than, say, an audience in Damascus or Galilee to have concerns about Israel, the Law, and the like? I think not.

There is also the matter of population. Antioch was one of the largest cities in the empire with estimates ranging up to 250,000 people or more. In such a setting, it should have been easy for a tiny minority sect of Jewish Christians to become rather invisible, even though there were many non-Christian Jews in the city. But the ethos of Matthew's Gospel seems to suggest a situation where there was a Jewish majority of neighbors who were not part of the sect. It seems to suggest a situation where there was an inter-Jewish debate and conflict over Jesus. Does this really describe Antioch in the latter part of the first century AD?<sup>29</sup>

In addition, I think it is more likely that an audience of Jesus' followers with no significant number of Gentile converts in their midst would be receptive to arguments about Jesus sent to the lost sheep of Israel, and the like, than an audience with many Gentile converts. They would be more receptive to arguments that the Gentile mission was intentionally a post-ministry of the Jesus phenomenon, while still urging that a mission to Jews was in order.<sup>30</sup> They would be more receptive to an understanding of a portrayal

of Jesus as Jewish sage and Wisdom. And there is this to consider as well: Matthew the tax collector was Galilean and would have had to know some Greek to practice his trade in that border region. After all, he lived in a region that could on occasion be called “Galilee of the Gentiles,” though in fact there is no solid archaeological evidence of any significant presence of Gentiles in Galilee.<sup>31</sup> A large majority of the residents of Galilee were Jews in the New Testament era, including after the fall of the temple in AD 70.<sup>32</sup> If Matthew did have special access to the birth stories and other unique Jesus material, then he must surely have gotten these in Galilee. Furthermore, our Evangelist had direct access to Matthew’s special material in a way that Luke and Mark did not, so I would suggest it is easier to explain both why this Gospel is attributed to Matthew and why it was assembled as it was by the First Evangelist if its provenance is in fact Galilee.<sup>33</sup>

Various other features of Matthew’s Gospel also point us in the direction of a Galilean provenance. If we ask where it was more likely that an Evangelist would speak about “their synagogues” (plural) repeatedly (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 13:54; 23:34), would refer negatively



Palestine



**Sea of Galilee**

[Photo Credit: Jim Pitts]

to the term “rabbi” (23:8; 26:25, 49), would continually critique Jewish leaders (ch. 23), and would repeatedly insist on Jesus’ messianic identity and ministry,<sup>34</sup> surely within Israel rather than outside Israel is more probable. Whatever else one can say about Antioch in the last couple of decades in the first century there is no real historical evidence of polemics between the synagogue or synagogues there and the Christian community that included Jewish Christians. Indeed, even the much earlier Galatians suggests only an in-house debate in Antioch, not an inter-faith one. In addition to these considerations, small linguistic clues in the Gospel itself suggest a Galilean provenance. For example, in Matthew 7:10 we have reference to a harmless water snake commonly found in the Sea of Galilee (*tropidontus tessellatus*), which was nonetheless something of nuisance because it would take the bait of a fisherman (cf. Matt 17:27).<sup>35</sup>

The thesis of this commentary, then, is that the audience of the Gospel of Matthew lived in Galilee and was predominantly, if not almost exclusively, Jewish Christian. This thesis also makes good sense in light of various things W. D. Davies and others pointed out long ago about how Matthew reacts to Pharisaism in a particularly noteworthy way. This Gospel is written in some proximity to

a stronghold of Pharisaism, and that is surely a more likely suggestion in the Holy Land than somewhere else. [Pharisees v. Others] While this Gospel is written within shouting distance of Pharisaic Judaism, the community of the Evangelist is no longer part of that particular stream of early Judaism; rather it is part of the messianic movement of Jesus. The Evangelist seeks to redefine the course or direction of Israel's history as pointing toward Jesus and needing to be redefined in light of the Christ event.

It is possible that Matthew's community developed in due course into the sect later called the Nazoreans by Jerome and Epiphanius, a sect that had a high Christology and continued to be observant of Jewish law and traditions.<sup>36</sup> Like the community of James in Jerusalem,<sup>37</sup> this group believed strongly in an ongoing witnessing to Jews (see Acts 21:20), whom God had by no means forsaken, while fully endorsing the mission to Gentiles as well. But precisely because this Evangelist believes so strongly in the ongoing witness to Jews, he has taken the trouble to re-Judaize the Jesus tradition, which both Mark and Luke had taken some pains to Hellenize to make it more user-friendly for Gentiles.

Can we be more specific as to where in Galilee this Gospel was written? There are several clues in the text. Firstly, there is the fact that this Gospel mentions cities more frequently than villages, even in the material it shares in common with Mark. Twenty-six times the First Evangelist refers to *cities*, whereas Mark uses the term *polis* only eight times. Mark uses the term *village* seven times (*kōmē*), while we find it only four times in Matthew.<sup>38</sup> Notice too that the disciples are encouraged to flee from city to city, not to the hills (Matt 10:23; 23:34).<sup>39</sup> This suggests the author is in and is writing to an urban setting. Secondly, as A. Overman has pointed out, the frequent references to debates with Jewish officials suggest the author and audience share an environment that is a center for Jewish thought and life.<sup>40</sup> Thirdly, there is the issue of the language of this Gospel. Sometimes it has been argued that since the Gospel of Matthew is written in good koine Greek, it must be written to an audience living outside of Israel. This is by no means necessarily the case. The Hellenization of the region had transpired long before Jesus' day, and it had left an enduring and profound impact on the Jewish culture.<sup>41</sup> The urban centers in Galilee, including in lower Galilee, were also centers where Greek was the second language of choice not only for speaking but espe-

#### Pharisees v. Others



Though the arguments of Davies are somewhat dated now, I do not buy the notion that the term Pharisee in this Gospel is simply a cipher for "Jew." This Evangelist knows very well the difference between Pharisees and Sadducees, or Pharisees and Jewish Christians. We are not yet in the situation that Galilean Jews were in after the Bar Kochba revolt in the early second century, much less in the situation of Galilean rabbinic Judaism where there was a deliberate turning away from Greek.



### Capernaum

Fishing boat returning to Capernaum. Shore of the Lake of Galilee, Israel. Saint Peter and the apostles fished here.

Location: Israel. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY]

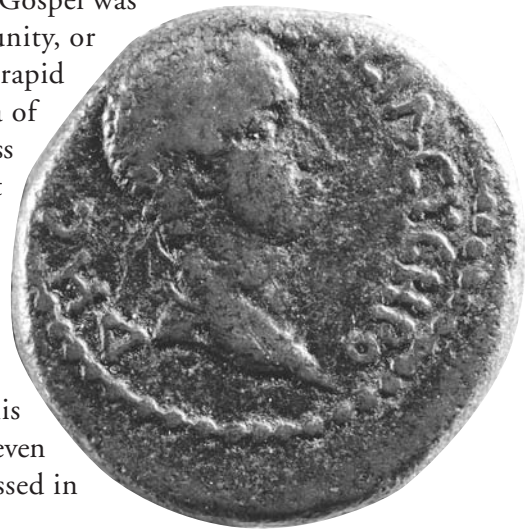
cially for writing. Recent archaeological work has confirmed that cities like Sepphoris, Tiberias, Bethsaida, and even Capernaum were places where Greek was in frequent use.<sup>42</sup> After the fall of the temple in AD 70, this became increasingly the case in Galilee. Josephus notes that while Aramaic was the main spoken language in Israel, many Jews also knew Greek (*Ant.* 20.11.1ff.), and we even have a rabbi from a slightly later period urging “Why use the Syrian language [i.e., Aramaic] in Israel? Either use the holy tongue [Hebrew] or Greek!” (*b. Sotah 49b*). The Greek of this Gospel suggests an urban setting, not necessarily a setting outside of Israel.<sup>43</sup>

Fourthly, it is sometimes argued that the prominence of and special material about Peter in Matthew’s Gospel favors the locale of Antioch, since we know he was there (see Gal 2). But it certainly cannot be said that the prominence of Peter favors Antioch over a city in Galilee for the provenance of this Gospel, and particularly not over Capernaum. Peter was from Galilee and is even said to have a home in Capernaum in this Gospel. Furthermore, Matthew’s Gospel says Jesus went and lived in Capernaum (4:13).

Even Jesus himself is not portrayed as a pure itinerant but rather one that had a home in Capernaum despite all his travels. Notice too that in Matthew 9:1 Capernaum is again referred to as Jesus' own town, and it is apparently on the outskirts of this town that Jesus encounters Matthew and calls him to discipleship (9:9-13).

In my view, either Capernaum, which we know was a center for Jesus and his followers, including apparently Matthew, or Sepphoris near Nazareth is likely the setting of this Gospel.<sup>44</sup> Of the two, Capernaum is a more likely setting for two reasons: (1) there is clear archaeological evidence of a Christian community continuing in this locale for many generations after the time of Christ, and even evidence that Peter's home was used as a center for Christian meetings long after his death in the 60s (see below); (2) Sepphoris, being a capital city for Herod Antipas, was much more Hellenized in its cultural expression and would have been problematic in various ways for followers of Jesus in a way Capernaum would not have been. [Avoiding Antipas] Sepphoris and Tiberias are nowhere mentioned in this Gospel, any more than Antioch is. I agree with Luz that it is unlikely this Gospel was written in a small and remote community, or else it becomes difficult to explain its rapid spread, but this takes us into the area of dating the Gospel, which we will address in a moment.<sup>45</sup> It is interesting that even as late as the eighth through eleventh centuries when the church had no meaningful Jewish presence in its midst, scribal notations in manuscripts of Matthew for that period (K, 126, 174) continue to locate this Gospel's audience in Israel, sometimes even in Jerusalem. Jerome had already stressed in the fifth century that Matthew composed his work for Jewish Christians in the Holy Land (more specifically Judea; see his *de vir. Ill. 3*)<sup>46</sup>

Can we say something more specific about the social situation of Kefer Nahum, the village named after the prophet Nahum? First of all, it was a small town taking up at a maximum 42 acres and with a population of perhaps as many as 1,500,



#### Bronze Coin of Herod Antipas

Bronze Coin of Herod Antipas, Tetrach of Galilee, and inscription. Reifenberg Collection. Jerusalem, Israel. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY]

#### Avoiding Antipas



For example, there was the known history of Antipas and how he treated John the Baptist, plus there was Jesus' dismissive evaluation of Antipas as a fox. Jesus and his followers seem to have avoided locales where there might be a confrontation with Antipas or his entourage, which is just one more piece of evidence that Jesus was not a revolutionary in the usual sense of that term.

but not more. Some excavators have argued that the city was set out in a grid pattern with residences grouped in *insulae*, but this has been disputed. It is not clear that there was any central planning for this town. What has been found is a multi-room mausoleum and a Roman bathhouse that dates to the second or third century AD. In the excavations around the famous synagogue, stone vessels used for purification (see John 2) have been found. The synagogue that now dominates the landscape in Capernaum dates probably to the second or third century, but its foundation seems to go back to a first-century synagogue. The basalt walls and the ceramic pavement seem to be from the first century AD. In regard to the excavations at Peter's house, there is clear evidence of unusual renovations in the mid- to late first century involving the plastering of its ceiling, walls, and floor, which suggests this had become a regular meeting place for Jesus' followers.<sup>47</sup> More clearly, walls that were erected in the fourth century AD bear Christian graffiti in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and Syriac, attesting to this certainly being a pilgrimage spot and meeting hall in that era. Two of these graffiti appear to mention Peter himself. It is not surprising then that we have historical record of the pilgrim Egeria in the fourth century visiting this house of Peter's, and by the fifth century an octagonal church had been built on the spot. The excavators claim to have found evidence that Jewish Christians met in Peter's house in the latter part of the first century AD.<sup>48</sup> Whether they have actually found such archaeological evidence or not, Matthew's Gospel seems to provide literary evidence that points in such a direction.<sup>49</sup>

As for the date of this Gospel's writing, it must surely have been written after Mark's Gospel, which places it sometime after AD 68–70.<sup>50</sup> One must also say that even if Mark's Gospel circulated widely, and I see no reason why it may not have,<sup>51</sup> we must allow for some time to have gone by before the scribe who composed the First Gospel had received and digested Mark, had gotten in hand Matthew's special material, and had gotten hold of a form of the material we call Q, the sayings collection that makes up so much of the Matthean discourse material. No date better suits the composition of this Gospel than sometime either in the later 70s or early 80s.<sup>52</sup> This is long enough after the Jewish war for things to have calmed down in Galilee, but not so long that Jewish followers of Jesus were no longer much in evidence in the region.

That Matthew's Gospel should probably not be dated much later than we have just argued is suggested by the following facts: (1) Ignatius seems to know this Gospel's special editing (cf. *Smyrn.*

1.1//Matt 3:15; *Phil* 3:1//Matt 15:13). Furthermore, Polycarp certainly knows this Gospel (*Pol.* 2.3//Matt 7:1-2; 5:3, 6, 10; *Pol.* 7.2//Matt 6:13; 26:41). This means the First Gospel was known in Smyrna no later than about AD 115. (2) More telling is the fact that Clement of Rome knows this Gospel (cf. *1 Clem.* 24.5 to Matt 13:3-9; *1 Clem.* 46.6-8 to Matt 18:6-7). This means this Gospel was known in Rome before AD 100. Scholars have frequently pointed to various portions of the *Didache* as being thoroughly familiar with and dependent on the Gospel of Matthew (see *Did.* 2.2; 3.15; 5.38-42; 6.9-15; 15.13). The *Didache* seems to have been already extant in the 90s AD or at the latest in the first few years of the second century.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps here is the place to note that Papias (Bishop of Hierapolis, writing perhaps around AD 100)<sup>54</sup> says Matthew wrote down the logia in the Hebrew dialect, and each interpreted them as they were able (Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39). Several considerations are relevant: (1) Our current Matthew is of course in Greek, and it does not on the whole appear to be translation Greek, and more to the point it is hardly believable that a document incorporating most of Mark was originally a document in a Semitic language.<sup>55</sup> (2) The term *logia* would normally be rendered “sayings.” Notice that the term *Gospel* (*euaggelion*) is not used. (3) It is believable that various of Jesus’ sayings were first written down in Aramaic, which may be what Eusebius means when he says “Hebrew dialect.” (4) It is also possible that special materials about Jesus’ origins and teaching were originally written down in Aramaic. In other words, it is possible that either some of the Q material (e.g., the Lord’s prayer) and/or some of the M material, which includes some logia (e.g., parables) were originally in Aramaic and were translated at some juncture.

Perhaps then we may envision Matthew’s special M material as originally in Aramaic, as was some or all of the Q material originally. This situation presented the First Evangelist with a dilemma. The Gospel narrative he had before him and relied upon (Mark) was in Greek, but these other materials were in Aramaic. The natural solution for this scribe was to render all the materials into koine Greek, the lingua franca of the empire, especially since the Evangelist did at the end of the day believe strongly in the Great Commission. If this is the process by which the Gospel as we now have it was put together, then it is unlikely that Matthew himself (while a source of some of the material in this Gospel—M source) assembled this Gospel. It was assembled after the Gospel of Mark was in wide circulation and had become the standard reference

work, the standard narrative on Jesus. [Date of Mark's Gospel] This helps us once more to date this document in the last couple of decades of the first century. By then, even conservative Jewish Christian communities in or near the Holy Land realized that in order to communicate with the majority of other Christians, including Diaspora Jewish Christians, they had to write in Greek. [Matthean Form of Q]

One further point needs to be stressed, namely that the First Evangelist lived in a mixed language milieu and was himself at least bilingual, and though, on the whole, he uses the LXX for the sake of his Greek readership,<sup>56</sup> it is clear from his handling of Old Testament material that he also knows Semitic languages and versions of sacred texts, as Allison and Davies have pointed out.<sup>57</sup>

This data simply further strengthens the case for the view that a Jewish Christian wrote Matthew for a largely Jewish Christian audience, and presumably one that lived in a genuinely mixed language milieu and that may have been conversant with some of the Semitic versions of their sacred texts. This better describes Galilee than Antioch.

Two other inter-textual relationships must be considered. There are some clear similarities between 1 Peter and Matthew, in particular between 1 Peter 2:12 and Matthew 5:16 and 1 Peter 3:14 and Matthew 5:10. The argument then becomes a chicken and egg argument. Which came first—1 Peter or Matthew's Gospel? In my view, it is likely that 1 Peter was probably written in the 60s.<sup>58</sup> However, a moment's reflection on these texts in Matthew shows that they are from the Sermon on the Mount and likely go back to Jesus himself in some form. It is thus possible that we are dealing with the Petrine rendering of this material into Greek both in 1 Peter and in Matthew's Gospel. In other words, Peter may be the source for some of the Q material in its Matthean

### Date of Mark's Gospel



I have argued that the Gospel of Mark was written to the church in Rome near to the time Jerusalem fell (AD 70). See my *The Gospel of Mark*. Whether one thinks Matthew is written to Antioch, or to somewhere else in Syria or Galilee, these locales are in the eastern end of the Empire. We must then assume that Mark was in rather wide circulation to have reached such a church and to have done so not long after Mark wrote his Gospel. I say this not least because Luke already knows of several such narratives when he writes his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4).

B. Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 26-29.

### Matthean Form of Q



Luke shows no knowledge of Aramaic whatsoever. He regularly omits any Aramaic from his source material; in particular we know he does so with his use of Mark. This then leads to the important conclusion that if the First Evangelist was rendering Q material from the Aramaic original, while Luke was using a Greek version of Q, it is more likely than not that the Matthean form of Q is closer to the original in most places, not least because the agenda of the First Evangelist is to retain or even restore the Jewish flavor of the Jesus material! In other words, Q scholars are simply wrong to give a natural preference for the Lukan version of Q.

form. That there are other parallels between 1 Peter and Matthew may also support this conjecture (cf. 1 Pet 2:7 to Matt 21:42; 1 Pet 3:8-9 to Matt 5:39, 44; 1 Pet 4:13 to Matt 5:11-12).<sup>59</sup>

There is also the matter of the relationship of James's homily and Matthew's Gospel. James contains some twenty partial quotes or allusions to the Sermon on the Mount, and it is always to the Matthean form of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>60</sup> This does not necessarily mean there is any literary relationship between Matthew and James, especially since James feels free to adapt and adopt these sayings for his own purposes and does not tell his audience they came from Jesus. It seems likely then that both the author of James and the First Evangelist knew the same version of these sayings of Jesus, which is to say they knew the same version of Q, the Aramaic one (see above). If, as I have argued elsewhere, James's homily should be dated to the mid-50s,<sup>61</sup> then we may have evidence from James that the version of Q used by both James and the First Evangelist is likely the earlier version, compared to the Greek version on which Luke draws. This makes Matthew's Gospel all the more important for learning about early Jewish Christians in the Holy Land and their faith and practices.

### **The Intended Use of Matthew's Gospel**

While I think it is right that this Gospel was intended to be used as a teaching tool training Jewish Christians in their faith, I would not want to imply that this Gospel was intended only for a school setting of some sort, much less as merely an early version of a catechetical manual. Luz, I think, is right in mentioning that Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer points us to the fact that Matthew's redaction reflects the language of worship in his own community, and this in turn suggests that the material was also meant to be used in worship, not solely in a school setting.<sup>62</sup>

Luz also points out rightly that the way the Lord's Supper discussion is framed likely suggests the worship setting where disciples hear the commands "take, eat, drink of it, all of you" (Matt 26:26-28). The same can be said about the stress on forgiveness of sins (Matt 9:8; Matt 18) that points to this being a major emphasis in the community. This also makes sense of various modifications of Mark's account, particularly the stress on the public testimony about Jesus' identity at the baptism and afterward, and the ameliorating of the harsh Markan depiction of the disciples as lacking faith. This is hardly what one needs to say to new converts in their training or in their worship as they are on the way to being full-

fledged disciples. Furthermore, it would appear that the Evangelist is part of a community where the Greek Old Testament (LXX) is used in worship and study, and so he relies on it as well. This points to an interesting conjecture. Could it be that Jews in Galilee, who spoke Aramaic, knew Greek better than Hebrew?<sup>63</sup> They would have to speak Greek to some degree to survive and do business in a multi-lingual environment like the border regions of lower Galilee. Hebrew would only be something they might hear or use on the Sabbath, unless they were training to be a Jewish scribe or rabbi.

As Luz points out, phrases from the LXX flow from the pen of the Evangelist, and indeed the terminology and even the structure of Matthew's Gospel seem to be influenced by the LXX. Luz concludes, "He is at home in his Greek Bible because the worship service plays a decisive role for him."<sup>64</sup> This may help explain why Matthew's Gospel so rapidly became the Gospel of choice to be used in worship by Christians. It was intended and shaped for such a purpose in the first place, albeit Jewish Christian worship was in view originally. It is also true, as Luz stresses, that this document was intended for repeated readings or hearings. We are thus to envision a community of Jewish Christians who, perhaps in order precisely to distinguish them from the nearby synagogue, use the LXX and Greek in general as their language of worship and study and reflection. More on all these matters will be discussed in the commentary itself.

### **The Impact Crater: Ways Matthew Has Been Read through the Ages**

Regardless of the intended use of the First Gospel, the text has always been interpreted and used in a variety of ways, and in fact this Gospel has sometimes been as influential for the ways it has been misread as for the ways it has been properly read and used.

#### **[Unintended Influences]**

What we learn from scrutinizing the uses of Matthew through the centuries is that texts take on a life of their own once they escape the gravity of their original setting and contexts and any historical controls, or better said once they both escape that original gravity and then become captive to the gravity of other cultures and other settings and so are read anachronistically. This was recently made painfully clear by the great outcry against Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* because of its inclusion (in the original version) of the uniquely Matthean blood-cry ("may the blood be on us and our children," Matt 27:25). The outcry against

### Unintended Influences



In a helpful study of the readings of Matthew through the ages, H. Clarke provides considerable insight on how a text can be influential even in ways the author would not have expected, intended, or in some cases even wished.

For example:

Many readers know that 16:18 (“Thou art Peter . . . I will build my church”) is basic to Catholicism’s claims for the papacy. But how many know that 9:2-7 is a foundation text for Christian Scientists? Or that Matthew, the only gospel to use the word church is a central presence in Mormonism, and that “pearl of great price” (13:46) became the title of one of the Mormon’s basic texts? Or that 5:34, forbidding oaths, was a fundamental provision of Quakerism? And that the “Harrowing of Hell” (27:52-53), found only in Matthew and often disregarded, has a special place in the art and spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy? As for Judaism, in the late Middle Ages, a Jew named Shem-Tob created a Hebrew version of Matthew to assist his people in their disputes with Christians, who had for too long used another Matthean verse, the “Cry of the People” (27:25) to justify their anti-Semitism. Historically, 4:17 not only provided the opening salvo of the Reformation, but in the same verse the translation of just one of Matthew’s words, as repent, ended for Protestants the century-old tradition of auricular confession, as well as the sacramental status of penance. And ubiquitous in Reformation writings is their “Call of the Savior” (11:28-30), which seemed to sum up all they found wrong in Romanism though Matthew’s accounts of baptism and the Eucharist also accounted for bitter divisions among the Reformers. The meaning of Jesus’ words on divorce and adultery is still debated (recall how 5:28, on the lust in the heart, almost derailed Jimmy Carter’s presidential campaign in 1976). And 5:39, which helped change Tolstoy’s life, has become as much a staple of Christian pacifism as 10:34 is for the militants of liberation theology. The “Christian perfectionism” of 5:48 has inspired both monks and Methodists, and it lurks behind most Christian cults and heresies. In Western culture, Matthew gave the Christmas scene its eastern star, its wise men and its “Flight into Egypt”; an allusion to Matthew helped Hamlet to resolve his tragic dilemma; and the first gospel continues to infiltrate our books and films. The hell that is preached is largely Matthean, and in the gospel’s final lines rests Scripture’s only formulation of the Trinity while also establishing the basis for Christianity’s missionary enterprises. Matthew is everywhere.

H. Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and Its Readers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), xi-xii.

the blood-cry text had more to do with the horrible ways this text had been misused to justify anti-Semitism in many centuries after the time of Christ than with its original meaning and intent.

While totally escaping anachronism and modern cultural assumptions is impossible, we intend this commentary to be a historical one in nature and orientation. Though total objectivity is elusive, I do not believe radical subjectivity is inevitable; or put another way, I do not believe all we have access to in our age is endless subjective readings and uses of the text. There is more possible in the study of the Bible than reader-response criticism would suggest. Careful historical research is the hedge against the inflation of anachronism, and it is, I submit, precisely where the text makes us most uncomfortable that we must avoid whittling off its hard edges. At those junctures, we both learn something about our own assumptions and prejudices and come most obviously into contact with the historical substance of the text.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> G. N. Stanton, "The Early Reception of Matthew's Gospel," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study*, ed. D. E. Aune (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 42-61, here 50-51, 61. The papyri fragments of Matthew are truly numerous by the time we get to AD 300. See some samples both from rolls and from codexes in *New Docs 2*, 125-30. Note especially that P1, 17, 64, 67 all contain some of Matthew.

<sup>2</sup> See *New Docs 3*, 103-104, and see especially the request "do not bring us to the testing" or the recitation of the beginning of the prayer "Our Father" in IGA 5.357; P. Ant. 2; P.Oxy. 3; PSI 6, P Koln 4.

<sup>3</sup> H. Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and Its Readers*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), xxi.

<sup>4</sup> A.-J. Levine, "Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of Matthew," in *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels*, ed. William R. Farmer (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 9-34, here p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> On which see my *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 16-31.

<sup>6</sup> The list of some 33 examples of awkward grammar and strange vocabulary including various *hapax legomena* can be found in J. C. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 131-34.

<sup>7</sup> On which see my *Gospel of Mark*, 16-31.

<sup>8</sup> See the helpful discussion by Graham Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *NTS* 43 (1997): 317-46. This is the juncture where I part company with D. Trobisch, who wants to argue that we can learn something about the final redactor of the whole New Testament from the *kata Matthaion* phrase. But see D. Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46-54. When the four canonical Gospels were first collected together in a codex, the label became necessary, and this must have happened before Tatian in the 2d century produced his *Diatesseron*, a harmony of precisely these four Gospels and no others. Note that this harmony used Matthew's Gospel as the primary Gospel or baseline for its synthesis. This too attests to the great popularity and influence of Matthew already in the 2d century.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, cf. my *Jesus the Sage* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 343, and C. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10.

<sup>10</sup> See the fascinating study of K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> On which see M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> See for example the works of M. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974); and R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> See my discussion in *Jesus the Sage*, 335-80.

<sup>14</sup> See the helpful study of J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster/J. Knox, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> See D. E. Orton, *The Understanding Scribe* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989). The analogy with Quman also doesn't work so well since the Qumran documents don't really speak about scribes and their tasks, and it is a mistake to confuse a sage, or teacher such as the Teacher of Righteousness, with a scribe. A sage is an originator of wisdom; a scribe, by and large, is an interpreter and explainer of previous wisdom.

<sup>17</sup> See my discussion in *Jesus the Sage*, 72-73.

<sup>18</sup> See D. C. Allison and W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, v.1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 2004), 31.

<sup>19</sup> Though since he is writing in Greek, he will also rely on the LXX.

<sup>20</sup> See especially R. Burridge, *What are the Gospels?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and of recent commentaries on Matthew see D. Hagner, *Matthew* (WBC; Nashville: Nelson Reference, 1993), lvii and C. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 46-47.

<sup>21</sup> See D. Senior, "Directions in Matthean Studies," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study*, 5-21, here p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> C. Keener, 23-24.

<sup>23</sup> The most thorough and helpful treatment of the structure of this Gospel is my colleague D. Bauer's *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> On which see C. Keener, 37; U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Grand Rapids: Fortress Press, 1992), 34-44.

<sup>25</sup> Luz, 42.

<sup>26</sup> M. J. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); C. Deutsch, *Hidden Wisdom and the Easy Yoke: Wisdom, Torah, and Discipleship in Matthew 11:25-30* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987); and M. D. Johnson, "Reflections on a Wisdom Approach to Matthew's Christology," *CBQ* 36 (1974): 44-64.

<sup>27</sup> I am thinking of some of those who contributed to the Talmuds and saw themselves as in essence tradents.

<sup>28</sup> See D. Hagner, lxviii-lxix.

<sup>29</sup> Just as I am unconvinced of the Antiochian provenance of this Gospel, I am even more unconvinced that its primary focus of animus is on the Roman Empire and the imperial cult. While it is true that the dominion of God is being asserted over against other possible dominions, Rome's is not singled out for special contumely; rather there is more concern with the client king Herod Antipas and his misdeeds. But see W. Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2001), and also his *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> See the helpful study of A.-J. Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1988).

<sup>31</sup> The phrase probably refers to the fact that Galilee was surrounded on several sides by non-Jewish neighbors.

<sup>32</sup> I suspect the name comes because Galilee abuts regions where there were many non-Jews. We now have a thorough debunking of the notion that the historical Galilee of Jesus' day or during the New Testament era was a region rife with Gentiles. See M. A. Chauncey, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> The Galilean provenance of this Gospel has been successfully argued for at length by J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), and his *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel according to Matthew* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> See D. Senior, "Directions in Matthean Studies," in *Gospel of Matthew in Current Study*, 5-21, here p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> See J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Why Doesn't God Answer Prayers?" *BR* (April 2004): 14-19, 43, here p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> D. C. Allison and W. D. Davies, v. 3, 726-27. It is interesting that Matthew's redaction of Mark includes a significant lessening of references to Jesus' emotions or his ignorance of something. There are some eight texts in Mark referring to Jesus' emotions and some fourteen texts in Mark alluding to Jesus' ignorance of something, and Matthew omits them. Here is a clear case where it is hard to argue that Mark used Matthew and added motifs of ignorance and emoting. See Allison and Davies, vol. 1, 104-105.

<sup>37</sup> On which see H. Shanks and B. Witherington, *The Brother of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 111-41.

<sup>38</sup> See J. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 125.

<sup>39</sup> See A. M. Gale, "Tradition in Transition, or Antioch verse Sepphoris," in *SBL Seminar Papers 2003*, 144-56, here p. 143.

<sup>40</sup> J. A. Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel according to Matthew* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1996), 18.

<sup>41</sup> See now the numerous fine essays in J. J. Collins and G. E. Sterling, eds., *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> The evidence from Sepphoris is particularly impressive. See now Gale, "Tradition in Transition, or Antioch verse Sepphoris," 144-56. As Gale points out, there are even Jewish grave markers in Greek in Sepphoris, and this is telling since the traditional spoken language of Aramaic was typically used by Jews on gravestones. See H. Shanks and B. Witherington, 111ff.

<sup>43</sup> I agree with Gale, "Tradition in Transition, or Antioch verse Sepphoris," 142-43, that the ethos of this Gospel does not suggest a wandering community of itinerants. Wandering itinerants simply move on when the going gets rough. This Gospel reflects an environment where Jewish Christians are staying in one place despite opposition.

<sup>44</sup> Bethsaida would also be a possibility, but we are only beginning to know something about it from the archaeological data now coming to light.

<sup>45</sup> See U. Luz, 92.

<sup>46</sup> See the discussion in C. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 36.

<sup>47</sup> See now P. Perkins, "Peter: How a Flawed Disciple became Jesus' Successor on Earth," in *BR 20/1* (February 2004): 12-23, here 17-18.

<sup>48</sup> See J. Strange and H. Shanks, "Has the House Where Jesus Stayed in Capernaum Been Found?" *BAR 8/6* (November 1982): 26-37.

<sup>49</sup> On these last two paragraphs, see Chauncey, *Myth of a Gentile Galilee*, 102-105 and the notes there.

<sup>50</sup> See my *Gospel of Mark*, 20-31.

<sup>51</sup> See R. Bauckham, ed., *The Gospel for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), for as he has suggested, these Gospels were written with at least one eye on the larger and broader Christian community in various locales.

<sup>52</sup> I think it is likely that Luke's Gospel was composed after Matthew's, though I doubt Luke had a copy of Matthew's text to hand. The fact, however, that Luke mentions Gospels plural in Luke 1:1-4 suggests the later date for Luke's work. On this, see my *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1ff.

<sup>53</sup> For a complete survey of allusions to Matthew in the 2d century, see E. Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990).

<sup>54</sup> See D. C. Allison and W. D. Davies, 128-29.

<sup>55</sup> See *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> See M. J. J. Menken, *Matthew's Bible: The Old Testament Text of the Evangelist* (Leuven: Leuven Press, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> D. C. Allison and W. D. Davies, 33.

<sup>58</sup> See my *New Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), ad loc.

<sup>59</sup> See the careful discussion in U. Luz, 93.

<sup>60</sup> See my discussion in *Jesus the Sage*, 236-47.

<sup>61</sup> See H. Shanks and B. Witherington, 143-64.

<sup>62</sup> See U. Luz, 77.

<sup>63</sup> It is interesting that the Evangelist avoids some but not all Aramaisms in the way Luke does. See *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.



# THE ORIGINS OF JESUS

## Matthew 1:1-25

The superscript of the Gospel of Matthew, which includes the phrase *kata Matthaion*, was added to the Gospel at some juncture after it began to circulate in the church, in particular after several Gospels began to circulate, such that Matthew could be distinguished from others by this phrase. The phrase seems to have been added at least as soon as the early second century AD, as there seems to have been a collection of the four canonical Gospels circulating together in one codex at that juncture.

As we have seen in the introduction to this commentary,<sup>1</sup> it seems unlikely that the notion of Matthew writing some Gospel material was arrived at without a historical foundation, since he is one of the more obscure members of the Twelve. Church tradition suggested that he had written down some of the traditions about Jesus in Hebrew or Aramaic and they were later translated into Greek. We have suggested that these traditions are the uniquely Matthean material we find in this Gospel, which includes the material in Matthew 1–2, though it may also involve some of the sayings or so-called Q material. Matthew then was the source of the material that began this Gospel and of some of the other material in it, and since he was a more famous contributor to this document than Mark or whoever assembled the Q material, the Gospel of Matthew was associated with him rather than someone else.

## COMMENTARY

### **The Origins of the Son of David, 1:1-17**

Matthew actually begins with the word *biblos*, which certainly could be translated “book.” This may suggest, since the term is modified by the phrase “of the genealogy/genesis/origin of Jesus Christ,” that this material was originally a separate document that may have extended at least to the end of Matthew 2, perhaps as far as Matthew 4:16. [*Biblos Geneseōs*] Certainly Matthew 1 is about Jesus’ origins, both human and divine. Though the form of this phrase echoes Genesis

**Biblos Geneseōs**

**ΑΩ** It is interesting that in the LXX version of Gen 5:1, the same phrase *biblos gene-seōs* introduces a list of descendants rather than ancestors. More importantly, this phrase introduces not just a genealogy, but also narrative material in Gen 5. As Allison and Davies suggest, the author seems to conjure up the notion that he is presenting some kind of primal history, or the origins of Messiah and his people, in which case Matt 1:1 should be seen as the intro to the entire Gospel. It may be that the Evangelist intended us to see this as a counterpart to the book of Genesis, or at least its beginnings, for he will go on to depict Jesus as the one who passes the temptation test and fulfills all righteousness as God's chosen One gone right.

D. C. Allison and W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, v. 1 (ICC; T & T Clark International, 2004), 150.

5:1, in Genesis it is followed by a list of descendants. Keener thinks the First Evangelist is making the profound point that in Jesus' case, he conveys honor and significance to his ancestors, being the Jewish messiah, rather than the other way around.<sup>2</sup> [A Sapiential Reading of 1:1-17]

Notice that Jesus is called "Jesus Christ," with the latter term acting almost as a name or a part of a name, though at 1:17 where it appears alone it seems to be a title. *Christos* is the Greek adjective turned noun that was used to render the Hebrew term *mashiach*, which means anointed one. It is understandable that *christos* was the Greek term used, since this adjective was found on flasks and used of ointment or perfume and its external application.

Keener is right to stress that for a Jewish Christian audience, the major names in this genealogy, such as Judah, Ruth, David, Uzziah, Hezekiah, and Josiah, would conjure up some of

the major stories in Jewish history and certainly also convey a sense of the honor claims in the genealogy of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> This is also clearly a Jewish genealogy from the fact that it is descending in character as opposed to ascending, as is the case with Luke's genealogy. Luke is conforming things to the Greek practice in listing ancestors, but Jews generally started with the oldest ancestor that could be listed.

The four women listed prior to Mary in this genealogy could be said to share in common a non-Jewish ancestry (Tamar from Canaan; Rahab from Jericho; Ruth from Moab; and Bathsheba, who was the ex-wife of a Hittite). Just by this fact, the unions these women had with Jews would be considered irregular. This is a different matter than emphasizing the miraculous element, in which case we might have expected Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. One suspects, since the First Evangelist is concerned about matters of apologetics and how things will appear to an outside audience, that it is likely these women are included to emphasize "divine

**A Sapiential Reading of 1:1-17**

The Evangelist seeks to present Jesus as a Jewish royal figure, not merely Son of Abraham, but Son of David, which is mentioned first in 1:1. The genealogy presents Jesus as the perfect one who has been preceded by seven times six generations and who begins the seventh

seven of generations. So intent on presenting Jesus as royalty is the author that he stresses that Joseph is son of David (1:20), even though Joseph is not portrayed as Jesus' biological father. He could, however, be Jesus' father under Jewish law by adoption, and thereby Jesus was entitled to his father's genealogy.

irregularity”—how God can use unusual women and unusual circumstances to produce leaders such as Solomon or Jesus. It is particularly important for the wisdom theme in this book to emphasize God’s mysterious wisdom from the first, and since the line is traced through Solomon to Jesus, who is the one most like that earlier son of David, this wisdom theme does undergird what is going on here. These previous women, especially in the case of Bathsheba the mother of Solomon, provide precedents by which the Evangelist can defend within an honor and shame culture what God did in regard to Mary and the virginal conception. As a subsidiary theme, there may also be some preparation here for the conclusion of the Gospel in Matthew 28, hinting already that Gentiles had always been part of Messiah’s family and God’s plan to form a people.<sup>4</sup> [Textual Variants]

The first and most important of the formula quotations in Matthew is the quotation of Isaiah 7:14 at Matthew 1:23, which we will treat here since we are already dealing with the issue of the virginal conception in the genealogy. [Crucial Observations]

The upshot of these observations is that Matthew did not likely derive the notion of the virginal conception simply by reading either the Hebrew Bible or the LXX, which he seems to cite at Matthew 1:23. It was rather the event in Mary’s life that forced him to go back and reexamine Old Testament stories, seek to find what prophecy had foretold this would happen. The historical substance of the narrative is what forced such a move on the part of Matthew.<sup>5</sup>

If we ask, from a Christian point of view, what the theological cash value of the notion of the virginal conception is, it is important in the following regards: (1) The virginal conception and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the process allowed Jesus to be conceived without the taint of human fallenness. He therefore could be, as Paul calls him, the last Adam—only he is Adam gone right, Adam who does not succumb to temptation. Thus the

### Textual Variants

**ΑΩ** There are interesting textual variants at v. 16. The version supported by Aleph, B, C, W, and others is usually followed and reads “and Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.” The second reading seems to be a reaction to the first one by a scribe fearful that someone might make the mistake of assuming Mary became pregnant while already married, and so it reads, “and Jacob begat Joseph, to whom being betrothed the virgin Mary bore Jesus who is called Christ” (supported by Caesarean

and old Latin witnesses, Theta and f13 being the principle witnesses). The third textual tradition reads, “Jacob begat Joseph; Joseph to whom was betrothed Mary the virgin, begot Jesus who is called the Christ” (attested by the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript alone). This last seems to be a revision of the second reading. What we learn is how nervous some scribes were about properly describing what actually went on when holy Mary became pregnant.

See B. Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 2-7.

### Crucial Observations

**ΑΩ** Several observations are crucial: (1) The early Jewish interpretation of this text seems to have seen Hezekiah, the successor and son of Ahaz, as the one to whom the text was referring. There seems to be no evidence that any early non-Christian Jew saw this text as referring to messiah, much less a prophecy about a virginal conception. Evidence that the Targums interpret Isa 9:5-6 messianically is one thing, but evidence has not yet turned up in the Targums of similar treatment of Isa 7:14. (2) In the Hebrew text, the word *'almah* is used, not *betula*. The former term means a young woman of marriageable age, and while this would certainly normally include the concept of virginity in such an honor and shame culture, *'almah* is not a technical term for virgin. *Betula* more nearly fits that description. (See G. J. Wenham, "Betulah: A Girl of Marriageable Age," *VT* 22 [1972]: 326-48.) (3) The term *'almah* is never used in the Old Testament of a married woman, but does indeed refer to a woman who is nubile,

sexually mature. There is in fact only one Old Testament text that may use this term to refer to a woman who is sexually active (Song 6:8, but cf. Prov 30:19). The term then normally implies a virgin but does not focus on this quality of the woman in question. This regular implication of the word probably explains why the LXX translator of Isaiah chose to translate the word as *parthenos*, which is more nearly a technical term for virgin. (I do not find persuasive the arguments about Gen 34:3 LXX that try to suggest *parthenos* does not mean virgin there since Dinah is seduced by Shechem. Dinah is called *parthenos* before the rape, but *paidiskē* afterward. More to the point, however, is Gen 24:43, which suggests occasionally *parthenos* can be as broad a term as *'almah* and mean a young woman of marriageable age.) It is interesting that other Greek translations of the Old Testament (e.g., Aquila, Theodotion) translate the word in question with *neanis*. (4) The Hebrew text speaks of *the* young woman and so seems to have some particular person in mind.

virginal conception probably provides the underpinning for the idea that Jesus was tempted like all other humans but did not sin (Heb 4:15) and could be seen as the holy high priest as well as the unblemished lamb of God. (2) The divine agency involved speaks to how the incarnation happened, but neither Matthew nor Luke tell the story of the preexistent one as we find it in John 1. Nothing is said in these accounts about a preexistent Son of God taking on a human nature. That discussion happened both before all the Gospels were written (Phil 2:5-11) and after the Synoptics were likely completed (John 1).

Verse 17 clearly speaks to the schematization of this material, for it refers to fourteen generations between Abraham and David, fourteen generations between David and the exile in Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Christ. A moment's reflection will demonstrate that the amount of time elapsed between Abraham and David must be much larger than between David and the exile. This is clearly a royal, and so edited, genealogy meant to make certain key theological points about the significance of Jesus. As such, it should not be evaluated in the way one would evaluate a normal modern genealogical record.

### The Birth of Jesus Story, 1:18-25

Not surprisingly, in Matthew's birth stories, the main focus is on Jesus, whereas in the Lukan stories there is also a focus on the

family of and birth of John the Baptist. The explanation of this difference is simple. Luke is writing a historical monograph, not a biography of Jesus, and his focus is on what he deems to be the pertinent events in salvation history. The First Evangelist, however, is writing an ancient Jewish biography of Jesus. Matthew 1:18-25 should probably be seen as something of an apologetical tale explaining how Jesus could be born of Mary and not of Joseph, and yet still be in the Davidic line. R. Brown points out that Matthew 1 is about who and how (i.e., the virginal conception), while Matthew 2 is about where and whence.<sup>6</sup> [A Sapiential Reading of 1:18-25]

With the mention of Mary in the genealogy, as well as other women, one might have expected a focus on Mary in what follows in Matthew 1:18-25, but in fact Matthew goes on to focus almost entirely on Joseph. Here we note that only Joseph other than Jesus in this Gospel is given the title “son of David.” It is through Joseph

### A Sapiential Reading of 1:18-25



Kings were often said to have miraculous births in antiquity, and Jesus is no different. Not only is Jesus said to be born by means of virginal conception, but the reader is told he will bear a divine throne name—Immanuel, meaning God with us (1:23; see Isa 9:6). God in some form is personally present with God’s people in and through Jesus. We are told later (at 11:19) what form that personal presence takes, namely that Jesus is Wisdom come in the flesh, and so he is someone who is a greater royal figure than even the ultimate Jewish sage—Solomon (13:42). *The son of David* before Jesus was of course Solomon, and the Evangelist will draw comparisons with Solomon and his wisdom throughout the text by presenting Jesus as both a sage who speaks in parables, riddles, aphorisms, and also the Wisdom of God come in the flesh. The term “Son of David” applied to Jesus will be sprinkled throughout the text to remind the audience of his royalty (1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; 22:42, 45) but most of this emphasis will come at the end of the narrative to stress he was indeed king of the Jews even though paradoxically he was crucified, and some Jewish leaders were indirectly responsible for this outcome.

The concept of the virginal conception has no exact parallels in other stories of prodigious births, either Jewish or Greco-Roman stories. Furthermore, the idea was unlikely to have been generated simply by a reading of Isa 7:14 that is cited in Matt 1:23, for that text could be read to mean that a woman who had previously not had sexual intercourse would conceive by normal means and bear a child. In other words, it was the story of Jesus’ birth told by early

Christians that led to the reading of Isa 7:14 in a new light, not the other way around. If we ask the significance of the virginal conception, it stresses: (1) the holiness of the child, for he was conceived through the agency of the Holy Spirit; (2) the uniqueness of the child, for such a means of conception was unprecedented; (3) the divinity of the child because by this means it was made clear he was also Son of God.

The portrayal of Joseph as a righteous and law-abiding man, bound in marital contract to Mary, and not wishing to disgrace her through public divorce proceedings is important. It makes clear that he did not understand it was a virginal conception and thought she would be subject to public disgrace, perhaps even stoning for immoral sexual activity. The Evangelist portrays Joseph as a good and godly man, open to spiritual direction, which comes in the form of a dream in which the angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him to go ahead and marry Mary. Spiritual guidance can take many forms, but here and elsewhere in the birth narratives it comes in the form of a dream. Matt 1:21 says Joseph was instructed to call the boy “Jesus” (i.e., Joshua, a Hebrew name that means Yahweh saves). It is thereby promised that he would save his Jewish people from their sins. Joseph is obedient to the angelic message that comes through the dream and marries Mary. Matt 1:25 probably means that while he had no sexual intercourse with Mary prior to the birth of Jesus, he did do so afterward. Thus the Evangelist provides an explanation for the children who appear subsequently in Matt 13:55, but who do not seem to be alive during the period of the birth narrative and are not mentioned as traveling with the holy family to Egypt.



### The Dream of Saint Joseph

Daniele Cresspi (1598/00-1630). *The Dream of Saint Joseph*. 1620-1630. Canvas.

Location: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria

[Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY]

and the naming of his son that Jesus becomes Son of David. The portrayal of Joseph is important in several ways. Joseph will be portrayed as a son of David caught between a rock and a hard place, more particularly between the Law, as he is a righteous, law-abiding Jew, and his love for Mary. The situation is not unlike the way Solomon is portrayed when it came to making wise decisions about important, and in some cases life and death, matters (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 3).

In other words, Joseph will be portrayed as a wise man before we even hear about the wise men or magi as he responds to the heavenly dreams and does the right thing repeatedly. This sets the tone and stage for the portrayal of Jesus himself as sage and indeed as the embodiment of Wisdom, Immanuel. Notice how Joseph as the wise father who is obedient to the heavenly directions initiates actions three times after being instructed by an angel in a dream

(1:24; 2:13; 2:19). The reception of the dreams and the guidance should not be taken to indicate that Joseph was otherwise dense, as if without divine intervention he would have done something stupid. To the contrary, Joseph is depicted as a good Jew following the Law, who was spiritually open enough to accept correction and direction when he misunderstood what God and the Law required of him. Again, he is son of David (i.e., one like Solomon) who provides something of a pattern for his own adopted Son of David—Jesus.

Verse 18 of Matthew 1 presents us with two key phrases or concepts in the Greek. The first of these is the use of the term *genesis* to refer to Jesus' origins.<sup>7</sup> Here as in Matthew 1:1 the issue is Jesus' origins, not just his birth, though that is included. "The term 'origin' is much broader in scope than 'birth.' 'Origin' has to do

with relationships: one's relationship to mother, to father, to lineage, to forebears, and even to one's own people, or nation."<sup>8</sup> In fact, this double use of this language in vv. 1 and 18 even summons us to consider Jesus' relationship to God, and this becomes apparent when the Emmanuel theme surfaces not only here at the beginning of the story but in Matthew 28 as well. Usually it is thought that Jesus is to be seen as Son of David, simply through the act of Joseph's adopting him; however, our author sees Jesus as a Son of David, like unto Solomon, not least because he is imbued with divine Wisdom by God, and thus is royal like Solomon because of what God has granted him—not merely because of adoptive and fictive kinship.

Secondly, we have an important Greek phrase here—*prin ē synelthein*. Here we have a genitive absolute agreeing with the subject. There are then two possible readings of the phrase: (1) “before they had marital union” or (2) “before they married or cohabited.”<sup>9</sup> If the former were the meaning, then it would certainly imply that Mary and Joseph consummated their marriage after the birth of Jesus. If the latter were accepted, it would simply be a statement about Mary's pregnancy before marriage. There is actually however a third option—namely that both marriage and its consummation are intended by this phrase. It is difficult to imagine a Jew (or a Jewish Christian like our author) separating these ideas once one was committed to marriage. Thus it seems likely that this phrase is meant to imply marital union did transpire after marriage, and as the Gospel continues, various texts suggest Mary and Joseph had further children (see Matt 13:55-56).<sup>10</sup> The awkwardness of the phrase comes from Matthew's concern to explain how God alone was responsible for Mary's conception and that Jesus is the result of God's, not Joseph's, creative action. I. Broer has rightly said that Matthew is only really concerned about Joseph's conduct until the point that the birth and marriage happen, in order to show the fulfillment of Scripture.<sup>11</sup> Mary then is depicted as having the greatest honor for a Jewess—she is the mother of Messiah, and so through her not merely Scripture but Israel's destiny is fulfilled.

Matthew 1:18 goes on to add that Mary was found to be with child by means of the Holy Spirit. This must actually mean that Joseph found her to be pregnant, though he did not know it was by holy means. Matthew then is reminding his audience that it was by action of God. The action in v. 19 is clearly precipitated by an assumption on Joseph's part that something unholy had happened. Joseph did not wish to subject Mary to the scandal of a public

breaking off of the betrothal, which in early Judaism was as much a legally binding and formal matter as a divorce is today (see *m. Qidd. 1:1*). Yet Joseph's allegiance to God's word and will came first. What was he to do?

Joseph in fact is depicted as the model disciple and follower of



### The Mother of God

Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (1878–1939). *The Mother of God*. Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. [Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY]

God's will, for he gives up a Jewish father's greatest privilege (siring his firstborn son) in order to obey God's will (cf. 1:24). Verse 20 suggests, however, that Joseph was afraid to take Mary as wife once she was pregnant. This is an understandable fear in an honor and shame culture where his whole family's reputation could be ruined by his being a willing participant in scandal. The angel reassures Joseph that what Mary has conceived is from the Holy Spirit. While Mary will give birth to the child, Joseph will assume what was normally the father's duty of naming the child (cf. Luke 1:59-60). The name given the child is Yeshua, or as we would call it, Joshua. This name means

“Yahweh saves” and foreshadows the role the Son of David was to play. Notice that we are already told in v. 21 that he will “save his people from their sins.” First of all, this makes clear that Jesus' mission is to an Israel that is lost or has gone astray. But what would it mean to save them from their sins? Does this mean save them from the consequences of their sins (e.g., judgment), or does it mean save them from the effects of their sins on their own lives and the lives of those close to them by transforming them? It probably implies both. They are not merely saved from the “wrath to come” but saved from their own worst instincts and behaviors and their consequences by graciously changing these instincts and behaviors.

Verses 22-23 affirm that it is not merely a prophet who spoke, but rather the Lord spoke through the prophet Isaiah. Like other early Christians, our Evangelist believes the Hebrew Scriptures are the inspired or God-breathed words of God, not merely the words of humans (see, e.g., 2 Tim 3:16). The Hebrew Scriptures were of course the Bible for the earliest followers of Jesus, as there was as

yet no New Testament. Our Evangelist here begins to use what have come to be called formula quotations from the Old Testament, of which there are ten in all in the Gospel (the others are 2:5-6; 2:15; 2:17; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; and the last being in the story of Judas at 27:9). G. N. Stanton has noted how closely the Evangelist's use of the Old Testament, especially in the formula quotations, is related to his distinctive theological themes, in particular to his Christology. It is not an accident that the first of these citations has to do with Jesus being Emmanuel, God with us. While all of these ten formula quotations indicate that events in the life story of Jesus are in fulfillment of the Scriptures, here we are told that Jesus' identity as God with us was foretold. The question is in what form is God with us in the person of Jesus, and the answer, as we shall see, is as Wisdom come in the flesh.<sup>12</sup>

The reference to the name "Immanuel" is a reference to a throne name for a king rather than a personal name, and as Chrysostom observes it is the name by which he was to be acclaimed as a result of the outcome of his life, death, and resurrection (*Hom. Matt.* 5.2-3). This is what Jesus will be called—the living presence of God with God's people. This theme finds a recapitulation when we come to the end of Matthew 28:20 and the exalted Christ promises to be with them until the close of the age. In terms of Christology, then, this Gospel is deliberately framed with the picture of Jesus as a king like Solomon who saves his people and gives them wisdom to live by and commands to follow. Joseph himself is then portrayed as an obedient son of David in v. 24, for when he awakens, he obeys the dream vision he has had.

Verse 25 has caused no end of controversy, especially in Roman Catholic circles. Joseph takes his wife (v. 24b), "but he was not knowing her until she gave birth to a son." The focus of this verse is on the fact of Mary's virginity before the time she gave birth to Jesus, and since the verb is imperfect it also focuses on the period during which Joseph abstained from intercourse with Mary, namely prior to the birth of Jesus. The imperfect, however, probably implies subsequent sexual relations between Joseph and Mary even more than an aorist verb would do. This is so because the phrase "he used not to know" or "he was not knowing her" implies a definite limited duration of abstinence, the duration limited by *heōs ou*. Attempts to redefine these words to mean "while" or "without" are clearly special pleading, as is the attempt to see these words as unrelated to what comes before them. A. H. Mc Neile puts it this way: "In the New Testament, a negative followed by

*heos ou* (e.g., 17:9) . . . always implies that the negated action did, or will take place after the point in time indicated by the participle . . . .”<sup>13</sup> The issue here is not what *heōs* means without *ou* nor what the phrase means in different sorts of contexts. When this phrase is preceded by an aorist indicative such as here (“gave birth”) and following the imperfect verb “he was not knowing,” it is hard to escape the conclusion that Joseph knew Mary after Jesus was born.<sup>14</sup> The verse likely rules out Mary’s virginity after the birth of Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

The passage ends with the affirmation that Joseph was again obedient and gave the child the name he was told to give him—Jesus.<sup>16</sup> It “remains an odd fact that although Jesus’ name occurs some one hundred and fifty times in Matthew, none of the human characters use it in addressing him”<sup>17</sup> in this Gospel. This is only surprising if one forgets that Jesus is not portrayed in this Gospel as a mere mortal, one human amongst many. He is portrayed as the mind and Wisdom of God come in the flesh—God with us.

Joseph fades from the scene in Matthew quite dramatically after chapter 2, and in view of the popularity of this Gospel, it is not surprising that there were various later apocryphal attempts to fill in the rest of his story. Especially the Proto-Evangelium of James from the second century proved influential in painting a picture of Joseph being an older man and Mary not being his first wife; rather he had been previously married and the brothers and sisters are his children by his first wife. There is in fact no good basis for this speculation in Christian documents from the first century AD, including no basis in the canonical Gospels themselves. It does appear likely, however, that Joseph died prematurely, probably before the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, which explains his absence from the stories in Matthew 13 and elsewhere in this Gospel. More we cannot say on the basis of good historical evidence.

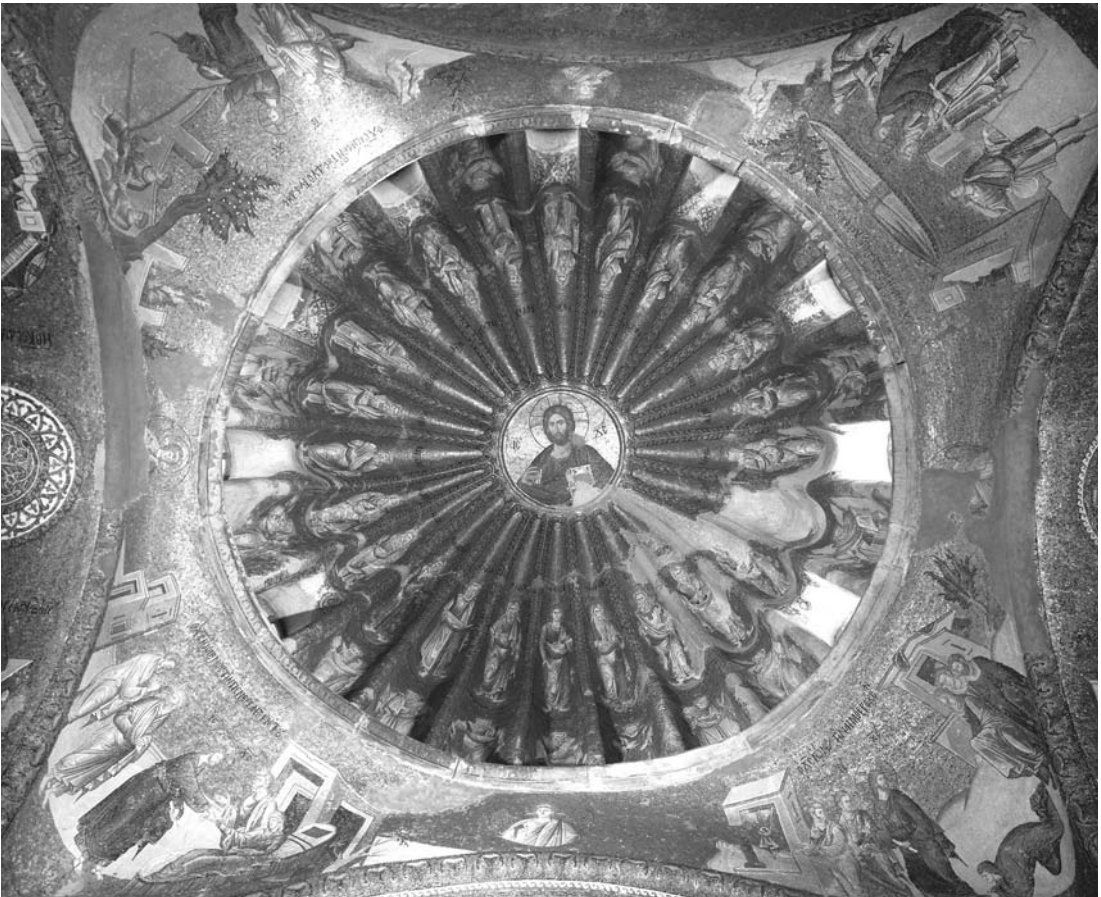
## CONNECTIONS

### The Genus and Genius of Genealogy

Scholars have always puzzled over the two very different genealogies found in Matthew and Luke. Since the time of Annius of Viterbo in AD 1490, it has been traditional to suggest that Matthew’s genealogy traces Jesus’ ancestry through Joseph (i.e., his legal genealogy, since Jesus would have to have been legally adopted

or recognized by Joseph), whereas Luke’s genealogy traces his lineage through Mary (his “natural” genealogy). Some support is lent to the Matthean side of this conjecture by the fact that the Matthean genealogy and birth narrative focuses on Joseph more than Mary.<sup>18</sup>

More to the point, it would appear that the First Evangelist presents the royal genealogy of Jesus, seeking in particular not merely to establish that he was a Jew (Son of Abraham), but more importantly that he was king of the Jews (Son of David). What we know of royal king lists is that they would often present a selective genealogy, concentrating on the line of succession. That Matthew’s list is selective is shown by the fact that for the five centuries between Zerubbabel and Joseph, only nine names are listed, compared to the eighteen names for the comparable period in Luke’s genealogy. On the whole, the author seems to follow the lists in



### Christ Surrounded by His Ancestry

Byzantine (476–1453). *Christ Surrounded by His Ancestry*. Mosaic in the narthex. 14th C. Hora Church (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY]

Chronicles, but clearly this genealogy in Matthew seems to have been schematized to serve certain purposes. Here are some factors of importance in interpreting the Matthean genealogy: (1) In Matthew, the genealogy introduces the Gospel and more particularly the birth narratives, tracing the line from Abraham through Joseph and Mary to Jesus, using the term “begot” (*egennēsen*). (2) The division of the names into three groups of fourteen is artificial, and it probably sets up the notion that Jesus should be seen as the perfect descendent of Abraham and David—the son of the seventh set of sons. (3) There is a noteworthy insertion of several women into a patrilineal genealogy, which is certainly meant to draw our attention to them, especially since they are women with surprising aspects to their stories. (4) Various names are also omitted from the genealogy, which is not surprising in a stylized king list. (5) Especially noteworthy is the awkward circumlocution at the end of the genealogy that threatens to undo the whole thing. The genealogy takes a left turn by mentioning that Jesus came from Mary and not Joseph, even though this is Joseph’s genealogy. Yet this left turn is not surprising when one realizes that the Evangelist is wrestling with how to speak of a virginal conception and still make royal claims about Jesus. The real issue is not so much Jesus’ ancestry as his character, and this genealogy is meant to be seen in light of the pericope that follows it in 1:18-25, with the latter passage helping to explain the strangeness of the genealogy, in particular how Jesus could be born of Mary and not of Joseph and yet still be the Son of David.<sup>19</sup> The genealogy, then, and the passage that follows it seek to explore and explain the virginal conception. There is a recognition of the difficulties caused by Jesus’ “unusual” origins, so in a sense this material can be seen as an exercise in apologetics—showing how Jesus could be born only of Mary and yet be the Son of David.

It was unusual to list women in a patrilineal genealogy *unless* the father was unknown, or there was a bifurcated line with two wives producing two sets of sons, or the women were famous figures or related to famous figures (as is the case in Matthew’s genealogy). Matthew’s genealogy mentions five remarkable women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. One plausible conjecture that takes these women as a group argues that the first four women are mentioned because they, like Mary, had irregularities in their past, and yet were still vehicles through whom God moved along God’s plan and brought royal figures to Israel.<sup>20</sup> Mary then is to be seen as a vehicle of the divine plan and Joseph a righteous man, and Jesus is shown in this genealogy to be indebted to both of them for

who he is, naturally in the one case and legally in the other case. As we have noted, however, in the introduction to this commentary, our Evangelist is setting things up here to portray Jesus as a sage, a Son of David, but one far more like Solomon than his father. In fact, it can be argued that this genealogy is meant to trace Jesus' link to Solomon and Isaac, for they are respectively the son of David and the son of Abraham, and this is what Jesus is said to be at the beginning of the genealogy in Matthew 1:1. It is important to add that there was the concept of legal paternity in early Judaism, so Jesus could indeed be entitled to Joseph's genealogy if Joseph legally accepted and adopted him.<sup>21</sup>

### The Virginal Conception

Though sometimes the miracle that happened at the beginning of Jesus' life is called the *virgin birth*, technically that is an inappropriate phrase, since in fact the miracle transpired not at the birth but at the conception. Thus, we will refer to this miracle as the *virginal conception*.

The virginal conception is one of the areas of the birth narratives where there is some overlap between Matthew and Luke, though Matthew focuses on Joseph's reaction to the miracle and Luke focuses on Mary's. The two authors do not seem to have known each other's sources for this material, and that strengthens the case for the virginal conception concept being grounded in an historical event in the life of Mary. Also strengthening the case for a historical basis to this event is the fact that both Matthew and Luke are concerned about evangelism and thus concerned about the opinion the world will have of their message. This being so, and especially in the case of the conservative honor-shame environment in which Matthew's community seems to have operated, it is hard to believe the virginal conception story is not well grounded in history, not least because the charge of illegitimacy would be an easy one to make since this story might readily be doubted (and of course, as we see later, Celsus, made such a deduction). No reasonably sane or sagacious evangelist would make up such a tale. Rather, these two evangelists felt they had to tell this story, and the First Evangelist struggles the most to be faithful to relate the story while trying to integrate it into his strong emphasis on Jesus' royal heritage and on Jesus as fulfilling prophecy.

It has sometimes been suggested that the birth narratives and particularly the accounts of the impregnating of Mary should be seen as parallel with pagan accounts about gods mating with

human beings, or accounts of *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage of the human and divine. (Mythological stories of Danae being impregnated by Zeus in a golden shower, Leda by Zeus disguised as a swan, Alcemea by Zeus impersonating her husband, or the unusual birth of Dionysus from the thigh of Zeus or Athena from his head are certainly far from clear parallels, never mind sources of this story in Matthew. Nor do stories about Caesar's impressive origins seem likely to be adopted and modified by anyone as Jewish as our author.) There are numerous problems with these suggestions, not the least of which is that no mating is described or hinted at in either Matthew's or Luke's account. Nothing is said about God coming down in the guise of a human and coupling with Mary. Rather, the story is of a miraculous conception without the aid of any human being, without any form of intercourse, a miracle that happens to Mary through the agency of the Holy Spirit. It is also in order to point out that etiological myths about the birth of a ruler or emperor involving a god are attempts to claim that the person in question has divine origins. Early Jews did not by and large view messiah or the ultimate Son of David in that way. They expected messiah to be fully and only human (see below). It is unlikely that Jews would have created such a story about messiah. And in fact, the focus in Matt 1 in particular is on Jesus as being the Son of David, not on his being the Son of God. This story of conception of messiah through the agency of the Holy Spirit is without any real precedent in Old Testament, early Jewish, or pagan literature of the period.<sup>22</sup>

The use of prophecy in the birth narratives is of course a noteworthy feature of these accounts, especially in Matt 1–2. No other section of this Gospel is so clearly and persistently linked to the Old Testament, not only because of the formula quotations but also because of the allusions and general use of Scriptural language in the account. In fact, the very structure of Matt 1–2 seems to be largely determined by the five formula quotations in these two chapters.

For our purposes here, it is especially crucial to state that the story of Jesus itself has led the author to the Old Testament text looking for an explanation, rather than the story being generated out of Old Testament quotations. This is especially clear at Matt 2:23, where the quote about Jesus being called a Nazarene shows how creatively the Old Testament could be handled, in a midrash-pesher kind of approach, to ground one's existing story in the Old Testament. Here I part company with R. Gundry, who even wants to argue that the narrative about Jesus is itself a midrash-pesher on

the Old Testament text.<sup>23</sup> Among other things this is a category mistake. The Jewish technique of midrash-pesher requires a fixed Scriptural text on which and out of which one can do creative things in terms of implications and applications. This hermeneutical technique does not involve the creation of the narrative that provides the basis for doing these sorts of expansions and applications.

The Evangelist's text here is a collection of stories

about Jesus and his origins, not a rewriting of the stories of the Old Testament itself, but he has shaped and molded these new stories in the light of Old Testament prophecy. R. T. France is right to query what fulfillment of the Old Testament could have meant, if in fact the story was created out of the Old Testament text itself.<sup>24</sup> Matthew concludes narrative sections with these prophecy quotations, especially in order to confirm some of the unusual divine twists in the story of Jesus' origins. This is especially the case when it comes to the use of Isaiah in regard to the virginal conception. The attempt to argue that the birth narratives are some kind of different genre of literature, a genre more prone to myth, than the narratives that follow them simply does not work when one realizes that this entire Gospel is following the ancient genre of biography, which more often than not included stories about the hero's origins and birth.



**The Annunciation**

Fra Angelico (1387-1455). *The Annunciation*. Fresco in the former dormitory of the Dominican monastery San Marco, Florence. Location: Museo di S. Marco (monastery), Florence, Italy. [Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 3-11 above.

<sup>2</sup> C. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> See my discussion in *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 167-68.

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion in C. Keener, 83-86, for helpful treatment of collateral issues and the inadequacy of myth stories and other such supposed parallel accounts.

<sup>6</sup> R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Chapman, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> B. Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 7, is surely right that the reading *gennasis*, which has the narrower meaning of "birth" or "engendering," is later. The earlier and better witnesses of various text types have *genesis*. See J. D. Kingsbury on the import of this reading in "The Birth Narrative of Matthew," in *Matthew* (Nappanee, IN: Evangelical Publishing House, 1998), 154-65.

<sup>8</sup> J. D. Kingsbury, "The Birth Narrative of Matthew," 156-57.

<sup>9</sup> There is clear evidence from the papyri that *synerkomai* means to marry—SEG 831. See *New Docs 3*, 85.

<sup>10</sup> On this entire matter, see H. Shanks and B. Witherington, *The Brother of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> I. Broer, "Die Bedeutung der 'Jungfrauengeburt' im Mattausevangelium," *Bib Leb* 12/4 (1971): 248-60.

<sup>12</sup> G. N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 363.

<sup>13</sup> A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1915), 10.

<sup>14</sup> "Know" here is of course a euphemism for carnal knowledge, or intercourse, very much like what is said of Adam and Eve in Gen 4:1.

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion of the brothers and sisters of Jesus in *Brother of Jesus*, 93-109.

<sup>16</sup> It is quite clear that the reason the Fathers denied the obvious grammatical sense of the text is because they associate sexual relationships with a man as something less than holy, or even as defiling. See Cromatius Tractate on Matt. 3.1; Chrysostom, Hom. Mat. 5.3, and other citations in *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 1 a*, ed. M. Simonetti (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> H. Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and Its Readers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>18</sup> H. Clarke, 1-9.

<sup>19</sup> See K. Stendahl, "Quis et Unde? An Analysis of Matt 1-2," in *Judentum, Urchristentum Kirche. Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias*, ed. W. Eltester (Berlin: Topelman, 1960), 94-105.

<sup>20</sup> See M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>21</sup> See R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Chapman, 1977), 137-39.

<sup>22</sup> Still helpful on this issue is the now dated study of J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960).

<sup>23</sup> See R. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1967); R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> See R. T. France, "Scripture, Tradition, and History in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew," in *Gospel Perspectives 2: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 201-37.