

INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

At the beginning of the New Testament stands the Gospel of Matthew. Each of the four Gospels blesses readers with inspiring testimonies of Jesus Christ: Mark's Gospel is succinct, impressive, and powerful. Luke's appeals more to ordinary gentile readers and everyday situations. The Gospel of John is spiritual and sublimely inspiring.

Matthew's, it may be said, is foundational. It builds on the fulfillment of many Old Testament scriptures. It details technical interactions with the law. It traces the step in organizing the Church and gives particular attention to Peter. It emphasizes Jesus's stern warnings about the end of times and the day of God's judgment. It concludes with several eyewitnesses to Jesus's resurrection.

The Gospel of Matthew is based on the perspectives, memories, and possibly notes kept by Matthew himself and on the early writings of others. Like John, Matthew was one of the original twelve apostles called by Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew listed himself as the eighth of the twelve. He was initially sent with the other apostles to preach the messianic message to the Jews in Judea. As one of the earliest disciples, Matthew was able to hear many of the private instructions and public speeches given by Jesus.

Matthew called himself a *telōnēs* (a tax collector). This does not mean that he was a "publicanus" (one of the publicans) who were franchisees that collected taxes for the Romans and infamously kept any additional money collected above their quotas. As a Jewish revenue agent, Matthew would have primarily collected taxes for Jewish rulers such as Herod Antipas. Matthew could have collected local taxes on all kinds of sales, customs from travelers, duties on imports, the annual temple tax required of every adult Jewish male, and also tithes and offerings legally required and supervised by temple officials in Jerusalem.

Thus, it is not surprising that Matthew (as a tax accountant) took special interest in numerical details. In his Gospel, the symbolic number seven appears ten times: seven spirits (12:45), seven loaves (15:34, 36), seven baskets (15:37), seven more loaves (16:10), seven levirate brothers (22:25, 28), and forgiving seven times seventy (18:21–22). Very large numbers also figure strongly in Matthew’s reports of miracles (feeding the four thousand and the five thousand), as well as in his unique reporting of Jesus’s parables (a leader leaving the ninety-nine sheep to rescue the one, the forgiveness of a massive debt of ten thousand talents). Matthew alone provided coinage details in his account of paying precisely the half-shekel temple tax for both Jesus and Peter with one stater (17:24), which was the Greek coin worth exactly one shekel. Matthew alone also reported the amount of Judas’s blood money (thirty shekels or pieces of silver; 27:9).

Like many people in his day, Matthew had two names: His name Maththaios derives from Hebrew words meaning “a gift (*mattat*) from Jehovah (*yah*).” His parents may have seen his birth as a special blessing. He also went by the name Levi, which raises the likelihood that he had ancestors from the priestly tribe of Levi. If so, he would have been well educated as a Levite, being taught in his youth the laws of Torah and the priestly ways of the temple. Indeed, the Gospel of Matthew is often recognized as the most Jewish of the four Gospels. In his Gospel, Matthew quoted or paraphrased at least thirty passages from the Torah (the first five books in the Old Testament), twenty more phrases from the Psalms, and thirty-six sayings from the Prophets. He also uniquely showed an interest at least forty words that would have been especially meaningful to Levites and to the temple scribes.

All these details confirm that Matthew was highly literate. In addition to knowing the Old Testament scriptures in Hebrew and also in Greek, he knew and used them by the letter and also by the heart. He must have been able to read complicated tax documents and to write official receipts in Aramaic and Greek. As a professional tax accountant, he would have carried with him a scroll case and a writing kit with papyrus to write on, an ink well (probably a small copper canister with a latchable lid), quill pens, and a flat writing surface. With this, Matthew would have been ideally suited to keep various records for the early Church and to record words that Jesus publicly taught as well as where Jesus went and what He did. As one trained in the law, Matthew would also have naturally taken an interest in the several challenges or accusations raised against Jesus by lawyers, scribes, and Pharisees and also would have been well-suited to keep records of organizational instructions given by Jesus to His inner circle of fledgling leaders.

Reflecting a familiarity with Hebraic literary styles, Matthew arranged his Gospel in what has been identified by several scholars as a chiasmic form. Seeing this helps readers grasp the basic organization and overall flow of the Matthew narrative, which can be presented as follows:

- A Jesus comes to earth; His forebearers (chap. 1)
 - B God's Son escapes from Herod and chief priests (chap. 2) and dismisses Satan (chaps. 3–4)
 - C He gives the Sermon on the Mount, with laws and warnings (chaps. 5–7)
 - D Miracles, callings, instructions, and challenges (chaps. 8–12)
 - E Jesus teaches and interprets a key set of parables (chap. 13)
 - D Miracles, callings, instructions, and challenges (chaps. 14–19)
 - C Jesus's final parables and woes on hypocrites and on Jerusalem (chaps. 20–25)
 - B God's Son submits and is put to death by Pilate and the chief priests (chaps. 26–27)
 - A Jesus rises from the dead; His final commission to His successors (chap. 28)

This Hebraic structure is consistent with Matthew's overall interest in Old Testament prophecies, Hebrew law, Levitical terminology, and Israelite temple and covenant patterns.

As a whole, the Gospel of Matthew includes nine readily identifiable threads, in the following frequencies:

- 46 *Events* in the life and death of Jesus
- 28 *Steps* in the covenantal Sermon on the Mount
- 27 *Instructions* given by Jesus to His disciples
- 20 *Parables*, ten of which are found only in Matthew
- 19 *Miracles* of various kinds
- 13 *Challenges* raised by opponents whom Jesus answers
- 10 *Signs* given that Jesus was the promised messiah
- 5 *Callings* extended by Jesus to the Twelve
- 1 *Genealogy* from Abraham to Joseph, husband of Jesus's mother

To aid comprehension in reading the following insights on the ScripturePlus app, each segment will be numbered and identified there under one of these types. These easily identifiable threads run through the Gospel of Matthew, weaving together the distinctive fabric of his Gospel message and testimony.

For example, in the category of *steps* in the covenant path in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew alone reported five of the Beatitudes that promise blessings to the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness's sake (5:4–5, 7–10). Matthew alone included Jesus's warning against anger and ridicule (5:21–22), the words about swearing our oaths to God simply and sincerely (5:33–37), becoming like God (5:48), giving to the poor privately (6:1–4), fasting (6:16–18), not casting holy pearls before those who will desecrate them (7:6), and making personal covenantal commitments.

Under *parables*, Matthew included twenty of Jesus's parables. Ten of those are found only in Matthew. They tend to emphasize topics that apparently were of personal interest to Matthew, such as relationships between powerful overlords and their subservient, faithful workers. Thus, Matthew distinctively included the parables of the wheat and tares (13:24–30, 36–43); the treasure in a Field (13:44); the pearl

of great price (13:45–46); the great net (13:47–50); the forgiven but unforgiving servant (18:21–35); the eleventh-hour laborers in the field (20:1–16); the father’s willing and unwilling sons (21:28–32); the wedding feast of the king’s son (22:1–14); the ten virgins and the bridegroom (25:1–13); and the talents (25:14–30). Luke, on the other hand, uniquely included in his Gospel about a dozen other parables that treat concerns about personal relationships, local matters, and social issues. This comparison highlights Matthew’s emphasis on organizational and covenantal matters.

In terms of authenticity and accuracy, the Greek texts of Matthew—and indeed the texts of all four New Testament Gospels—are marvelously attested by early papyrus fragments. The full text of the four Gospels is contained in the third-century Chester Beatty Papyri in Dublin. In addition, complete parchment manuscripts containing most of the New Testament, notably Codex Sinaiticus in London and Codex Vaticanus in Rome, date already to the early fourth century AD. Numerous early Christian Fathers, both in Greek and Latin, quoted passages from throughout Matthew, which corroborates Matthew’s importance to Christians throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

In addition, the presence in 3 Nephi 12–14 in the Book of Mormon of an astute text very similar to Matthew 5–7 offers, especially to Latter-day Saints, important keys to appreciating the unity of the Sermon on the Mount and to interpreting it as a covenantal text. Spoken by the resurrected Lord to some of His “other sheep” shortly after He had ascended from Jerusalem, this adaptation of the Sermon on the Mount provides good reasons to date the similar text in Matthew 5–7 to Jesus’s lifetime and not to some later time. Moreover, many distinctive expressions from the Sermon on the Mount are found in Matthew 10–25 and throughout the New Testament.

All of these notes and insights increase confidence in the stature, authority, and goodness of the Gospel of Matthew among the records left by the first-century apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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