

The Gospel of Matthew

While there are many similarities between the four gospels documenting the life of Christ, there are also important differences. Each one has its own distinctive slant and focuses on a particular aspect of Jesus' person and work. Matthew's emphasis is on Jesus as teacher and law-giver, one who surpassed even the great teacher and lawgiver of the Old Testament, Moses himself. Matthew shows how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament scripture as the promised Messiah, and how the unique message he brought - a message of moral and spiritual reform - was the natural consequence and fulfillment of everything that had gone before. Matthew has a lot to say about the future of kingdom of heaven, but he emphasises that disciples must be citizens of that kingdom right now by the way that they live their lives.

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Matthew provides a significant clue about the particular emphasis of his gospel in the very first verse:

"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." (Matthew 1:1)

Although the inclusion of a genealogy is not unique (Luke has one too), Matthew's is distinctive and is placed first. Whereas Luke charts the line of Jesus back to Adam and then to God (there is thus a universal element in the approach), Matthew takes readers back to two Old Testament Jewish characters, David and Abraham. Who was David? Who was Abraham? And why should we care? The only way one would be able to answer

those questions would be by going back to the Old Testament to find out.

The answers are very significant. Abraham stands as the man called by God, the man of faith who was prepared to give up everything to follow God, and who consequently received great promises from Him. Abraham is the Jewish ancestor par excellence. David, the man after God's own heart, is the archetypal Israelite king. Like Abraham, he too was the recipient of amazing promises from God, including the promise of a son who would one day sit on David's throne for ever.

Jesus, then, is tied right in to two crucial Old Testament characters by Matthew's gospel account. One ancestor, one king, both men were men of faith and servants of God to whom God made remarkable promises. Could it be that Matthew is suggesting that Jesus is to be the very fulfilment of those promises?

More than this, Matthew's opening verse, modeled as it is on Genesis 2v4 and 5v1, plays on the very Greek word *genesis* ('the book of the generation of Jesus Christ...') that is instantly recognisable as the title to the Bible's first book.¹ That same word *genesis* recalls the many genealogies in the book of Genesis,² and it is interesting in that context that Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy. By recalling the term 'genesis', and by opening with a genealogy, Matthew seems to be deliberately playing up Jesus' Old Testament credentials, as well as the Old Testament credentials of Matthew's gospel itself.

Already then, at Matthew 1v1, we have detected an Old Testament focus and a Jewish focus as a possible key to the gospel. Let's take this hypothesis, combine it with some further evidence, and see what further refinement it might need.

¹ Our book of Genesis gets its name from the Greek word *genesis*, which was the title of Bible's first book in the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament which, along with the Hebrew, was familiar to the New Testament writers. Incidentally, the Hebrew title for the book of Genesis is 'Bereshith' which means 'In the beginning...' (the opening word of Genesis in Hebrew).

² See the Bible Toolshed pdf on Genesis for information on how important genealogies are as a structural marker in the book of Genesis.

God with us

One interesting phenomenon, found in each of the four gospels, is the concept of a frame. Just as one would put a picture or a photograph in a picture frame to set it off, and to bring out some of the colours and perhaps textures in the picture, so works of literature may use frames to draw out some of their key themes and to give emphasis to their message by including elements at the beginning and end which draw the whole thing together. When we look for evidence of a frame in Matthew, we find the following two passages from the first and last chapters:

“His name shall be called Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” (1v23)

“And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” (28v20)

Just as God had said through the angel in chapter 1 that Jesus would be God-with-us, so too Jesus, at the end of the gospel, correspondingly committed to being with his disciples for ever. The parallel is quite clear, and likely deliberate. Especially so when we consider the nature of the connection and the enormous significance of the Immanuel concept in the Old Testament. Not only is there a link to one of the most famous of all OT prophecies, the prophecy of the virgin birth in Isaiah 7, there is also a link to the promise that God made to many of His faithful followers and to His people as a whole many times in the Old Testament - that He would be with them and be their God.

There is one particular instance of that promise of God being with His servants that is of monumental significance. It is made to Moses in Exodus 3:12 as God commissions him to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt. To go along with that special promise God reveals His covenant name, YHWH, which is intimately associated with God’s promise to be with and to redeem His people (compare Exodus 3:12 and 3:14).

The revelation of the name of God in Exodus 3 and 6 is unique, as is alluded to in these ‘frame’ passages from Matthew. God had crucially promised to be with Moses in Exodus 3v12 and

Quotation formulae

Matthew’s most distinctive form of quoting the Old Testament is the following:

“Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying...”

This occurs in: 1:22; 2:15,17,23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9.

Slightly different formulae are used in: 2:5; 13:14; 22:31;24:15; 26:54,56; cf. also 3:15; 5:17, etc.

had linked this with the giving of His memorial name two verses later. That name, embodying the concepts of the eternal existence of God and His future redemptive plan (His plan to be manifest in and among His people) finds a wonderful instance of fulfillment in the sending of His son the Lord Jesus.

All this is picked up by Matthew both at the beginning and end of his gospel. In the Lord Jesus Christ, God proves Himself once and for all to have an abundant commitment to His stated purpose to be with His people. Both the enabler and the proof of that desire for fellowship and ‘with-ness’ is the Lord Jesus Christ. He was and is God-with-us; that is why God sent him (Matthew 1). And it remains the case even when Jesus is not

Matthew’s gospel: who, when and how?

Who wrote Matthew’s gospel? By a very ancient tradition, the answer is Matthew the tax collector, one of the twelve apostles (in the other gospels he is called Levi, and it has been speculated that Matthew may have been a name he took upon conversion). One of the oldest and fullest traditions comes from Papias who died in AD130. He states that Matthew wrote the gospel (that’s why it now bears his name!), and that it was written in Hebrew or Aramaic. However, given that there is little evidence of the gospel having been translated and that it makes use of quite a lot of Greek word-play, this statement from Papias has more recently been understood to mean that Matthew wrote more of an orderly account (compared, for instance, to Mark) in a Jewish style (rather than in their language). There is also ancient testimony to the notion that Matthew’s original audience was primarily Jewish.

While some scholars deny that Matthew was the author or that the account is that of an eyewitness, the view that Matthew was the author remains entirely reasonable. It seems likely that Matthew had Mark’s gospel available to him as a source, but that he added lots of material and reminiscences of his own.

When was it written? There can be no definitive answer to this question, and it ultimately makes little difference to how one reads or interprets the gospel. Most people would say in the late first Century AD, and the consensus is that it would have been after AD70 because of the level of detail recorded in Matthew 24 concerning those events. However, if one believes in inspiration and predictive prophecy this is a weak argument, and there is no reason Matthew could not have written prior to AD70. Ultimately, these questions of authorship and date are much less interesting than engaging with the text of the gospel itself and trying to understand what it means and how it is relevant.

physically present upon earth (Matthew 28, the final verse of the gospel). He will continue to be with us, and to be God-with-us, until the purpose of God is consummated.

The frame which surrounds Matthew’s gospel thus constitutes another vital link with OT scripture. God’s OT promises are being fulfilled in the Lord Jesus in a way in which they had never been fulfilled in a particular individual before.

The fact that the particu-

lar scripture being developed is the revelation of God’s name as given to Moses in Exodus 3:12-14 will turn out to be another important piece of the jigsaw, as we shall see.

Fulfillment

Although it is true that all the gospel writers allude heavily to the Old Testament, and often build whole narrative sequences

Unique to Matthew

The following miracles are generally considered to be unique to Matthew's gospel record:

- Two blind men (9:27-31)
- Mute and possessed man (9:32-33)
- Coin in fish (17:24-27)

The following parables are generally considered to be unique to Matthew:

- Good and bad trees (7:16-20)
- Dragnet (13:47-50)
- Wheat and tares (13:24-30, 36-43)
- Hidden treasure (13:44)
- Pearl of great price (13:45-46)
- Unmerciful servant (18:23-35)
- Labourers in the vineyard (20:1-16)
- Two sons (21:28-32)
- Ten virgins (25:1-13)
- Sheep and goats (25:31-46)

These lists are not absolute, as there can be disagreement about whether a certain episode is or isn't the same as something recorded in another gospel. At the very least they serve as a starting point for further exploration.

together on the basis of Old Testament prototypes, it is in Matthew's gospel above all others that explicit fulfillment quotations are used. A 'fulfillment quotation' is more than an allusion to a scriptural passage or incident, or the quoting of scripture by one of the characters. Instead it is the reporting of an event followed by an explicit assertion by the narrator that 'this happened, that it might be fulfilled which was written by the prophet, saying...' These 'fulfillment formulae', while not completely unique to Matthew, are uniquely dominant in his gospel.

Matthew quotes the Old Testament in a number of ways which are worth exploring. The table illustrates the different 'quotation formulae' that he uses. It can be seen that the most dominant is "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying...", and it may be significant that this formula is used precisely ten times.¹ There are a number of significant groups of ten in the Old Testament, from the ten divine fiat in Genesis 1 by which God creates the world, the ten plagues called forth by the word of the Lord in Exodus and by which the world of Egypt is destroyed, the ten sets of 'generations' in Genesis, the ten commandments in Exodus ... and more besides. It may be significant that Matthew uses his most characteristic quotation formula according to the same pattern.

What function do the OT citations serve in relation to the gospel as a whole? They show that Matthew is concerned to present Jesus' whole life, in even its tiniest details, not as a random sequence of events, but as divinely patterned (and in a sense called forth) by what the Old Testament demanded. Jesus' life happened the way it did, and Jesus was the way he was, because the Old Testament had said that it would be so, and because Jesus was the very embodiment of that ancient Word. It is one of Matthew's tireless themes.

The early years

Yet it is a theme which is particularly dominant at the front end

¹ This excludes the reference found in the AV of 27:35, which is omitted in most Greek texts, as per the RV, NIV, etc.

of the gospel. Right from the outset (even including the details of his birth and childhood), Jesus' life was foreseen by the prophets (and sometimes in seemingly the most unlikely passages). No less than five fulfillment formulae are to be found in the first two chapters! The gospel sets its stall out fairly clearly in this respect.

Speaking of the early life of our Lord enables us to move on to a slightly different aspect of Matthew's use of the Old Testament: the typological one. There are a number of respects in which the events of the first three or four chapters of Matthew echo key Old Testament prototypes, frequently involving Moses. The massacre of infants by Herod, for example, is straight out of the Exodus 1 account of Pharaoh's massacre of Jewish males when Moses was born. In both cases, the special child and future deliverer (whether Moses or Jesus) escapes and in time has to flee the land (Moses to Midian, Jesus, in an interesting twist, to Egypt). Ultimately, a message comes from the Lord in a dream that it is now safe to return, for those who sought the child's life are dead. The set of parallels is extensive and systematic. Some of the key ones are set out in the table.

Exodus

Slaughter of infants
Return of hero (Moses)
Pass through water (Red Sea)
Wilderness temptation
Ascension of mountain
A new law

Matthew

Slaughter of infants
Return of hero (Jesus)
Pass through water (baptism)
Wilderness temptation
Ascension of mountain
A new law

What is the point, though, of such an extensive Old Testament typology, such an excessive correspondence? The answer is not merely to reinforce the theme we have already spotted: that Matthew is at pains to show Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. More than this, the Moses/Jesus typology enables us to refine our theory and put our finger more precisely on what Matthew is striving to achieve. It is this: to present Christ as the New Moses. The Immanuel prophecy in chapter 1 (rooted in

Jesus and the Law

There are a number of terms which are used repeatedly in Matthew's gospel which fit in with this over-arching theme of Jesus as the New Moses and which highlight Jesus' relationship to the Law. Terms like 'law', 'righteousness' and 'fulfil' are classic examples. Matthew's focus on the concept of judgment also fits in with the theme. The repeated expression 'you have heard that it was said by them of old time...' (when Jesus is referring to the Law) is another instance.

Exodus 3:12) had pointed to it, and the Moses typology woven throughout chapters 1-2 points to it. Moses is the Old Testament figure par excellence who is associated with law-giving and scripture-making; the Lord Jesus Christ is the new Moses, the prophet 'greater than Moses' foretold in Deuteronomy 18.

The Law from the Mount

Our chart of correspondences between Jesus and Moses at the beginning of Matthew closed with the Lord Jesus ascending the mount to give his famous 'Sermon on the Mount' recorded in Matthew 5-7. The words used to describe the ascent and descent of the mount link explicitly to the words used of Moses at the giving of the law. As Jesus himself said in this very speech, he did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. Matthew, of all the gospel writers, is keen to show what Jesus said about his relationship to the Law. He not only fulfilled it, he showed by his incredible teaching what it meant to really fill it full with meaning, to capture its essence and spirit, not merely its letter. This he did when repeatedly (again in this very sermon) he said 'ye have heard that it was said by them of old time ... but I say unto you'. Jesus was not undoing the law or unpicking it. He was showing where it led when spiritually interpreted. He was unlocking a new level of potential and showing a more excellent way than the eye-for-an-eye mentality that the Law had seemed to promote.

Matthew 5-7, therefore, perhaps the longest and most famous at-a-sitting account of the sustained teaching of Jesus, sets out his manifesto for discipleship. In it he gives his new law – for he is the New Moses.

This background of Jesus as a counterpart to Moses as deliverer and lawgiver helps us to understand other elements of Matthew's vocabulary. Given its Jewish and Old Testament emphasis, and in particular the 'New Moses' theme, it is no surprise that words like law and righteousness should feature more prominently in this gospel than in the others. By implication Matthew answers the question of whether the old Law, the Law of Moses, was in itself a practical route to righteousness.

The people's inability to keep it had proved the contrary. Jesus brought a new way of salvation, a new covenant. In him the concept of righteousness and how it might be obtained took on a vivid new dimension.

The five-fold shape

The Sermon on the Mount, so well-known a component of the first gospel, is but one of a number of sustained presentations of the teaching of Jesus that Matthew's gospel contains. Turning our attention now to the question of the shape of the gospel as a whole, we may note the following passages which look conspicuously similar:

'And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings...'
(7v28)

'And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding...' (11v1)

'And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables...'
(13v53)

'And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings...'
(19v1)

'And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings...'(26v1)

Not only do they look similar, they also look like deliberate structural markers or place-holders in the text. If we examine the preceding verses in each of the above five instances, it turns out that on each occasion Matthew has presented a long and sustained account of Jesus' teaching. These blocks of teaching material encompass the following chapters: 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 23-25.

While all the gospels contain examples of Jesus' teaching and the things that he said, there is nothing in the other gospels which corresponds to these five discourses. Though many of the verses within the discourses have their counterpart in one or more of the other gospels, it is the way Matthew has collected

Beatitudes and woes

There seems to be a deliberate parallel between the first and last of Matthew's five discourses. Both of them are considerably longer than the other discourses. The first contains the beatitudes ('Blessed are they that mourn...' and so forth), the last contains the corresponding number of woes ('Woe unto you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites...!').

The five discourses

The following is a somewhat clumsy attempt to represent the structure of the gospel. It's beginning and end each contain a frame (the 'God with us' reference), and are thematically linked by dealing with Jesus' birth (at the beginning) and death and re-birth (at the end). In between come the five discourses around which the gospel is structured (marked D1 through D5). Each of these discourses is separated by a narrative block (marked Narr).

Intro	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	Ending
chs 1-4	5-7	10	13	18	23-25	26-28
Birth + prep		Narr	Narr	Narr	Narr	Death + resurr.
Frame (1:23)						Frame (28:20)

When the five discourses are examined, it appears that each one has a distinct thematic core. The first (the Sermon on the Mount) presents Jesus as moral and spiritual teacher and lawgiver - the New Moses. If Jesus' message centres around the 'kingdom of heaven' (Matthew's distinctive term), then these chapters show the entrance requirements to that kingdom – what sort of person a disciple must become in order to be a future citizen of it. The second discourse is about preaching – the urgency of spreading the message of the kingdom to others. The third discourse contains parables about the kingdom and in so doing it encourages a state of preparedness. The fourth discourse deals with relationships between disciples and their role to live as citizens of the kingdom in their congregations today. Finally, the fifth discourse examines the signs of the kingdom and the judgment that will precede it.

these materials together and grouped them into five distinctive and continuous discourses which is unique. The other gospels have nothing like this.

And notice that there are five discourses. Why five? Because it ties in perfectly with Matthew's theme of Jesus as the New Moses. Just as there were five foundational books of Judaism – the Pentateuch, the Law, the five books of Moses, call them what you will – so Matthew's gospel is structured around five foundational discourses of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹

To wrap up the topic of the structure of the gospel, the five discourses account for 9 of the 28 chapters of Matthew. What of the other chapters? Between each of the discourses is a block of narrative material. Of course Jesus has much to say within that narrative, but these are not sustained discourses in the manner of the five. These blocks of narrative material tell the narrative story of Jesus' life in the way that the other gospels do, and in doing so they link and set off the discourse material. This

¹ The proposal is that there is a link between the number of the discourses given by Jesus in Matthew and the five-fold number of the books of the Pentateuch (traditionally ascribed to Moses), not that there is a one-to-one correspondence between each speech and the corresponding book. Thus, for instance, no particular link is claimed between say, the fourth discourse and the book of Numbers or the fifth and Deuteronomy. The parallel works at a more general level.

Methodical Matthew

The structure of Matthew's gospel is quite elaborate, even at the high-level with the five discourses as its structural core. Burying down to the micro level, further elaborate arrangement of material can be seen. The narrative block in chapters 8-9 is a case in point. These chapters form the bridge between Jesus' first and second discourses, but they are far from a random collection of happenings. Even a brief reading reveals that it consists almost entirely of miracles and revolves around the question of authority (which is raised both at the beginning and end of the two chapters. Even closer study suggests that the miracles are probably arranged into distinct groups.

All this is quite interesting if we take the traditional view that Matthew the tax-collector / accountant is the author of the gospel. The record reveals exactly the sort of deliberation and method that one might expect someone of such a profession to show.

intervening material accounts for another 13 or so chapters. The gospel also includes a beginning (recounting the early life of Jesus, much of which is unique to Matthew), and an end (the death and resurrection, in which less material is unique – although the end of the gospel, again perhaps built around a Moses/mountain prototype, certainly is). All this is summarised in the diagram on the previous page.

How the Jewish themes develop

In presenting Jesus as the explicit fulfillment of Old Testament scripture and as the New Moses, Matthew implicitly claims that 'Christianity' is both the logical and necessary continuation, extension, or fulfillment of 'Judaism.' These labels are not used of course, for from the Biblical point of view there is but one Truth, revealed by God through the ages. But in modern terms this could be said to be one of the things Matthew does. He explores the interface and the parting of the ways between true Christianity and Judaism. He describes a new law which both fulfills and dominates the old. He tells of a new righteousness which grows out of and yet transcends the righteousness of the Law. This involves reorientation from an old style of righteousness which was ultimately self-delusional (witness the scribes and Pharisees) or unachievable, to a new and better way.

All this demanded of Matthew's Jewish readers a decision. What would they do with Jesus, and would the outcome of this decision enable them to remain within the framework of traditional Jewish concerns, devotions and ritual? Was Jesus indeed the fulfillment of Old Testament scripture, as Matthew claimed – and if he was, then what did this mean for the course one's life should take? To what extent would or should the new law of Christ supersede the old? Should Moses be reappraised as the forerunner and type of a greater deliverer and law-giver? Would Matthew's readers allow Moses to give way to Christ?

What of the future?

These matters were not abstract or theoretical. They affected every aspect of one's life and orientation – and had the potential to

Judgment and the End-time

This is an important theme in the gospel, dealt with through several repeated motifs:

- Focus on the coming future kingdom (see the sidebar below)
- Parables about judgement (many of the 'kingdom' parables are in fact primarily about judgment)
- Hell (5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33)
- Weeping and gnashing of teeth (8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30)
- Day of judgement (7:21ff.; 13:36ff.; 25:31ff.)

Kingdom of heaven

Although Matthew does not use the term 'kingdom' disproportionately more than the other gospel writers, he does have a characteristic expression to refer to it: the 'kingdom of heaven'. Also, most of the parables he records about the kingdom are unique to him (see the list in an earlier panel).

- "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." (13:31,33,44,45,47; 20:1)
- "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to . . ." (13:24; 18:23; 22:2)
- Three Kingdom parables close Jesus' final discourse (25:1,14,31).

crucially redefine one's expectations for the future. Matthew has a lot to say about the future as a goal for present life (his characteristic expression 'the kingdom of heaven' is found over thirty times, with twelve parables which specifically explore it). But his focus is not on the details of what the kingdom would be like when it came (for that was foretold by the prophets). Instead it is on what sort of a person one needs to be in order to be part of God's future kingdom.

The urgent nature of the decision which confronts all readers is brought out in Matthew's emphasis on the judgement. The decision the predominantly Jewish original audience of the gospel had to make with respect to Jesus and with respect to their own lives was not inconsequential. According to Matthew it was a matter of life and death, and that is why he quotes Jesus' graphic use of judgment and end-time language so frequently. While Matthew speaks of the positive aspects of the coming kingdom of God and the return of Jesus, he is quick to point out that this message carries with it responsibility. It will not necessarily 'all be all right in the end'. There has to be preparation and preparedness. The right decisions have to be made, and the right life-course has to be chosen. So it is that Matthew speaks of judgment and even the punishment of eternal death for those who reject Jesus. He borrows characteristic phrases from Jewish apocalyptic concerning the end of time such as 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' to instill in his Jewish readers a sense of urgency. Much Jewish apocalyptic had used this kind of language to talk of the fate of unsuspecting Gentiles, but in a clever twist Matthew quotes Jesus using this language in addressing the Jews! It was they (and now any reader of the gospel in their place today!) who has to take this seriously and make the right choices with respect to Jesus in their lives.

But where does this leave the Gentiles? The new way of Jesus embraces them too, as Matthew is quick to point out. The law and the prophets had always said it would, and Matthew's message is consistent with this. The question of Jew and Gentile and their relationship in the purpose of God had long been a crux and a source of contention for Jews, with some remark-

The Gentiles

Although the initial audience of Matthew's gospel was perhaps predominantly Jewish, Matthew also quotes plenty of Jesus' teaching concerning the Gentiles (non-Jews). Some examples:

- 4v12-16; 12v15-21; 21v43,45; 28v19-20

ably vitriolic sentiments expressed towards the Gentiles in some Jewish quarters – so it is not that surprising (and in no way undermining of the Jewish theme) to find that Matthew explores this too. Though predominantly looking at the Jewish angle, the gentiles come to the fore in an impressive number of passages (see sidebar). For the teaching of Jesus and his demands for discipleship have the potential to affect everyone, whatever their race, sex, background or station. The teaching of Jesus, when embraced and applied, revolutionises human life for both now and the future. It is thanks to the gospel of Matthew in considerable measure that we still possess today such a challenging and systematic account of that wonderful teaching. 