

Introduction to Matthew

What is a Gospel?

A Gospel, like every other New Testament document, is

- * a historical document,
- * a literary composition,
- * and a theological affirmation.

As a historical document a Gospel reflects the historical events on which the Christian faith is based. The Christian faith is about events that happened in real history: the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels are not based on fiction.

Also, each Gospel reflects and addresses the historical situation in which it was originally written. Each Gospel, not only reflects the life of the historical Jesus, but the historical setting of the church in and for which that Gospel was written.

For example, the way that Mark portrays Jesus going to his death on the cross is different than the way Jesus is portrayed in Luke, and the difference has something to do with the particular context of the church out of which each of them emerged and to whom it was written. In Mark, Jesus is silent and the only thing he says from the cross is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” echoing Psalm 22:1. Jesus dies in anguish, feeling forsaken. But in Luke’s portrayal Jesus goes to his death like a faithful, confident martyr. He forgives his persecutors, speaks forgiveness and grace to a thief crucified next to him, and dies confidently, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” These different portrayals and theological emphases says something about the historical situation of the church in each Gospel. Believers in Mark’s faith community were undoubtedly feeling forsaken and abandoned. They needed to be assured that their Lord also felt that way and yet remained faithful, clinging to God in radical trust. The cry “My God, my God” is a cry of faith. Luke felt his church needed to be inspired to emulate the kind of confidence and faithfulness that Christ embodied in his death.

Since each Gospel is also *a literary composition*, each author had to determine how to begin, how to structure and develop the plot, and how to conclude the story. Each writer had to make decisions about what to include, what to omit, and how to structure or shape it.

The writers, however, were not simply composing interesting literature or simply reporting history; they were making *a theological affirmation* about Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. *The writers were interpreting and proclaiming the*

significance of the Christ event as the saving act of God for humanity in fulfillment of God's redemptive plan.

So the narrative has to be read at two levels—the then-and-there level of what Jesus said and did in his pre-Easter ministry, and simultaneously, the here-and-now level of the living Christ who speaks to our present needs through his Spirit within the faith community. The Gospel writers present the sayings and stories of the pre-Easter Jesus in the light of their resurrection faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. In this way, history and theology become inseparably bound together.

For example, both Matthew and Luke have the story of Jesus walking on the water. The disciples are on the lake of Galilee being battered by a storm. They are straining against an adverse wind. Some interpreters consider this story to be a theological narrative, not a report of a real historical event. Along this same line of thought, some of these interpreters see this as a resurrection story read back into the pre-resurrection life of Jesus. It reads like a resurrection appearance, with Jesus appearance somewhat ambiguous (“they thought he was a ghost,” Mk 6:49). The story symbolizes the risen Christ coming to the church in the midst of the storm of persecution. The good news in the story is that the risen Christ has not abandoned his people who are being tossed to and fro in troubling times. According to these interpreters the story is set more in the life of the church, than in the historical life of Jesus, though it may echo a resurrection appearance.

An indication of the theological nature of the story is in how the response of the disciples is told differently by Mark and Matthew. When Jesus steps into the boat and quiets the storm Mark says,

Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened (6:51-52)

But Matthew's gospel reads differently,

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (14:32-33)

Obviously, neither Gospel writer is giving a literal, factual, historical report. The response of the disciples in Mark fits Mark's constant emphasis on the spiritual ineptitude and dullness of the disciples. All the Gospels have this, but Mark even more so. Matthew is giving us a post-Easter confession—projecting into the story the church's faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

Another way to get at this is to realize that the Gospel narrative is multi-layered. The first level of the tradition (I am using tradition the way New Testament scholars use the term; in a positive way to refer to the stories and sayings of Jesus that have been passed down) is the memory of actual sayings, deeds, teachings, and events.

The second level of every Gospel text is the transmission process between the events of Jesus' life and the writing of the Gospel. Neither the writer nor the readers experienced the original events. These traditions are passed down, not by a chain of individuals, but by communities of faith. They are interpreted, adapted, shaped, and proclaimed by the church in ways that fit their own particular needs and circumstances. This process involved collecting, selecting, amplifying, interpreting, and teaching and preaching.

At first, much of this was oral in form—passed on by word of mouth. Later it was written down. Available to the authors of our four Gospels were both oral and written sources which they utilized in the writing of the Gospels as we now have them. This is the third level and the only level that is directly accessible to us. But the nature and meaning of a Gospel text is often illuminated by working our way backward, imagining how a particular Gospel story was passed on and shaped by the church.

In addition, the early church believed that the risen Christ continued to speak to them through the Spirit at work in their faith communities. These early communities had prophets and teachers that uttered words by the Spirit of the living Christ for the edification of the church (see 1 Cor. 14:3, 29-33). These words were considered to be words from the Lord of the church. It is not difficult to see how in the course of passing down the sayings and teachings of Jesus that the words of the prophets spoken by the Spirit of the living Christ would be mixed together with the traditions of the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth.

At the third level we speak of the authors or writers of the Gospels, but again it is important to remember that these Gospels were written to and developed out of faith communities. These communities of faith influenced what was selected, omitted, included, and emphasized.

The third level is the final level; it is what we have in the four Gospels as they come to us in the Greek manuscripts. A Gospel contains both memory and confession, history and theology, weaved together in such a way that in many cases it is not possible to distinguish what is actual memory and what is interpretation. In one sense it is all interpreted; there is no historical saying or event that has not been interpreted in the tradition. Even those at the first level who actually witnessed the event or heard the saying gave it an interpretation.

Consider the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. What is history and what is theology? The stories had no significance at all for Mark and John, and Matthew's stories are completely different from Luke's stories. Do these stories contain actual history or are they purely theological/metaphorical narratives? Scholars debate and differ in their conclusions.

The consensus of modern Gospel scholarship believes that Mark's gospel was the first gospel to be written (shortly before 70 A.D.). Matthew and Luke came next, probably around the same time, maybe ten to twenty years after Mark (80 to 90 A.D.). Both Luke and Matthew used Mark as a source. It is also generally believed that Luke and Matthew had access to a common written source containing mostly sayings of Jesus (scholars simply call this "Q" for the German *Quelle* meaning "source"). It is also thought that Matthew and Luke had a written source unique to their own communities. Most scholars believe that John's gospel was written independent of the traditions of the other Gospels around 100 A.D. and that he had his own sources. One can find the literary and theological arguments to support this position in standard New Testament Introductions.

The Gospel According to Matthew

The Gospel contains no direct reference to its author or its place of origin. So how did Matthew's name get assigned to the gospel as its author? Some of the early interpreters attributed this gospel to Matthew based on a report from Papias in about A.D. 130. According to Papias "Matthew collected the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best as they could." Papias also says that Matthew "first preached to Hebrews" and "transmitted in writing in his native language the Gospel according to himself."

Most modern scholars doubt the reliability of this reference. It is a commonly accepted position today that Matthew's gospel is based upon the Greek text of Mark and a sayings source ("Q"), also written in Greek. It is unlikely that Matthew, an Aramaic-speaking disciple and eyewitness, wrote this gospel in Greek. However, the author was certainly familiar with Jewish Christianity.

One of the oldest witnesses to the use of the gospel is Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (A.D. 110-115). This may suggest an origin in Syria, perhaps even the city of Antioch.

Matthew's gospel gives special emphasis to Jesus as Teacher, structuring it around five major discourses. A standard New Testament Introduction says this about Matthew,

"Clearly this Gospel is more systematically and intricately organized than Mark. Matthew emphasizes fulfillment of prophecy, Jesus as teacher, and the place of the law and final

judgment within the Christian congregation. These broad interests suggest a churchly Gospel, written to guide the community in a time of transition as it faced problems pertaining to organization, separation from Judaism, and disappointed eschatological hopes. Matthew serves the church; probably for that reason the church placed it first in the New Testament canon.” (Robert A Spivey, D. Moody Smith, and C. Clifton Black, *Anatomy of the New Testament*, sixth ed., p. 91).