

Matthew: Understanding the Tax Collector and his Gospel

By Steve Ray

If looks could kill, he'd be dead. The Jews glared at Levi as he counted his coins. Tax collectors in Israel had great wealth and were considered renegades and traitors. Levi, a Galilean Jew who was also called Matthew, would soon be despised for more than confiscating money from his own people. He would be an outcast for following Jesus. One day Matthew, son of Alphaeus (Mk 2:14), was sitting at his booth collecting taxes for Rome and a young rabbi named Jesus walked by and "saw a tax collector, named Levi, sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he left everything, and rose and followed him" (Lk 5:27–29; cp. Mt 9:9). After leaving his tax booth, Matthew prepared a great feast for Jesus in his home and invited a great company of tax collectors and others to sit at table with Jesus.

When you open the New Testament, the first book you find is the Gospel of St. Matthew. How do we know Matthew wrote the first Gospel? We know because of Catholic tradition. Whereas the rest of the New Testament books were written in Greek, Matthew's Gospel was originally written in the language of the Jews and only later translated into Greek. Papias (c. AD 60–130), a living witness to the teachings of the apostles wrote, "So then Matthew wrote the oracles [of the Lord] in the Hebrew language" (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 3, 29). St. Irenaeus (c. 130–200) wrote "Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome" (*Against Heresies* 3, 1, 1). Matthew preached the Gospel orally long before committing the *Saying of the Lord* to writing sometime between AD 40–70. No date is certain and debate has raged with some wishing a later date. Tradition informs that Matthew preached to the Jews in Palestine for over a decade and later went to foreign nations including Ethiopia, Macedonia, Syria, Persia, Parthia and Medea.

Matthew was a Jew writing to Jews. By some calculations, he quotes directly or alludes to the Old Testament a whopping sixty-five times! Readers today must "think" and read like his original audience—Palestinian Jews—to get the full impact of his message. Mark preaches Jesus to the Romans as a *servant* with no genealogy; Luke portrays Jesus as *humanity* to the Greeks with a genealogy going back to Adam; John tells the world Jesus is *divine* and as God he has no genealogy. Matthew, however, adeptly presents Jesus to his people as *Messiah* and *King* with *royal pedigree* through the kings to David and back to Abraham the patriarch of Israel. The phrases *Kingdom of God* or *heaven* are used almost forty times. Using the interpretive techniques of the contemporary teachers of the Law, Matthew skillfully handles the *Tanakh* arguing that Jesus is the Coming One promised by Moses and the Prophets.

Jesus was a master storyteller, teaching the kingdom of heaven through parables. Matthew weaves these grandly simple stories and miracles into his Gospel to pull back the curtain on the supernatural revealing Jesus' true identity. Jesus walks through the pages adorned in the purple and gold of royalty. Chapters 1–4 narrate King Jesus' ancestry, virgin birth, commission, and the inception of his public ministry. Chapter 5

opens with Jesus as the New Moses. With imagery alluding to Mount Sinai, we read, “he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them” (Mt 6:1–2). Over fourteen hundred years earlier God had spoken through Moses: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deut 18:18). As Jesus took his seat on “the mountain”, the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) established him as *the* Prophet who would fulfill and re-define the Law of Moses (Mt 17–22), revealing the interior nature of the Kingdom of God as opposed to the exterior legalism of the Pharisees.

Matthew’s narration in chapters 8–23 continues with lengthy discourses, parables, dialogs, and miracles. Jesus chastises and challenges the Jews while teaching and training his disciples. Jesus demonstrates clearly, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, that he is the Son of God, the Lord of Creation, and the Jewish Messiah. Jesus’ actual words comprise 25% of the text in Matthew’s Gospel.

Matthew’s modern critics may harshly judge him for his “free-wheeling” use of Old Testament passages, yet he was a master of contemporary interpretation (hermeneutics). In addition to the simple or literal meaning of a Scriptural text, Matthew follows the rabbinic tradition, continued in the tradition of the Catholic Church, of plumbing the depths of revelation and seeing events and prophecies in Scripture with a much higher and often elusive spiritual significance. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he sees Old Testament events as prefigurations of current events; he sees figures in the Old which are fulfilled in the New - Jesus is the culmination of Israelite history which now goes beyond the bounds of Israel to the Gentile nations. Matthew demonstrates that the expansion of the Covenant and the Gospel to the nations is embedded deep in the heart of God and in the revelation of the Old Covenant. The Old Testament is the New concealed; the New Testament is the Old revealed.

In chapters 24-25, Jesus predicts and describes the End. The Institution of the Eucharist at the Jewish Passover receives careful attention in chapter 26, which then flows into the Passion as Jesus is betrayed, condemned, crucified, buried, and raised from the dead in chapters 26–28. The Gospel ends majestically with the risen King standing victoriously on the top of Mount Tabor in Galilee (Mt 28:16) overlooking the land of Israel and beyond, pronouncing his reign and commissioning his ambassadors with the immortal Trinitarian words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:18–20).

Recently, some have questioned Jesus’ intent to establish a Church? Matthew alone among the Gospel writers incorporates the word “church” (*ecclesia*) and makes it clear that Jesus fully intended to build a hierarchical Church. Jesus, the king apparent to the eternal throne of David (Lk 1:32), renames Simon “Peter” (*Cephas*, meaning “rock”; cp. Jn 1:42) and appoints him as the foundation rock of the Church (Mt 16:18). Why does Jesus establish such a Petrine office in the Church? Because he is King of the Jews.

Every Jewish king appointed a Steward who carried the delegated keys of the kingdom (cp. Is 22:15–25). Keys represent *exclusive dominion*. Jesus also gave a like authority to the other apostles (though not the keys) investing them with legislative and judicial authority (Mt 18:15–18). Believers are to “listen to the Church” and are excommunicated if they refuse to do so. Matthew also gives Peter the title of “first” not only as heading the list, but *protos*, first among the apostles (Mt 10:2). The Mosaic system has ended, as symbolized in the torn curtain of the Temple (Mt 27:51), and the new era of the Church has begun. Matthew’s Gospel served as a bridge from the “national kingdom” of Israel to the Church, the Kingdom of Heaven.

The majesty and simple elegance of Matthew’s style makes this Gospel stand as one of the greatest writings of all time, and the content makes it arguably the most important document ever bequeathed to mankind. Matthew is quoted more frequently by the Church Fathers than any other Gospel. The breath of the Holy Spirit can be deeply sensed in this inspired text as this account of Jesus’ life and words rise high to the heavens and permeate deep into the soul.

Eusebius referring to the ancient Fathers writes, “Of all the disciples of the Lord, only Matthew and John have left us written memorials, and they, tradition says, were led to write only under the pressure of necessity. For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence” (*History of the Church* (c. 325) 3, 24).

“It is common knowledge that among all the Scriptures, even those of the New Testament, the Gospels have a special preeminence, and rightly so, for they are the principal witness for the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, our Savior. The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterward they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John” (*Dei Verbum* 18).