

An Overview of the Gospel of Matthew

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The Gospels pose an interesting challenge to the modern world as well as are magnetic in their essential nature. They pose a challenge in the sense that the post-modern mind, let alone the modernistic critic finds it difficult to subscribe to their authority and power as an accurate description of what actually transpired when the Lord Jesus walked the earth. They are magnetic in the sense that the message they carry is so effectually powerful that scarcely anyone who reads them can ignore their claims. They talk about the Messiah who walked the earth to seek and to save that which was lost.

Three of the gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark and Luke) are called the “synoptic gospels” because they are so similar and essentially carry the same message, albeit, presented from different perspectives. These synoptics all record parables, miracles and certain things that Jesus said or did though in unique order of priority, thus not uniform in their presentation of facts. What may be found in two gospels may not necessarily be found in the third or vice versa but the general tenor points to the same conclusion. Each gospel has a different target group and slant hence the unique emphasis. The Gospel of John on the other hand is different from the synoptics in its approach and slant. It narrates the gospel from a totally different perspective, stating from the beginning that Jesus (i.e. the word) is both divine and human at the same time. John does not record any parables for example although several miracles are recorded, some of them uniquely fitted for this gospel. John’s aim is to give a witness so that people might believe. Furthermore, John talks more about the Father-son relationship than any other gospel. A careful reading of the gospels is therefore very fruitful and edifying. For now, we focus on the first synoptic gospel of Matthew:

Author of the Gospel

The author of this gospel is most likely and evidently Matthew (in other gospel styled ‘Levi’) the tax collector who eventually became a disciple of Jesus Christ. He was called from that stigmatised background to serve the King of Kings and thus hosts a feast in Jesus’ honour. Not much is documented about the activities of this gospel writer outside the recorded incidences in the scriptures except church tradition passed down to us by the Apostolic Fathers and their successors. It would appear that Matthew exercised a wide ministry across the world (e.g. believed to have ministered in Ethiopia) and initially wrote his gospel

in Hebrew (so some hold) and later he or an associate translated it into Greek for another target audience. From the narratives, choice of words and explanations, it appears the author was well versed in Jewish (probably a native) traditions knowing what to record in order to present a true narrative account of Jesus. He did not write it selectively or strategically to deceive but as a true record of what actually transpired in keeping with the scriptures and prophecies. Although the gospel is not primarily a biographical account of Jesus, it none the less gives objective bio data and activities of Jesus Christ in his context in relation to the authorities, John the Baptist, temptations, calling of the disciples, healing of people etc. Matthew demonstrates that Jesus actually was a real person that lived and walked the earth as the promised messiah. Although some dispute arises as to whether Matthew the apostle actually wrote the gospel or it was merely attributed to him so that the write up may gain some authentic credibility, tradition overwhelmingly points to him, hence the attribution. Granted, external and internal evidence may be disregarded and questioned but certain things are sure about the author of this inspired gospel: it was recognised as authoritative by the early church. Second, the narrative penman was a Jew who probably lived in Palestine itself. Third, the language used, including word choices resonatingly appealed to the Jewish mind. Although not a chronological narrative, the author touches on important issues pointing to the messiah such as the genealogy or other detailed aspects of this wonderful gospel.

Internal and external evidence

As hinted at in the previous section, a good portion of external evidence points to Matthew the apostle as the author. As earlier intimated, Church tradition equally attributes it to Matthew as having initially written the book in Hebrew¹ but probably later translated it into Greek for Hellenised Jews in diaspora. As for the internal evidence, the book itself does not claim or state to have been written by Matthew but certainly brings out evidence of having been authored by a Jewish person having had first-hand contact with Jesus Christ.

Purpose, Target and Intent of Matthew's Gospel account

The main purpose is to present Jesus as the long expected messiah, hence the lengths to which the writer goes giving details relating to Jesus' genealogy and his mighty acts. The secondary purpose and intent is to have the Jews accept this Jesus as the deliverer, one who introduces or brings God's kingdom to bear on the souls of men. His primary target group therefore are the Jews where ever they might be.

¹ An anonymous document entitled "New Testament originally in Hebrew?" makes a strong case for this assertion, even citing authorities in that regard

Probable Date of Writing and Location

The exact date of the writing of this gospel is uncertain though some suggestions have been forwarded. Internal evidence however suggests that the gospel was authored before the destruction of the Temple of AD 70 as evidenced by the prophecy in Matthew 24. Others suggest a much earlier or later date such as AD 50 or after AD 70. Matthews's location when writing is equally uncertain but probably Jerusalem or somewhere within Palestine when authoring the Hebrew text and most likely in another place outside Palestine when translating to the Greek text.

Special Features of the Gospel

The gospel is in many senses a master piece, having been written by one of Christ's apostles, Matthew the tax collector. Only one gospel mentions the tax collector attribute and for a good reason, because this tells us that God has and can use anyone regardless of their past or history. The gospel itself has special features which beg attention and noticing. The following are some of the clear highlights immediately coming to mind:

- a. The gospel was probably written by an apostle who walked with the Lord, hewn from the stigmatised rock of a tax collector.
- b. The gospel is targeted at the Jewish mind, yea, the Palestinian Jew given the narration detail included in the book.
- c. Matthew's gospel has an elaborate genealogy right from Christ back all the way to Abraham with several generations in between. This elaborate genealogy would immediately resonate with the Jewish mind striking the ancestry bell traced all the way to the patriarch Abraham, the father of faith. This no doubt would immediately grab the Jew's attention. Thus, Matthew carefully traces the messiah's roots to prove that Jesus is indeed the anticipated Messiah. Although Luke does have a genealogy all the way to Adam, Matthew's list strategically captures its target audience. The gospel connects well with the Old Testament.
- d. Matthew's gospel records far more parables than the rest of the synoptic gospels (i.e. Mark and Luke). Chapter 13 for instance has the highest concentration of parables one after the other compared to any other gospel. Although other shorter parables are scattered across the book, the said chapter stands out.

- e. The sermon on the mount, including the model prayer and beatitudes are recorded in detail in Matthew's gospel. Three chapters (5-7) are devoted to that watershed sermon on the mount which no other gospel records to that detail. In the said sermon, Jesus touches on several key matters as well as comments on the right spirit and understanding of the law, relative to what had been taught, probably in the synagogues.
- f. Matthew records several significant miracles pointing to Jesus as the messiah and saviour of the world, the long expected saviour. Thus when Jesus performs a miracle, it is calculated to point to himself as the saviour of the Jewish people, though some misunderstood him to be a political deliverer probably from the tyrannical rule of the occupying Romans. Christ corrects some of these wrong notional perceptions demonstrating that His Kingdom is spiritual in nature and from another world, thus stating that tax and other normal mundane activities needed to be performed as expected.
- g. Jesus encounters his greatest foes, the Pharisees and Sadducees, prominent religious groups in their day. The Pharisees were the renowned teachers of the day and manned the synagogues, were meticulous about truth, believed in the resurrection of the dead and therefore the after life. The Sadducees on the other hand manned the Temple with its attendant liturgy such as sacrifices but rejected the afterlife, existence of angels or even the resurrection. In this gospel, Jesus encounters these rival groups at different stages in his Ministry stirring quite some storm in many instances because the son of man speaks with peculiar authority and authenticity unlike these self important folk. At some point, Jesus even denounces these teachers though in the same breathe reaffirms the perpetuity of the moral law. Although the Essenes are not specifically mentioned in the Bible, Jesus could have interacted with some of them. Some hold that by Jesus' time, they had already withdrawn from polluted society into the desert. It is from this group's labours that we get the prized 1947 Dead Sea scrolls. Another group mentioned in passing are the Zealots, and it appears one of Jesus' disciples hailed from this cadre. In short, Jesus clashed with these leaders on several fronts bordering on justice perversion, inconsistency, unethical practice, unrealistic claims or demands, wrong interpretation of the law and hypocrisy among others. Their encounters were definitely spark packed nearly at all recorded episodes. The Lord was surprisingly extremely stern on these people.
- h. Matthew gives unusual detail which other gospels may not to the same degree. For instance, he takes time to trace Jesus' genealogy, the nativity, issues surrounding the resurrection of Jesus, his appearance to many witnesses, the rising or raising of dead people, the conspiracy surrounding the purported stealing of Jesus' body and the eschatological aspects in Chapter 24. The other gospels may allude to aspects of these things mentioned but they do not give as much detail. None of the gospels for

instance gives a detailed treatment of the eschatological aspects to the degree that Matthew has which evidently is prophetic as well as gives an indication that the gospel was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 led by Titus the Roman commander. Matthew is very meticulous about what would capture the Jewish mind and thus brings critical points to the fore, obviously as led and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

- i. The gospel is not as logical but is certainly very comprehensive touching on many important subjects. The gospel is comparatively very long (28 chapters), longer than any other and gives unique descriptive details. Mark is equally graphical but action oriented while Luke writes an orderly, as much as possible logical account giving sufficient detail from a physicians' perspective. John is in a class of its own, written much later by the venerable John the apostle.

Clearly, we can see that the gospel is unique in many senses and a modern reader must take time to understand the back ground to the gospel, target, customs and what each item is calculated to communicate to its primary target audience. In short, an appreciation of the authorial intent is critical. We proceed to consider some perceived challenges related to this great gospel write up.

Perceived Problems with the Gospel

Some people have raised concerns challenging the authenticity, authority and genuineness of the book based on several perceived inconsistencies or problems. First, pundits claim that available Greek narrative is not the original because it appears slightly different from the Hebrew text whose originals are not available to compare with. This raises an issue of uncertainty either way. Second, critics claim that there is insufficient internal evidence that the author was really and truly Matthew the tax collector. Although early church tradition attributes the book to Matthew the tax collector, tangible evidence is not forthcoming leading to some assuming that probably Mark wrote the book under the direction of the apostle Peter or some other authority. Third, there is a belief that the Hebrew text and the Greek are of different lengths with the latter probably edited for a different target audience. It is believed that either Matthew himself or another translated and edited the text to meet the needs of the respective target audience. The question then arises as to who translated the gospel and why? Fourth, it is believed that the gospel is too similar to Mark and Luke for comfort thereby suggesting that there was dependence on either Mark or the writer of Mark on Matthew. Although this theory does not have sufficient clout, there is some force to it. If that be the case, how then can an apostle rely on another's work. Couldn't it equally be a work of a forger? Fifth, some believe that Mark is a summary of Matthew given its brevity, a prologue of some sort. There is insufficient evidence to this theory either because the writers could have been

independent of each other. Finally, some critics reject the miraculous claims as impossible or designed to hoodwink or deceive people.

These are some of the main objections critics raise but can easily be answered by further research as well as yield of proper exegesis. New information is consistently being discovered which often validates what the gospel writers stated.

Lessons Gleaned From the Gospel of Matthew

Arising from a reading of the gospel, a reader cannot help but come away with some of the following lessons:

1. Matthew was a Jew from Palestine itself and thus wrote to his native people.
2. Although some claim that the gospel was originally written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek at a later stage, the book none the less is consistent and carries essentially the same message. We should focus more on its central message, though not disregarding the integrity and cohesion of the gospel.
3. In effectively presenting the gospel, there is need to present it in the simplest form and appropriate language that the target audience will grasp and understand. This, Matthew grasped very well and effectively executed, hence the purported translations and probable editing of the text. There
4. The gospel was written by a former tax collector and outcast. When the Lord called him, he was sanctified and eventually bequeathed the gospel to the world. This shows that God can and will use anyone if only they are willing and ready to be used. In the language of the apostle Paul (2 Timothy 2:22 ff), in the Father's house are many articles for different use, noble and ignoble. If one sanctifies themselves (of course by the aid and sanctifying assistance of the Holy Spirit), they will be vessels of noble use.

There could be other lessons from which to draw instruction but the above should suffice. What remains is to draw conclusions and close our discussion.

Conclusion

The gospel of Matthew is a landmark writing having relevance for all time. Despite the challenges and questions surrounding the uncertainty of its author, the gospel certainly has the divine stamp and authority. The Jewish mind would quickly resonate with it and submit to its claims about the saviour of the world.

Jesus is indeed a great saviour as foretold by the law and the prophet's right from Abraham or before to the present. To be in Him is to have everlasting life.

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