

INTRODUCTION

Meeting Matthew

Before we begin reading Matthew's Gospel verse by verse, we ought to meet the man whose name appears at the top of the page—or at least discover what we can about him. We should also meet the people for whom he appears to be writing. Every conversation has a speaker and an audience, and if we ignore either one, we can easily hear things that were never being said.

Matthew is perhaps the most obviously Jewish of the four Gospel accounts. That does not mean the other three are somehow un-Jewish, nor does it mean Matthew has nothing to say to Gentiles—a Gentile is simply someone who is not Jewish. Quite the opposite. Gentiles appear from the beginning of Matthew's story. But Matthew seems to assume that his readers know a great deal about Israel's Scriptures, Israel's history, Israel's hopes and Israel's arguments. Abraham and David appear in his very first sentence. Before chapter 2 is finished, Matthew has taken us repeatedly into the writings of the prophets. He does not merely tell us what happened to Yeshua. He continually turns and says, in effect, “Do you see how this fits the story we have been reading all along?”

That is the Matthew I want us to meet.

Who Was Matthew?

The Gospel itself does not begin, “I, Matthew, wrote this book.” The name Matthew comes to us through the early tradition of the believing community, which consistently associated this Gospel with Matthew, also called Levi, the tax collector who became one of Yeshua's disciples. Matthew 9:9 tells us that Yeshua saw “a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth,” and simply said to him, “Follow Me!” Matthew got up and followed Him.

That is quite a résumé for someone who would eventually write a Gospel. Tax collectors were not among the most admired members of Jewish society. They worked within the Roman economic system and were often regarded as collaborators with the occupying power. They were Jewish people working for Rome, and that did not exactly make them popular with their fellow Jews. Yet that is precisely the kind of person Yeshua called. Matthew left the tax booth and became a disciple. If the traditional identification is correct, the man who once kept records of taxes eventually gave us this carefully arranged record of the Messiah.

There are scholars who question whether the apostle Matthew personally wrote the Gospel in the form we now possess. Those questions are worth considering, and I do not want to pretend they do not exist. At the same time, I see no compelling reason to discard the ancient association of this Gospel with that very person named Matthew. So throughout this commentary I will call the author Matthew. Where there is uncertainty, we can acknowledge it without allowing uncertainty to become the most important thing in the room.

After all, our purpose is not primarily to win an argument about authorship. We are here to hear what Matthew is saying to us about God and life in those days and in our days.

To Whom Was Matthew Writing?

It is common to hear that Matthew wrote his Gospel “to the Jews.” There is considerable truth in that statement, but it can also be too simple. Matthew certainly writes from within a Jewish framework. His Gospel is saturated with the Tanach, that is the Hebrew Scriptures. He assumes familiarity with Jewish customs and religious discussions. He is interested in Abraham, David, Moses, Torah, the prophets, the Temple, the Sabbath, purity, Messiah and the kingdom of heaven. He repeatedly shows us Yeshua in relation to Israel and Israel’s story.

But Gentiles are here too, and they are not merely standing at the edge of the photograph. We will meet the Magi coming from the east to worship the King of the Jews. Matthew’s genealogy itself includes Gentile women. So although Matthew is profoundly Jewish, his vision is not confined to Jewish people. That theme will find its way through the entire book.

I think it is better to imagine Matthew writing for a community in which the great questions surrounding Yeshua were being worked out in a thoroughly Jewish context, while Gentiles were increasingly becoming part of the story. What does it mean to say that Yeshua is Messiah? How does He relate to Torah? What does the kingdom of heaven mean? What do we do with the promises to Israel? How should we understand opposition to Yeshua from some Jewish religious leaders? And what happens when Gentiles recognize Israel’s Messiah when some of His own people do not?

Those are not twenty-first-century questions imposed upon Matthew. They arise naturally from the story he tells.

When Was Matthew Written?

There are academics and theologians who will disagree with me—and with each other—about when Matthew’s Gospel was written. That is expected. Dating ancient

documents is not an exact science, and I do not think we need to settle every scholarly argument before we can sit down and read Matthew together and learn.

My perspective is that Matthew wrote after the Gospel of Mark and that most of the Gospel was completed before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. I am open to the possibility that some additions or final shaping of the text may have taken place after 70. There are certainly places where Matthew's tension with the Temple establishment and his criticism of some Jewish leadership are apparent, and those passages need to be taken seriously. But on balance, I think we are reading a Gospel substantially composed while the Second Temple was still standing.

That affects the way I read the book. I do not want us automatically imagining that Christianity is already one religion and Judaism another, each neatly packaged and clearly separated. That picture belongs to a much later period. In Matthew, Yeshua is Jewish. His disciples are Jewish. Matthew himself is Jewish. The Scriptures they quote are Jewish Scriptures. The arguments we will encounter about Torah, Sabbath, purity, authority, Messiah and the Temple are largely arguments taking place within the Jewish world.

Sometimes those arguments are fierce. That should not surprise us. We Jewish people have been having fierce arguments with other Jewish people for a very long time.

We must therefore be particularly careful when Matthew criticizes Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, chief priests or other leaders. His criticism of particular Jewish people or institutions should never be expanded into condemnation of "the Jews." Matthew is himself part of the argument. The Hebrew prophets could speak with extraordinary severity about Israel while remaining Israelites and loving their people. We should allow Matthew to speak from within his own Jewish family without turning his words into weapons against that family.

Matthew and Tanach: The Hebrew Scriptures

One phrase will become very familiar as we travel through this Gospel: "This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet." Matthew sees the story of Yeshua everywhere in Israel's Scriptures.

Sometimes the connections will seem obvious to us. At other times we may find ourselves scratching our heads and asking, "Matthew, how did you get that from that passage?" That is a good question, and we should not be afraid to ask it.

Matthew did not attend a modern Western Bible college. He was a Jewish writer reading the Jewish Scriptures in a Jewish world. He sees patterns, echoes, fulfillments and repetitions. Israel came out of Egypt; Yeshua comes out of Egypt. Israel passed through the waters; Yeshua stands in the Jordan. Israel was called God's son; Yeshua is

declared to be God's beloved Son. Matthew is not simply collecting predictions and then ticking boxes when they come true. He is showing us that the story of Yeshua brings Israel's story to its intended destination.

We will call Yeshua the consummate Israel. That idea will continue to matter. Matthew wants us to see that the Messiah does not arrive disconnected from everything God has previously done. His story grows out of Abraham, David, Moses, the prophets, exile, return, promise and expectation.

If we ignore that Jewish story, we will miss a great deal of Matthew.

The King and the Kingdom

There is another word we are going to encounter again and again: kingdom.

Matthew begins by establishing Yeshua's royal credentials as the son of David. The Magi arrive asking, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" Herod recognizes a threat to his throne. John appears in the wilderness announcing, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2).

And if the King is coming, the kingdom is coming with Him. Wherever the King is, that is where the kingdom is. We should not hear "kingdom of heaven" and immediately think, "the place Christians go when they die." Matthew's kingdom language is much bigger than that. It concerns the rule and reign of God. The King has arrived, and His arrival demands a response.

We will see several responses. The Magi worship. Herod resists. The religious leaders know the right biblical answer but remain unmoved. Joseph obeys. John prepares the way. Crowds repent. Others trust in their ancestry and religious standing. Matthew keeps putting the King in front of people and showing us what happens next.

Eventually, he puts the King in front of us.

How We Will Read Matthew

This commentary is not intended to remove all the difficult questions from Matthew. I hope it does the opposite. I hope we learn to ask better questions.

We will pay attention to Greek words when they genuinely help us understand the text, but this will not become a Greek textbook. We will explore Jewish customs and traditions when they illuminate what Matthew is saying, but we will be careful not to take later Jewish practices and automatically assume they existed in precisely the same form in the first century. We will listen to Christian interpreters, Jewish interpreters, historians and archaeologists where they help us hear the text more clearly. And when

we do not know something, I hope we will become increasingly comfortable saying, “We don’t know.”

Most importantly, we are going to keep reading Matthew as a whole book. Something introduced in chapter 1 may return in chapter 8. An expression that seems insignificant on first appearance may acquire greater meaning when Matthew uses it again. We will resist the temptation to take every verse out of its setting and turn it immediately into a slogan, sermon point or theological argument.

And we will keep asking what the text requires from us.

There is a danger in Bible study. We can become very good at knowing what the text says without allowing the text to do anything to us. John warned people who trusted in their *yichus* that being children of Abraham was not a substitute for repentance. Knowing is important. But knowing is not the same as responding.

So pull up the chair again. Keep your Bible open. Ask questions. Write in the margins. Disagree with me when you think I have missed something. Check the references. Follow the connections back into the Tanach.

We are going to spend a long time with Matthew. And I think he has a great deal to show us.