

Structure of the Bible Study

The course will cover the following, with a view to understanding the passages we read on Sundays throughout Year A in their historical context.

1. The history and structure of the book
2. The Messiah Revealed
3. Responses to the Messiah
4. The Messiah's Mission
5. The Kingdom of Heaven
6. Discipleship

We will look at how applicable the various sayings and stories are to our own lives. The result of such an exercise will hopefully enable us to travel more affirmatively and deeply with each other.

The following questions are those that any biblical researcher asks when they start studying a book of the Bible.

The History and Structure of Matthew.

1. When was the last time any of you looked at any part of Matthew's Gospel?
2. How did you read it? As prose? As you would in church?

It can be read as a biography of Jesus. It can be read as a complete piece of literature. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. As a piece of prose, it flows well.

3. This is a tangential question, but one I think that is pertinent. Are the books we have in the Bible the only books that were written?
 - Have a look at the pdf of the Biblical Canon. Were you aware that what consists of the Bible to one person may not be the same to someone else?
 - Compare and contrast the makeup of the Jewish Scriptures with our own. When you're in Church on Sunday and the reading comes from Ecclesiasticus (which is not the same as Ecclesiastes), does it make you stop and think as to how the SEC is formed and what its theological stance is?
4. When do you think the Gospel of Matthew was written?
 - Considering that Jesus only lived until 33 C.E. (A.D.), does it surprise you that this Gospel was written 50 years later?

- There are two references in the Gospel (12:6 and 22:7) that suggest the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed.
 - Therefore, the book must be dated after 70 C.E. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (circa 110 C.E. wrote a *Letter to the Philadelphians* that appears to reference some of Matthew, suggesting that a date of 80-90 C.E. is reasonable.
 - Some of the book's writings (21:33-45; 22:1-14; 23:3-36; and 27:25) suggest a strained or broken relationship between Matthew's intended readers and the synagogue. It is likely that these are Matthew's interpretations of the destruction in 70 C.E., when Rome destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple. Therefore, there may be some insight into the tensions that existed between Jewish Christians and traditional Jews following the massacre in 70 C.E.

5. Was it written before all the other books in the New Testament, considering it's the first book in the New Testament?

The first letter was the Letter to the Thessalonians, written by Paul, which was written in approx. 52-53 CE.

6. Why is Matthew first?
 - Popular throughout the early Christian world; (it is the most cited Gospel);
 - It contains instructions for the church (18:15-20);
 - Its opening genealogy provides a smooth transition between the Hebraic Scriptures and the story of Jesus.

7. Who was it written for? Was Matthew a Jew or Christian?

Whether the book was written for a particular Jewish Christian community or served as a text for all Jesus' followers remains debated.

8. Where was it written?

This is debated too. Possibly Antioch. Matthew is the only Gospel to mention Syria in Jesus' ministry. However, a Galilean setting is also possible.

9. Who wrote it?
 - Probably not the disciple Matthew, though he is noted second hand by an independent source (Eusebius) that Matthew the disciple recorded sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew language. The book does not claim Matthew as the author. It also does not read as a translation from the Hebraic language.
 - It seems to be a Greek text written with strong knowledge of Jewish Scripture, tradition and belief.

- Some scholars argue that Matthew's Gospel served as a source for both Mark and Luke and possibly John. However, most scholars agree that Matthew is dependent on both Mark's Gospel (90% of Mark's material is contained within Matthew's text) and a hypothetical text called Q, from the German *Quelle*, meaning 'source.'

Here's a quote from R. T. France and his commentary on Matthew:

“The text of the Gospel of Matthew is not provided with markers to draw attention to a comprehensive outline of sections within which the author intended it to be read. Any proposed outline of the gospel is thus imposed by the interpreter, not dictated by the author, and is therefore open to discussion as to whether it truly represents the intended shape of the narrative.”

R. T. France states something that should be obvious to every reader of the Bible. Unfortunately, we are led by the sub-headings and the various translations in existence to read what each translator wanted us to read. To read the Bible objectively, one would have to return to the Koine Greek with which the New Testament was eventually written, and to go back to the aural narrative by which the Old Testament or Hebraic Scriptures were passed from generation to generation. R. T. France writes very objectively, and hence is my go to scholar for a less-biased commentary on the various books of the Bible.

I'd like to give you an example of the kind of bias I mean. Luke Johnson in his writings on the New Testament insists that Matthew was the first book in the New Testament because it was written first. He also refers to it as the most successful edition of Mark's Gospel. Yes, it contains 90% of Mark's writings, but I think it's a tad unfair to think it's a complete rewrite of Mark's Gospel. But you do have to make up your own opinion on these things.

So Luke Johnson states that the early Church regarded Matthew as the first of the Gospels to be written. The later analysis of Matthew and Mark and Luke came much later. If Matthew was written first, it could claim apostolic and eyewitness authority. The tax collector who Mark calls Levi of Alphaeus, and was called Levi by Luke, is named Matthew by this Gospel (9:9). In the list of the 12, he is called 'Matthew the tax collector' (contrast Mark 3:18 and Luke 6:15).

This prioritisation is the sort of argument used to elevate someone's superiority, which is the sort of thing the early Church would have been grateful to use.

Therefore, using more modern commentaries, like R T France's, means there is less chance of having a gendered or denominational or even racial bias. His commentaries are good, but the cheapest on Amazon comes in at just under

£50. I bought an electronic copy through Google Books for under £20, but that has its own limitations.

Matthew has five main sections of the teachings of Jesus.

- Have a look at 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1. It should be along the lines of: ‘Now when Jesus had finished saying these things...’
- Now look at 1:22-23; 2:15; 4:14; 8:17; 12:14-17; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10. It should be ‘... to fulfill what had been spoken... through the prophet,’ as Matthew leans heavily on the Hebraic Scriptures.

So Matthew shows Jesus as the fulfilment of the Torah and prophets:

5:17; 7:12; 17:3; 17:12.

Matthew also anchors Jesus in Jewish tradition through comparisons and connections with Jewish texts.

- Jesus, like Moses is rescued in infancy and travels to Egypt.
- Like Moses, after leaving Egypt, Jesus crosses water (through baptism); enters the wilderness (the temptation); climbs a mountain before beginning his instruction.
- At the end of the Gospel, Jesus gives his followers instructions from a mountain, just as Moses did.
- Jesus, is not only depicted as the new ‘Moses’ but as his superior. Cf Matt 4:1-11 with Deut 9:9.

So we know now that whoever wrote the Gospel of Matthew tried very hard to show that the life of Jesus was grounded in the Jewish culture.

We know now that 90% of Mark’s Gospel is contained within this Gospel. One thing we haven’t mentioned is that there is another Gospel that contains a lot of material from Mark, and that is... Luke. So Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels. There has been a great deal of research into the comparison and contrast of the three – their similarities and their differences. We will look at some of these in later weeks.

In week 2 we look at how the Messiah is revealed in the Gospel and I would like to ask you to read chapters 1-9 in advance of that study.

Bibliography

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