

# Sessions 1&2

## Introducing Matthew's Gospel and its Context.

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As we begin our journey with Matthew's gospel, we look at the background, context and literary design of Matthew's Gospel.

### In these Two Videos

As a result of these videos, you will:

- Appreciate the cultural, social and historical context of the world of Matthew's Gospel;
- Note the literary structure of the Gospel;
- Understand how the video sessions are guided by the Gospel's structure.



Hieronymus Bosch, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1510.  
(Photo: Michael Trainor, used with permission.)

# Introducing Matthew's Gospel

## Background<sup>1</sup>

- *Date*: The gospel was written in Greek, probably between CE 80 and 90.
- *Author*: The author was a Greek-speaking, Jewish Jesus householder, steeped in the Jewish heritage, and skilled in the art of narration and interpretation. Though respectful (or critical?—David Sim) of Mark's gospel, which apparently was already known in Matthew's household, as well as other important resources of the young Jesus movement such as the collection of parables and sayings now designated "Q," Matthew did not hesitate to compose a new life of Jesus that absorbed these important sources but significantly recast them to address the specific concerns of a household of Jesus followers.
- *Locale*: That household (or number of households) was possibly located in Antioch of Syria, a Greco-Roman urban center with a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles, a city reached by the Jesus movement shortly after its inception and one destined to be an influential center of Gospel teaching in the early centuries of the spread of Jesus households. Antioch is also a proposed locale for the Gospel of Luke. Other suggestions for the provenance of Matthew include Caesarea Maritime, Sepphoris, Tiberias, Capernaum (in Galilee) or Pella in the Decapolis. Nevertheless, the Gospel presumes closeness to other Jewish groups, familiarity with Jewish customs that have no need of explanation (hence presuming a predominantly Jesus-Jewish audience), in contact and debate with Torah interpreters, and in proximity to Gentiles.
- *Context*: Matthew's household was immersed in a critical transition moment, suffering a wrenching separation from its roots in Judaism on the one hand and faced with the prospect of growing numbers of Gentile Jesus followers on the other. This transition had provoked bitter conflict with the leadership of the emerging Pharisaic Judaism as well as debate within the community over the impact of the Gentile mission. For Matthew's audience, both non-Jesus Jews and Gentiles were "outsiders" and relationships with both were a difficult challenge.

## Purpose & Christology

- An important purpose of the gospel was to address the questions of identity and purpose faced by Matthew's Jesus household. On the one hand, the evangelist reassures the Gospel household that in following Jesus the promised Messiah and unique Son of God they were being completely faithful to their Jewish heritage and would find in Jesus' teaching and example the embodiment of all

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<sup>1</sup>Insights from Ian Boxall, "Matthew," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. J. J. Collins, G. Hens-Piazza, B. Reid, D. Senior (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 1168-70; Donald Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 83-84.

that God had promised Israel. On the other hand, the character of Jesus' own teaching and ministry, the decisive turn in the history of salvation effected through Jesus' death and resurrection, and the household's own experience of rejection (or separation?) by the Jewish religious leadership compelled the gospel household to turn its future vision to the Gentiles. Thus faith in Jesus and a profound understanding of and fidelity to his way stand at the very center of Matthew's perspective.

- Mt is a valid authentic Jewish-Jesus response to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. The Gospel seeks to show how Judaism can survive and grow within a Jewish-Jesus setting. Jesus' teaching and ministry was in 'harmony' (rather than 'fulfillment') with the Hebrew traditions reflected in the Torah writings. Jesus is presented as interpreter of the Torah who is authentically rooted in the best of Judaism. Mt titles applied to Jesus ('Messiah,' 'Son of God,' 'Servant,' 'Son of David,' 'Lord,' 'prophet') reflect an appreciation of Jesus' Jewish identity. Importantly, Jesus was also regarded as God's *Sophia* ('Wisdom' Mt 11:2, 19, 28-30)

## Social Structure of Matthew's Household

- How does one explain the similarity and difference which the writer seeks to offer between the Jesus' movement and formative Judaism? Matthew's household was a Jewish religious group within a variety of religious (and Jewish) groups in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>2</sup> It may well have reflected a variety of theological/religious groupings with competing voices within its household. It is a community in which diversity exists and where truth is sought. For Anthony Saldarini, Matthew's household is a deviant or sectarian group within Judaism that sought to develop a coherent symbolic worldview and theology that authorized this deviance or difference—a perspective explored by other scholars.<sup>3</sup>
- If we presume a household, then the members that constitute it regard themselves as a kinship group, natural and fictive. The household would represent members from different cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> This diversity would have developed a challenging Gospel narrative to unite, encourage and interpret.

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<sup>2</sup> E. Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1998),

<sup>3</sup>J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); J. Andrew Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel of Matthew* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1996); A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Segal, 'Matthew's Jewish Voice'

<sup>4</sup> Wainwright, *Shall* 45.





St Matthew in the 9<sup>th</sup> Cent Ebbo Gospels.

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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=268344>

## Summary

- The evangelist is concerned about continuity, the continuity of the faith of Israel in the story and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. This is a Jewish Gospel for a predominantly Jewish audience but aware that matters are changing in the post-70 CE era, in tension with Jewish co-religionists and its teachers (the “Pharisees”) of formative Judaism, and conscious of a growing attraction of Gentiles to the Jesus movement that impinges upon and will eventually change the configuration of the Gospel audience. Hence the “tension” between Jesus sending his disciples “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10.6), while the evangelist dots the narrative with Gentile figures (the Magi, the Canaanite woman) and concludes the Gospel with the Risen Jesus instructing his disciples to missionize the Gentile world.
- Matthew presents Jesus in Jewish terms and with Jewish titles (Son of God, Son of Man, Christ, Lord and Son of David). Jesus is also presented as one like Moses and Elijah who is able to interpret the teachings of the Torah authentically for a new and different era.



*Saint Matthew* (1713–1715) by Camillo Rusconi,  
Archbasilica of St. John Lateran in Rome

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## An Outline of Matthew's Gospel

A conventional literary structure of Matthew's Gospel has six parts, with sections II to IV oscillating between Jesus' proclamatory teaching (his word) and his ministerial actions (his deeds):

### *I Prologue (1:1—4:16)*

- Jesus' birth (1:1—2:23)
- Preparation for ministry (3:1—4:16)

### *II Jesus' Ministry Around Galilee (4:17—10:42)*

- Inauguration of ministry (4:17—25)
- *Jesus' teaching on the Mount (5:1—7:29)*
- Jesus' powerful deeds (8:1—9:38)
- *Jesus' teaching about mission (10:1—42)*

### *III Opposition to Jesus (11:1-18:35)*

- Jesus' rejection (11:1—12:50)
- *Jesus' teaching in parables (13:1—53)*
- Jesus' miracles and controversies (13:54—17:27)
- *Jesus' teaching on community life (18:1—35)*

### *IV Jerusalem Journey: Entry. Conflict, Final Teaching (19:1—25:46)*

- Jesus' experience of opposition (19:1—23:39)
- *Jesus' teaching on the end time (24:1—25:46)*

### *V Jesus' Death and Resurrection (26:1—28:15)*

- Jesus' Passion and death (26:1—27:66)
- Resurrection (28:1—15)

### *VI Finale (28:16-20)*

- Jesus' mountaintop gathering with his disciples (28:16-17)
- *Jesus' final teaching that recapitulates the Gospel (28:18-20)*



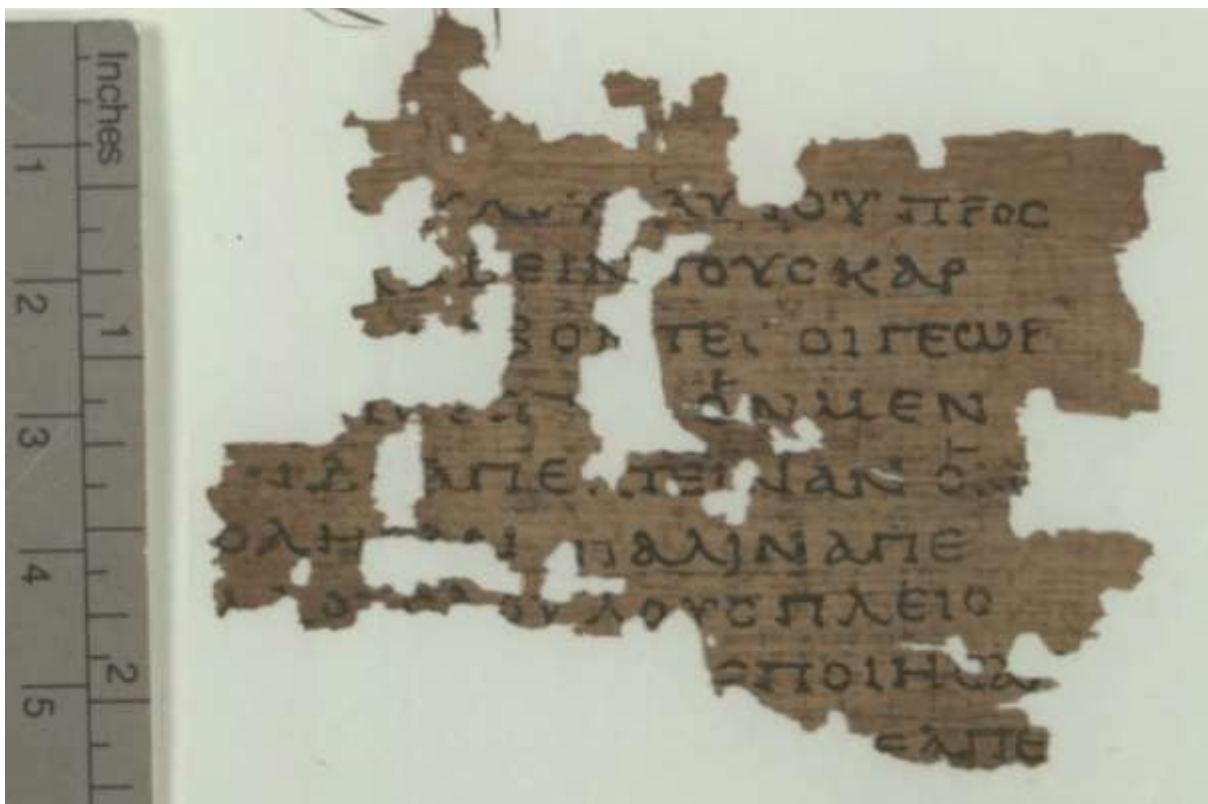
## Summary

In this introduction to Matthew's Gospel, we learn that:

Matthew writes a Gospel to Jewish followers of Jesus struggling in their identity in the Greco-Roman of the late first century. Tensions were already beginning to emerge between leaders of the mainstream Jewish renewal movement (the "Pharisees") in post-70 CE era and the Jewish-Jesus movement. Jesus is presented as a teacher like Moses who can authentically interpret the Torah.

## For Reflection

- What key insights emerge for you from this introduction to Matthew's Gospel?
- What has been "new" learning for you?



Matthew 21:34–37 on Papyrus 104 (*recto*; c. 150CE).

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