

## Road-map through Matthew

### Who wrote the book, when and why?

The gospel is anonymous, that is to say, nowhere within the text does the author tell us who he is. We do know that the early church (e.g. Irenaeus, circa 180) believed the author to be the ex-tax-collector Levi (Matthew), and this forms quite strong external evidence for his authorship. It is certainly clear that the author was a highly literate Christian well-versed in the Old Testament.

The dating of the gospel is debated, but conservative scholars tend to agree that it was probably written between 60 and 80AD, i.e. within eyewitness recollection of the events it narrates.

It is important to understand that the gospels are not written as neutral history. (Does such a thing exist?) Rather, they are intended by their authors to be evangelistic or apologetic treatises to inform the early church. Each writer has carefully gathered the teaching and signs of Jesus which best demonstrate their particular chosen themes. If this seems to imply duplicity, consider how different members of our congregation might retell a complex sermon. Although everyone is attentive(!) and honest, every witness will have a slightly different story to tell, according to the particular circumstances in which they were listening.

### The structure of the book

To a large extent, Matthew groups his material topically, rather than chronologically. The gospel is structured around five major sermons (chapters 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 23-25), each ending with the conclusion formula: 'When Jesus had finished saying these things,' or similar. Many people consider this to be a deliberate attempt by the gospel writer to frame Jesus as a new (and improved) Moses: 5 sermons alluding to the 5 books of the Pentateuch (Genesis – Deuteronomy). This would fit with one of the main

thrusts of the Sermon on the Mount, 'You have heard that it was said... but I say to you...').

The hinge chapter is the third sermon in chapter 13, and the gospel is arranged symmetrically (the technical term is *chiastically*) around it. Thus:

**Birth narrative:** Immanuel (God with us)

**Sermon 1:** entry into the kingdom (now)

**Sermon 2:** sending out of people in the name of Jesus (mission)

**Sermon 3:** different responses to the planting of God's seed

**Sermon 4:** receiving people in the name of Jesus (church)

**Sermon 5:** entry into the kingdom (last days)

**Resurrection account:** (I am with you always)

This may seem implausible to modern eyes, but is a common device used by many of the Biblical writers.

### Matthew's themes

1. Jesus – Messiah, Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God
2. Fulfilment of the OT (law and prophecy) in the life of Jesus
3. Discipleship – as recipients of God's love, how does that love transform us?
4. The kingdom of heaven – its meaning, character, demands, coming and propagation
5. The church and its conduct
6. The end-times
7. The universality of the gospel for Jew and Gentile alike

It'll be apparent from this list that Matthew is no simple book, to be reduced to a two-dimensional précis. It's a complex, beautifully constructed document, exploring in glorious richness some of the facets of Jesus' life and teaching. It's a wonderful book, and I trust and pray that we will meet the King as we read and study the gospel of Matthew in these months.