

## The Gospel According to Matthew (80 C.E.)

Matthew was awarded pride of place as the first Gospel of the New Testament, not because it was the first to be written, but probably because it was the most widely used by early Christians interested in knowing about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, stories found in Matthew but in none of our other Gospels continue to be among the best known and most popular accounts for readers of the New Testament today. Only here do we read of the visit of the magi to the infant Jesus and of the flight to Egypt; here alone does Jesus deliver his Sermon on the Mount with its memorable form of the beatitudes does Jesus deliver his Sermon on the Mount with its memorable form of the Beatitudes (“Blessed are the poor in spirit” ...), Antitheses (“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ But I say to you...”), and other inspirational sayings (“Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,” “No one can serve two masters,” “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own”).

Christian writers of the second century ascribed the book of Matthew, the tax collector called by Jesus to be his disciple (see Matt 9:9), The actual author of the book, however, did not disclose his name. Scholars today generally think that he was a Greek-speaking Christian writing in the second half of the first century, perhaps around 80-85 C.E., probably outside of Palestine, possibly in the opinion of some, in Antioch of Syria. The author’s insistence that Jesus’ followers adhere closely to the Jewish law (Matt 7:17-20) may suggest that he was himself a Jewish Christian; at the same time, his claim that Gentiles who accepted Jesus would enter into God’s kingdom while many Jews would remain outside (8:10-12) may indicate that his own Christian community was comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

It appears that Matthew’s accounts were drawn from written and oral sources, including the Gospel of Mark and a collection of Jesus’ sayings that scholars have designated Q (from the German word for “source,” *Quelle*), a lost Gospel that was also available to the author of Luke. “Matthew” used these sources to create a distinctive portrayal of Jesus as a new Moses who provides the authoritative interpretation of the Jewish law. (e.g., 5:1-48). His followers are to adhere to this law in all its particulars, and to do so even better than the Jewish leaders, the

scribes and Pharisees who throughout this Gospel are condemned as self-serving hypocrites (see chap. 23).

These leaders fail to be convinced of Jesus' identity, despite his many miraculous deeds; as his opponents, they ultimately arrange to have him executed (chaps. 26-27). But this death is according to God's plan, for through it Jesus "saved his people from their sins" (1:21). On the third day, Jesus is raised from the dead and appears to his disciples, commissioning them to spread his "good news" throughout the entire world, teaching their converts to observe all that Jesus commanded, until he returns (28:19-20).

## The Gospel According to Mark (70 C.E.)

Mark is the shortest of the New Testament Gospels, and, in the opinion of most scholars, it was the first to be written. Although traditionally ascribed to John Mark, the companion of the apostle Peter, its author chose to remain anonymous. Most scholars think that the book was composed thirty or forty years after Jesus' death, possibly during the early years of the Jewish uprising against Rome that culminated in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. Its author was a Greek-speaking Christian who had heard, and possibly read accounts of Jesus' life and death and created a kind of biographical account of his own in order to proclaim the "good news of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God." (1:1)

Jesus is declared to be the son of God by God himself at the outset of the narrative (1:11) and is proclaimed the Son of God during his ministry by the evil spirits that he casts out (3:11). One of the striking features of this Gospel, however, is that no one else seems to understand who Jesus is. Despite the fact that his teachings astound his listeners (1:22) and that his miracles cause his fame to spread far and wide (1:28, 45), his family thinks that he has gone out of his mind (3:21), the Jewish leaders claim that he is inspired by the devil (3:22), the people from his hometown do not accept him (6:1-5), and, worst of all, his own disciples do not understand who he is (6:51-52; 8:21).

It is not until halfway through the Gospel that the disciples begin to have an inkling of Jesus' identity (8:27-30). Even then, their understanding is partial at best (8:31-33). They recognize that he is the Messiah, but appear to share the traditional Jewish notion that the Messiah would be a great and powerful figure who would bring salvation through his mighty deeds against God's enemies. They do not understand that Jesus, as God's Son, must suffer humiliation and death (9:30-31; 10:32-34).

For this author, however, this is precisely Jesus' destiny. At the end of his life Jesus makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover, where he is arrested, tried, and executed (chaps. 11-15). For Mark, this death is not a simple miscarriage of justice; it is a death for the sake of others in fulfillment of God's will (10:45). God's definitive vindication of Jesus on the one hand and his followers' continuing inability to understand on the other are decisively shown in the concluding scene of the narrative. For on the third day, three women go to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body, only to find that he is not there but has been raised from the dead. They flee to the tomb, not saying anything to anybody, "for they were afraid" 16:1-18).

## The Gospel According to Luke (85 C.E.)

Luke is the only surviving Gospel whose author also produced a sequel, the Book of Acts. Whereas the Gospel records the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Book of Acts records the spread of Christianity after Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven. Taken together, these two books comprise over one-fourth of the entire New Testament.

Traditionally the author has been identified as Luke, the Gentile traveling companion of Paul; but as is the case with the other Gospels, the author does not actually disclose his identity. Whoever he was, he appears to have been writing in the final quarter of the first century, possibly around 80 or 85 C.E. He addresses his book to someone called "most excellent Theophilus" (1:3), whom some scholars take to be a non-Christian Roman official. If they are right, then Luke may have written his books to persuade Theophilus that Jesus and the religion he founded were morally admirable and socially innocuous (see e.g., 23:47). Other scholars,

however, think that the addressee's name is symbolic: it literally means "beloved of God" and may simply refer to the Christian community that the author addresses. Like the author of Matthew, "Luke" appears to have had access to both the Gospel of Mark and the lost collection of sayings designated Q; from these and other sources (see 1:1-4) he constructed his own distinctive portrayal of Jesus. The basic story line of this Gospel is similar to those of Matthew and Mark; here, too, Jesus is the Son of God, who delivers inspired teachings and does astounding miracles; he is rejected by the leaders of his people and executed by the Romans for claiming to be the kind of the Jews, but he is then raised by God from the dead.

More than the other Gospels, however, Luke is intent on showing that Jesus is God's special "prophet," of spokesperson, sent to his people. Thus, in stories found only in Luke, Jesus' birth is reminiscent of the prophet Samuel's (compare 1:46-56 with 1 Sam 2:1-10); he is anointed as a prophet (4:18), preaches as a prophet (4:20-30), does miracles as a prophet (7:11-17), and dies as a prophet (13:33-34). As God's prophet, Jesus not only proclaims God's will, but his entire life and the outcome of his death also conform to God's will, as found in the writings of the Jewish Scriptures (24:44).

As God's prophet, Jesus is rejected by his own people (13:33-34). This too, however, is according to the plan of God. For Jesus' rejection in Jerusalem allows his message to be taken outside of Israel, to the nations of the Gentiles (24:44-49). The spread of the good news of Jesus' salvation will then be recounted in Luke's second volume, the Book of Acts.

## The Gospel According to John (90-95 C.E.)

Perennially one of the most beloved writings of the New Testament, the Gospel of John has always been recognized for its distinctive portrayal of Jesus. Here alone do we find Jesus turning water into wine, raising Lazarus from the dead, and washing his disciples' feet. Here alone do we hear Jesus proclaim "I am the Father are one." Whereas in the other New Testament Gospels Jesus refuses to prove his identity by performing miraculous signs, here that is precisely what he does: his signs are performed and narrated to reveal his identity so that

others might believe (cf. 2:10; 4:48; 20:30-31). Similarly, whereas in the other Gospels Jesus proclaims the coming kingdom of God but rarely speaks about himself, in this Gospel he proclaims almost nothing about himself and scarcely mentions the kingdom. The Gospel has been traditionally ascribed to John, the son of Zebedee (a person never named in the narrative); as with the other New Testament Gospels, however, the book itself is anonymous. The author was clearly a Greek-speaking Christian; he evidently lived outside of Palestine. As one of his sources for his accounts, he claims to have used the testimony of one of Jesus' closest followers (19:35; 21:24), whom he never names but calls the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (21:7).

Scholars today widely recognize that the author utilized several written sources, including (a) a written account of Jesus' signs that may have been composed, originally, to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah (see, e.g., 2:1-10; 20:30-31); (b) one or more collections of Jesus' long speeches, including the "Farewell Discourse" that comprises all of chapters 14-17; and (c) the introductory hymn to Christ that serves as the Gospel's prologue (1:1-18).

These various sources arose within the author's own community, which evidently began as a group of Jews who came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and eventually were expelled from their synagogue as a result of their belief, leading them to form a worshiping community of their own (see 9:22; 16:2). The community's various conflicts stimulated their theological reflections about the meaning and importance of Jesus, reflections that came to be embodied within the Gospel when it was written sometime near the end of the first century (ca. 90-95 C.E.).

As in the other Gospels, here Jesus continues to be portrayed as a Jewish rabbi, a great prophet, and a messiah sent from God to die for the sins of the world. But he is also far more. For here Jesus is said to be the one who reveals God; he is the embodiment of God's very Word, through which the world was made and by which all things have life (1:1-18). Those who see Jesus have seen the Father, those who believe in him have eternal life, those who reject him are subject to the wrathful judgment of God (3:36; 14:9). In short, for this Gospel, Jesus is God's

very presence on earth, the one who came from the Father to reveal his identity and who at his death and exaltation returned to heaven to prepare a place for his people (14:2).

## The Gospel of Thomas (200-250 C.E.)

The *Gospel of Thomas* was one of the most sensational archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century. The document was unknown except by name before 1945, when a peasant diggings for fertilizer near the village of Nag Hammadi, Egypt, accidentally uncovered a jar containing thirteen leather-bound manuscripts buried sometime in the late fourth century. When the manuscripts came to the attention of scholars of antiquity, their significance was almost immediately recognized: they contained fifty-two tractates that, by and large, represented “heretical writings of Gnostic Christians. Although originally composed in Greek, the writings were in Coptic (ancient Egyptian) translation. Many of them had been previously known by title only.

None of the fifty-two tractates has attracted more attention than the *Gospel of Thomas*. For this is a book of Jesus’ sayings that claims to have been written by Didymos Judas Thomas. According to some early Christian legends, Thomas was Jesus’ twin brother.

The book records 114 “secret teachings” of Jesus. It included no other material: no miracles, no passion narrative, no stories of any kind. In this it appears to resemble that lost collection of sayings that scholars have designated Q, which was used by Matthew and Luke for their Gospels. What ultimately mattered for the author of Thomas was evidently not Jesus’ death and resurrection (which he does not narrate or discuss), but the mysterious teachings that he delivered. Indeed, the Gospel begins by stating that anyone who learns the interpretation of these words will have eternal life.

Many of the sayings will sound familiar to readers already conversant with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For example, here one finds, in slightly different wording, the warning against the “blind leading the blind” and the parables of the sower and of the mustard

seed (sayings 9, 20, 34). Other sayings, however, are quite different and appear to presuppose a gnostic point of view, in which people are understood to be spirits who have fallen from the divine realm and become entrapped in matter (i.e., in the prisons of their material bodies). Salvation, according to this perspective, comes to those who learn the truth of their plight and so are enabled to escape this impoverished material existence by acquiring the knowledge necessary for salvation (e.g., sayings 11, 22, 29, 37, and 80). Jesus is the one who conveys this knowledge.

Some scholars have maintained that the sayings of Thomas may be closer to what Jesus actually taught than what we find in the New Testament; others, however, have pointed out that the theology implicit in the more gnostic teachings cannot be dated with confidence prior to the beginning of the second century. Thus, while some of these sayings may be quite old—may, in fact, go back to Jesus himself—the document as a whole probably came to be written sometime after the New Testament Gospels (though perhaps independently of them), perhaps in the early second century.

## The Gospel of Peter (85 C.E.)

The *Gospel of Peter* was known and used as Scripture in some parts of the Christian church in the second century. Its use was eventually disallowed by church leaders, however, who considered some of its teachings heretical and who claimed, as a consequence, that it could not have been written by its imputed author, Simon Peter. Having fallen out of circulation, it was practically forgotten in all but name until a fragment of its text was discovered near the end of the nineteenth century in a tomb of a Christian monk in Egypt.

The fragment narrates the events of Jesus' passion and resurrection; it begins in mid-sentence by describing Pilate's washing of his hands at Jesus' trial. The narrative that follows bears a close relationship with the accounts found in the New Testament Gospels, especially Matthew, including descriptions of Jesus' crucifixion, his burial, the posting of a guard, and the events surrounding the resurrection. Some of the details here, however, are strikingly different.

During the crucifixion, for example, Jesus is said to have been “silent as if he had no pain” (v. 10). In addition, some of the stories found here occur nowhere else among our early Christian Gospels. Most significantly, the Gospel narrates an account of Jesus’ emergence from his tomb. He is supported by two gigantic angels whose heads reach up to heaven; his own head reaches above the heavens. Behind them emerges the cross. A voice then speaks from heaven, “Have you preached to those who are sleeping?” The cross replies, “Yes” (vv. 39-42).

At the conclusion of the narrative the story breaks off in the middle of a sentence in which the author reveals his name: “But I, Simon Peter, and Andrew my brother, took our nets and went to the sea...” (v. 60).

It is impossible to know whether the complete *Gospel of Peter* contained only a passion narrative or, like the New Testament Gospels, simply ended with one. Some scholars maintain that its pseudonymous author (no one actually thinks it was Peter) derived his stories from the New Testament Gospels and modified them according to his own theological perspective others think that he is depending on *other* sources than the canonical Gospels or that all five Gospels derived their stories from the same sources, but independently of one another.

In any event, it is clear that one of this Gospel’s principle concerns is to incriminate Jews for the death of Jesus. Here, for instance, after Jesus’ crucifixion, the Jewish people bewail their guilt and lament the certain fate of their beloved sacred city of Jerusalem, which God will now destroy as a retribution for their disobedience (v. 25). This anti-Judaic slant can perhaps be used to help date the Gospel in its final form, for such themes became common among Christian authors in the second century. The author was possibly writing at the beginning of the century, utilizing traditions from oral and written sources that were themselves much older.

## The Infancy Gospel of Thomas (80-185 C.E.)

Many early Christians were naturally curious to learn the details of Jesus’ life. As stories circulated about the inspired teachings and miraculous deeds of Jesus’ public ministry, some



Christians began to speculate on what he said and did before it began. Only a couple of incidents involving Jesus prior to his baptism are found in the New Testament Gospels: the narratives of his birth and infancy in Matthew and Luke and the account, unique to Luke, of his pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple as a twelve-year-old (Luke 2:41-52). Other stories of Jesus as a youth, however, were soon in circulation. Behind many of these legends lay a fundamental question: if Jesus was a miracle-working Son of God as an adult, what was he like as a child?

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, not to be confused with the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* was discovered near Nag Hammadi Egypt, is one of the earliest accounts of these legends. The book was allegedly written by “Thomas, the Israelite.” It is not clear whether or not the author intended his readers to recognize him as Judas Thomas, thought by some early Christians to have been Jesus’ own brother. If he did, then his accounts of Jesus as a youth, needless to say, would have been based on indisputable authority.

The Narrative begins with Jesus as a five-year-old boy and relates a number of incidents, most of them miraculous, that betray a streak of the mischievous in Joseph and Mary’s precocious son. Here are anecdotes of Jesus at play with his childhood companions (sometimes harming them with his divine power, sometimes healing them), in confrontation with his elders (usually bettering them), at school with his teachers (revealing their ignorance), and in the workshop with his father (miraculously correcting his mistakes). For modern readers it is difficult to decide whether such stories were meant as serious accounts of Jesus’ early life or simply as speculative and entertaining stories of the youthful Son of God.

The text provides few clues to help us fix the time of its composition. Most scholars believe that such “infancy Gospels” began to circulate during the first half of the second century; some have dated the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* itself as early as 125 C.E.