

Authorship of Matthew's Gospel

The Testimony of Papias

The church historian Eusebius (260–339) claimed to have a statement from someone named Papias, who said, around 135, “Matthew compiled the sayings in the Hebrew language and each one interpreted them as he was able.” Eusebius took this as a reference to the book that we call the “Gospel of Matthew.”

On the basis of this, some people believe that this Gospel is written by Matthew, the tax collector who was one of Jesus's original twelve disciples and who narrates the story of his own call in 9:9 (cf. Mark 2:14). Most scholars think that this is unlikely because:

- This Gospel is written in Greek, not Hebrew, and is far more than a collection of “sayings.” Therefore, Eusebius probably was wrong in thinking that Papias's statement referred to this book in its entirety. Some scholars think that Papias was referring to the now lost “Q” source, which was incorporated into this Gospel.
- This Gospel is often thought to depend on Mark and/or Q for most of its information. Therefore, it is unlikely that it was written by an eyewitness with personal knowledge of Jesus.

- The theological concerns and perspective of this Gospel are generally considered to be those of a “second-generation” Christian rather than those of Jesus’s original disciples.
- This Gospel usually is dated after 70 (possibly after 85). It is unlikely that any of Jesus’s original twelve disciples were still alive at that time, not just because they would have to be fairly aged for the time but, more to the point, because we do not hear of any of them being alive at this time in writings of other early Christians a short time later (e.g., the letters of Ignatius of Antioch).

The Jewish Character of Matthew’s Gospel

This Gospel strives to show that Jesus was faithful to Judaism. He pays the temple tax (17:24–27) and limits his ministry to Israel (10:5–6; 15:24).

This Gospel shows unusual concern for the fulfillment of Jewish Scriptures throughout Jesus’s ministry.

This Gospel emphasizes the endurance of the Jewish law, saying it will remain valid until heaven and earth pass away (5:18). It recognizes that the scribes and Pharisees legitimately occupy Moses’s seat and that their instructions are to be followed (23:2–3). It omits a phrase from Mark’s Gospel that interpreted Jesus’s words as “making all foods clean” (15:16–20; cf. Mark 7:19).

This Gospel respects Jewish piety. It assumes that its readers practice fasting (6:16–18) and make the traditional Jewish offerings (5:23; 6:2; 23:23). It also assumes that they will be offended at the prospect of having to make a journey on the Sabbath (24:20). It is perceptive of Jewish sensitivities regarding use of the divine name, substituting “kingdom of heaven” for “kingdom of God” in most cases throughout the book.

This Gospel does not consider it necessary to explain Jewish customs such as the handwashing scruples dictated by the “tradition of the elders” (15:2; cf. Mark 7:3–4), the wearing of phylacteries (23:5), and the whitewashing of tombs (23:27).

This Gospel conforms at times to the professional style of writing used by rabbinic scribes. The recasting of the divorce question through the addition of the words “for any cause” in 19:3 (cf. Mark 10:2) and the addition of the exception clause to Jesus’s answer in 19:9 both follow typical rabbinic formulations. The form of the Lord’s Prayer in 6:9–13 suggests Jewish liturgical usage by its address, seven petitions, and use of the word *debts*.

On the basis of this, some people believe this Gospel was written by an unknown Jewish Christian who may have been a converted rabbi or scribe and who may therefore provide an oblique reference to himself in 13:52. The author sometimes is considered to be a Jew who believes that Jesus is the Messiah but who would still identify himself as being “within the walls of Judaism”; he thinks of himself

not as someone who has converted to another religion but rather as someone involved in a messianic movement within the ancient religion of Israel.

This view has supporters, but many modern scholars think that it fails to account for the level of hostility directed against the Jewish people and their leaders in certain passages in Matthew (see “The Anti-Jewish Character of Matthew’s Gospel” below).

The Non-Jewish Character of Matthew’s Gospel

This Gospel does not distinguish between the different parties of Judaism. It refers to “the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:12) as though the doctrines of the two groups were the same.

At times, this Gospel seems to misinterpret matters that would have been clear to any Jewish person of the age. The excessively literal fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 in Matthew 21:7 indicates that the author did not understand parallelism, a typical characteristic of Hebrew poetry.

This Gospel does not reproduce some of Mark’s Semitic words, such as “Corban” in Mark 7:11 (cf. Matt. 15:5).

This Gospel refers to “the Jews” in 28:15 as though they are a group distinct from the disciples of Jesus and makes references to “their cities,” “their scribes,” and “their synagogues” throughout the

narrative, as though Jesus and his followers belong to some entity distinct from the Jews, for whom these institutions exist.

This Gospel has a universalistic strain that is inclusive of the non-Jewish world. In 13:38 the “field” of ministry is designated the “world.” In 24:14 Jesus prophesies that the gospel will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to the gentiles, and in 28:19 he commissions his followers to make disciples of all nations (gentiles).

On the basis of this, some people have suggested that this Gospel was written by a gentile Christian who had acquired a secondhand interest in the Hebrew Scriptures and in things Jewish.

This view has not held up well in recent scholarship. Most people believe that the aforementioned anomalies can be explained in terms of Matthew’s community being Hellenistic rather than Palestinian and in terms of the distinctions between Christian Jews (who believed that Jesus was the Messiah) and non-Christian Jews (who did not).

The Anti-Jewish Character of Matthew’s Gospel

This Gospel infers that the Jewish people have been rejected by God.

Jesus tells a gentile centurion that “the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness” (8:12).

He tells the Jewish leaders that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to” another (21:43).

The Jewish nation as a whole is pictured as cursed for all time with guilt for Christ’s death (27:25).

The words of the Great Commission in 28:19 could be interpreted to mean “make disciples of all gentiles,” thereby excluding Jews from the sphere of Christian missions.

On the basis of this, some people believe this Gospel was written by an ex-Jewish Christian who has left the synagogue and now considers himself to be outside the walls of Judaism. This would explain the love/hate attitude that this Gospel has toward the Jews. Affection for things Jewish remains, but an irreparable separation has occurred. The future of the author’s community lies in the mission to the gentiles.