

BIBLE SUNDAY 2013: The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction

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The first gospel to be written was Mark. Most likely, a few years later, the young Christian Churches wanted a gospel which included more of the teachings of Jesus, because Mark concentrates on the personality of Jesus. They approached the Christian teacher whom we call Matthew, who edited Mark somewhat, and inserted five great collections of the teaching of Jesus. Most probably these teachings had been collected into a document known to both Matthew and Luke, but now lost, for large tracts of material are shared word for word by these two gospels. Matthew also added some of his own material, stories and details which he must have received by separate oral tradition, and which he was the first to write down.

It is clear from the interests and emphases of this gospel that Matthew and his community were Jews who had recognised Jesus as the Messiah of Judaism, and so had become Christians. Matthew uses Jewish methods of argument, and is familiar with Jewish institutions. He stresses that Jesus fulfils the Jewish scriptures and especially the Jewish Law, though not in the way that his Jewish contemporaries favoured. This made for a decided tension between Matthew's community and their Jewish neighbours, amounting even to hostility and resulting in persecution of these Christian Jews. The same sort of tension is visible in the Gospel of John, and may well have been widespread towards the end of the first century.

Matthew also shows us a community which has settled down to live the Christian life. There is no longer the vivid expectation of an immediate Second Coming of Christ which we find in Mark. Matthew envisages a longer period of Christian living before the rewards and punishments of the final judgment. Meanwhile he is intensely conscious of the divine presence of Christ in the community of the Church, the new People of God, and of the authority which the Church exercises in Christ's name.

Take and Read: the Gospels is a book series, recommended by the Bishops' Conference Scripture Working Group, that is designed to help people explore the four gospels more deeply, encouraging meditative and prayerful reading in an accessible and attractive way. The books can be used both by individuals and by groups gathering to study and pray. For more information about the Take and Read Series please see: <http://www.whatgoodnews.org/take-read/>

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