

# In conversation with Matthew – A

## Introduction

### WHY MATTHEW?

We will study the gospel of *Matthew*, the lectionary New Testament (NT) readings for 2017 and on alternate fortnights we will look at the Old Testament (OT), or Hebrew Scripture, references for the previous study.

The Gospel is about Jesus Christ, Mt 1<sup>1</sup>. We will read some text carefully, research the relevant background, ponder the deeper meaning and take a little time at the end of each session for devotion. Suggested ***questions and activities (Q/A) are in bold italics*** in the body of the study material. The background paper (BP) has more information, if interested.

**Please bring a bible to each study.**

### ABOUT GOSPELS

Gospel comes from an Old English word, *gôd-spel*, meaning ‘good news’. It translates the Greek word from which we get “evangelism”, etc.

***Q/A: Look up the titles and the first verse or so of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in various versions. Check the footnotes, margin notes, etc., What title might the original documents have carried? What do they say they are about?***

Gospels were like ancient ‘lives’ or biographies, but they were mainly for preaching and teaching, Jn 20<sup>30-31</sup>. The gospels tell of Jesus’ origin, ministry, teaching, passion (the last week of his life), crucifixion and resurrection. There are four in our Bibles, but many other surviving ‘gospels’ (eg *Thomas*) did not make it into the cannon.

After Jesus’ death people began to collect their memories in oral and written forms. These provided the material for the gospel writers. Since only a few people then could read or write, most of life’s business for the common people was done by word of mouth. But their memories were better trained than ours. A tiny privileged elite were literate and they left us their biased accounts from antiquity. Thucydides, an Athenian historian, wrote a benchmark for objective history in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and Luke was probably aware of this.

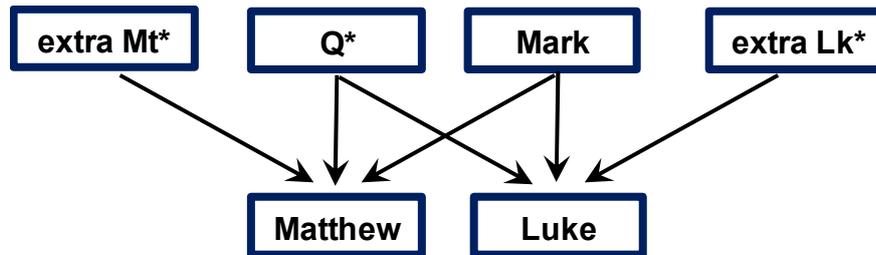
***Q/A: Read Luke 1<sup>1-4</sup> and Acts 1<sup>1-5</sup> looking for clues about the writing process. Look briefly at Thucydides words in the Background Paper (BP pp2-3). How might this perspective influence our understanding of the gospels?***

Many believe that the Bible is fully inspired by God, thus making normal means of inquiry irrelevant. But Luke seems to think it was important to make a determined human effort to record the story of Jesus and the early Church accurately.

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**Q/A: What does Biblical inspiration mean for each of us? Is canonical status significant? Can the canon offer us a common space for learning while holding a variety of beliefs about scripture?**

Most scholars date *Mark* at about 70 CE, Matthew and Luke between 80 and 100 CE and *John* from 100 to 125 CE. So the earliest gospel was written about 40 years after Jesus died, Matthew 50 to 60 years after and Paul's earliest letters about 20 years after. It is now thought that Matthew and Luke used two principal sources: *Mark* and a collection of 'Jesus sayings' called Q.



\* Indicates a postulated document or source

Matthew would have drawn extensively on Mark and Q while introducing some material independently known to him and labelled 'extra Mt' above. NT researchers have had 'a field day' with this theorising and there are many variants on this broadly consensus view of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Q is somewhat similar to the *Gospel of Thomas*, also a predominantly 'sayings' document. *Thomas* is a favourite of 'Jesus Seminar' scholars, most of whom tend to see Jesus in the mould of a Jewish Cynic philosopher.

**Q/A: Does it help us to understand how the Gospels came into the Bible? Do history and exposition matter at all? Discuss the pros and cons of delving into this sort of complicated scholarship for ordinary Christians.**

Language is also a problem. Aramaic was the native language of Galilee in Jesus' time. So how did Aramaic memories about Jesus become our Greek gospels? Remember that Greek was then the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean world and the language of many Jews living outside Judea. No manuscripts have survived in Aramaic and the scholarly consensus is that our Gospels, including *Matthew*, were written firstly in Greek.

The Uniting Church in the *Basis of Union*, para 5, accepts the "Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.." and "it lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures..." In para 11 "it acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, and thanks God for the continuing witness and service of ... scholar(s)..."

**Q/A: The history is hard enough, but questions of language become highly specialised. How do inquiring lay Christians make sense of this, when the experts disagree? Does it matter? Can the Bible still be definitive?**

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It's unlikely that Matthew, the disciple and tax collector (Mt 10<sup>3</sup>), wrote *Matthew*, the gospel. Why would an eyewitness follow the account of Mark, a non-eyewitness? Perhaps in Mt 13<sup>52</sup> he is hinting at his background as a scribe trained in Jewish methods of interpretation of scripture.

Who did he write for? Probably a Jewish-Christian church outside of Judea. Jewish features of *Matthew* are more extensive quotation of the OT than other gospels, a five-fold structure like the Torah (see 4<sup>th</sup> dot point below), written in polished Greek for Greek-speakers, respects Jewish sensibilities and knows Galilee and its culture.

**Q/A: Look up Mt 5<sup>3</sup> & 10 for Jewish custom of avoiding saying God. Note untranslated Aramaic at 5<sup>22</sup>, 27<sup>6</sup>, mention of Jewish customs at 5<sup>23-24</sup>, 6<sup>16-18</sup>, 15<sup>2</sup> & 17<sup>24-27</sup>, 23<sup>5</sup> and Jewish exclusivism at 10<sup>5-6</sup>, 15<sup>4</sup>.**

Hellenistic Jewish locations suggested for Matthew's church have been Antioch in Syria as well as Tiberias and Sepphoris in Galilee.

**Q/A: How might knowing the community originally addressed add to our understanding of Matthew or other gospels today?**

Some features of *Matthew* are:

- Intensely ethical understanding of Judaism (7<sup>12</sup> and 22<sup>37-4</sup>)
- Quotes OT +80 times
- Uses a fulfilment formula for prophecies of Jesus as Messiah: 1<sup>22</sup>, 2<sup>15,17,23</sup>, 26<sup>54,56</sup>, 27<sup>9</sup>, etc.,
- Concludes Jesus' five major discourses with a formula: 7<sup>28</sup>, 11<sup>1</sup>, 13<sup>53</sup>, 19<sup>1</sup>& 26<sup>1</sup>.
- While strongly Jewish, is open to Gentile inclusion: 2<sup>1</sup>, 28<sup>19</sup>, 8<sup>10-12</sup>, etc.,
- Practical guidance for church: 18<sup>15-20</sup>.

**Q/A: Read and discuss some of the passages cited above.**

The outline and program followed in this study will be as in BP pp7 & 11.

### ABOUT QUOTING THE OLD TESTAMENT

**Black-Letter** English Bibles, showing OT quotations in the NT, may be of more value than **Red-Letter** Bibles, showing Jesus words. Our OT was the early Christians' Bible (Lk 24<sup>32</sup>) and they resorted to it to resolve issues. The lists provided give the extensive quotations in *Matthew*.

They had two sources to access the OT: the Hebrew Text and the Greek Translation or Septuagint (LXX). NT writers mostly used the LXX or related translations from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE in Egypt. The LXX contained the Apocrypha, which is not in our Protestant Bibles.

Technology plays a significant, but often overlooked part in understanding what Bible reading involved then. Codex books like ours only became common in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Reading, for the tiny fraction of people that were literate, involved unrolling and rerolling a 10 metre papyrus or vellum scroll. The text was written in vertical columns about the width of a human upper leg, where scribal writing was done. There were

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few divisions between the words and minimal punctuation. Lighting was poor and there were effectively no vision aids such as spectacles. It was not easy just to read in a linear fashion. Imagine trying to look up a specific passage or part of the text as we do, moving back and forth through our Bibles and dictionaries.

Bearing in mind these limitations, quotations can be classified as:

- Quotation directly and accurately from the Hebrew or Greek text;
- Quotation from memory, possibly with approximate wording;
- Allusions to an OT theme or motive but not a quotation;
- Quotations not accurately attributed;
- Misquotations or modifications; and
- Quotations which seem to have been taken out of context or misapplied.

The main reasons for quoting the OT were;

- To show that Jesus had fulfilled OT prophecies;
- To argue that the Church had become the new Israel;
- To derive rules for leading moral Christian lives; and
- To draw on themes, literal and allegorical, in search of ultimate truth.

***Q/A: Is there a risk that the Bible, as we now use it with all its accumulated electronic aids in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has become a totally modern invention bearing little relation to the early church's Bible? What then is its authority? Discuss***

Some Christian beliefs seem to rely heavily on the LXX translation of the Hebrew Bible. See the discussion at p9 BP on the virgin birth.

***What do we take from this in terms of Biblical authority?***

***Devotion: Imagine for a few minutes what it would be like to be transported back through time into a meeting of Matthew's church. What would you want to say to those first Christians? Share your thoughts with the group as you feel moved.***