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## Matthew in context

Matthew's gospel is not a biography in any meaningful sense, for along with the other three gospels, Mark, Luke and John, it contains only the briefest of details of Jesus' life. It is hardly justifiable to describe any of the four gospels as books at all, they are more like tracts or pamphlets. If we put all the information together, there is a total of less than thirty days of Jesus' life accounted for in the entire New Testament record. There is only the scantiest of information about his birth in the records of Matthew and Luke (nothing in Mark or John), only one mention of an event in his boyhood, recorded in Luke, and by the third page of Matthew he is already 30 years of age. We know no details of his childhood beyond his actual birth, or of his boyhood years, apart from the visit to Jerusalem with his parents at the age of twelve. We know nothing of his teenage years, of any schooling he may or may not have had, at what age he began to work in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth, or of any details of his adult years until the age of thirty. We know nothing of his contemporaries or friends during that time, or whether any friendships survive into the three years of his ministry. Matthew's introduction of him as an adult is very matter-of-fact, 'Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John' (3:13). The jump from his last mention of Jesus is enormous, 'He went and lived in a town called Nazareth' (2:23) which was after his return from Egypt where, as a refugee, he had been taken by his mother



and Joseph to avoid the wrath of Herod in his mass destruction of all the baby boys in Bethlehem.

The public ministry of Jesus is generally agreed to have lasted for approximately three years (Matthew does not tell us his age at any point, but Luke 3:23 states, 'Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry', and John indicates his ministry covered three annual Passovers eg John 2:13; 6:4; 12:1). As the accumulated record of Jesus during this time amounts only to around one month's worth, we are left with approximately another thirty five months of activity about which we know nothing. We do know that very much took place during that time, for John writes at the end of his account, 'Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written' (John 21:25). On the one hand it would have been wonderful to know much more of the life of Jesus than we do, but on the other hand, we may be grateful the Scripture has been maintained in a manageable size! Had the Holy Spirit chosen to reveal for our benefit the whole story that John says he could have written down, we might have been so overwhelmed with the material available, the scriptures might have sat unopened on our bookshelves as most encyclopaedias do! We can be grateful for the brevity of the gospels!

Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the synoptic gospels, presenting their story in a uniform pattern. If we lay them out in parallel columns we will find a very similar arrangement of material. The ministry of Jesus in the synoptics is almost exclusively in the region of Galilee, with Jesus coming to Jerusalem only in the week immediately prior to his crucifixion, where he made a dramatic entry, riding on a donkey, with a large crowd accompanying him who spread their cloaks on the road, cut palm branches to spread before him, and shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David'. In Matthew's record this is the first visit of Jesus to Jerusalem, but John gives other accounts letting us know there were at least three visits prior to that (see John 2:13ff; 5:1ff; followed by a period of deliberate absenteeism from Jerusalem because the Jews were wanting to take his life (see 7:1); then he visits again in 7:14 staying in Judea until the end of Chapter 11, returning in 12:12ff on the occasion recorded

by all three synoptics, with the people laying palm branches in front of him and shouting 'Hosanna').

There is no conflict in this regard between the synoptic gospels and John's account, for the inclusion of material in one account does not mean it was unknown to the other writers. Matthew, Mark and Luke very likely depended on common sources for much of their material, but each writer has selected his material so as to present a particular portrait of Christ. It is important to see and to understand the individual portrait of each writer, and then in unifying the four pictures to see the full portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ intended by the Holy Spirit in his inspiration of each text.

## Four Portraits

### 1. Matthew: Christ the King

Matthew's portrait is of Christ as King. The opening statement of his gospel, 'A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David...' (1:1), immediately identifies him with the royal throne of David. We shall consider the implications of this later, but his kingship as presented by Matthew is neither nationalistic or materialistic, though its roots are in Israel's royal line of David. One of the outstanding features of Matthew's gospel is the reoccurrence of the word 'kingdom' throughout the text. Thirty two times Jesus speaks of the 'Kingdom of heaven' (no other New Testament writer uses that term), four times of the 'Kingdom of God' and altogether, there are fifty four references to the word 'kingdom', together with fourteen statements or allusions identifying Christ as 'king'. The other gospel writers also record teaching of Jesus about the 'kingdom', particularly in the synoptics (Mark: nineteen occasions; Luke: forty three times, with John recording the word on only three occasions) and although the concept of the kingdom is not therefore exclusive to Matthew, it is much more the central theme of his record. Jesus Christ is king, and his business is to set up a kingdom and to exercise authority as king in that kingdom. This is Matthew's message, and the portrait he presents.

### 2. Mark: Christ the Servant

Mark's portrait is of Christ as servant. There is no genealogy recorded in Mark, for the ancestry of a servant is of little interest



and of no consequence. If someone stood up to claim himself a king, we would want to know who his parents were. The claim to kingship is based on ancestry. If someone presents himself as a servant, the question becomes irrelevant. To be king is to be acknowledged for who you are. To be a servant is to be acknowledged for what you do. Mark's gospel records Jesus in motion, with plenty of movement and activity, but with little teaching. The theme of Mark's gospel is found in Mark 10:45 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many'.

### **3. Luke: Christ the Son of Man**

Luke's portrait is of Christ as the Son of Man. The stress is on the broader humanity of Jesus, and whilst Luke records Jesus' genealogy he does not only trace it back to Abraham, the father of the Jews, (which is as far as Matthew goes), but to Adam, the father of the Human Race. Luke is the only Gentile writer of the New Testament, and he presents Jesus as more than the son of Abraham, the fulfilment of God's covenant with the Jews, but as a son of the Human Race.

### **4. John: Christ the Son of God**

John's portrait is of Christ as the Son of God. He paints on the biggest canvas of all. There is no human genealogy in this gospel, for John's record of Christ begins outside of time and outside of space: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made' (John 1:1-3). This is the divine incarnation, God made flesh, and living among us!

Each portrait is unique, but none is contradictory of any other. They complement, endorse, and add to one another to give us the fuller picture of the Christ we are intended to know. These four aspects are anticipated in Ezekiel's vision of four living creatures, of which he says 'Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox, each also had the face of an eagle' (Ezek. 1:10). The face of a man may represent Luke's portrait of Christ as the son of man, the face of a lion, Matthew's portrait of Christ as king, the face of an ox, Mark's portrait of Christ

as servant, and the face of an eagle, John's portrait of Christ as the Son of God. In the book of Revelation a similar vision is seen by John, this time in the order of the lion [Matthew], the ox [Mark], the man [Luke] and the eagle [John] (see Rev. 4:7)<sup>1</sup>.

### **Purpose in writing**

Matthew wrote his gospel for Jewish readers. The testimony of the early church fathers who commented on this gospel is unanimous about this. Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyons in the middle of the second century) wrote, 'The gospel of Matthew was written for the Jews'; Origen a little later wrote, 'St. Matthew wrote for the Hebrew', and Eusebius of Caesarea, the great historian of the third century to whom we owe so much of our knowledge of the early church, wrote, 'Matthew ... delivered his gospel to his own countrymen'. The content of the book confirms this view, for it is steeped in detail of concern to the Jewish people. One of the chief features of this gospel is the demonstration and confirmation that all which was expected of the Messiah was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The Jewish people had long expected the Messiah to come, but their image of him had evolved through the years to that of a great military ruler who would throw off the shackles of Roman domination, assert their independence and dignity and make them a nation of great significance in the world.

There was good reason for this crystallisation of Messianic expectation. For over seven hundred years Israel had been the subjects of superpower imperialism. They had been nothing more than a pawn on the board of international power politics, ruled, subdued, used and abused against their will to further the interests of a foreign tyrant. In the year 722 BC, Assyria had destroyed the Northern kingdom of Israel, (Israel had divided into two separate entities after the death of Solomon – Israel in the North with Samaria as its Capital, and Judah in the south with Jerusalem as its Capital), leaving Judah intact to serve as a convenient buffer state between its territory and that of its arch rival and antagonist, Egypt. During that time, Judah could hardly breathe nor move without the consent of the super-power states. At the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, Assyria's

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of the relationship of the four gospels see *Why Four Gospels* by Donald Bridge, Mentor, 1996.



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