
The Gospel According to Matthew

Part One

Matthew 1–16

Barbara E. Reid
with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



*A ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock
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DIOCESE OF LITTLE ROCK

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Dear Friends,

The Bible is a gift of God to the church, the people gathered around the world throughout the ages in the name of Christ. God uses this sacred writing to continue to speak to us in all times and places.

I encourage you to make it your own by dedicated prayer and study with others and on your own. Little Rock Scripture Study is a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock. It provides the tools you need to faithfully understand what you are reading, to appreciate its meaning for you and for our world, and to guide you in a way that will deepen your own ability to respond to God's call.

It is my hope that the Word of God will empower you as Christians to live a life worthy of your call as a child of God.

Sincerely in Christ,

✠ Anthony B. Taylor
Bishop of Little Rock



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Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

The Gospel According to Matthew, Part One Matthew 1–16


The resource you hold in your hands is divided into five lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet five times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- The text of the Gospel According to Matthew, chapters 1–16, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.

- Commentary by Barbara E. Reid (which has also been published separately as part of the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the chapters of Matthew being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is: LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/MatthewPartOne. Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.
- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 12–22) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 23–24.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 25 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.

The Gospel According to Matthew

Part One

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Matthew 1–2

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

God of all righteousness, send your Spirit into my mind and heart so I may understand your word and live its truth. Inspire my life with the words of this Gospel.

Read the Introduction on pages 12–14 and the Bible text of Matthew 1–2 found in the outside columns of pages 15–21, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 23–24, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 25 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In many ways the Gospel of Matthew holds primacy of place for Christians. It is the first book in the New Testament, and in patristic times it was thought to have been the first Gospel written. It was the Gospel most used in worship in the early church. And it has been the one most commented upon and preached, beginning with the first known commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by Origen (ca. A.D. 185–254).

Some of the best-loved passages in Scripture, as well as some of the most difficult sayings and teachings of Jesus, are found in this Gospel. This Gospel is distinctive for its emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus, as authoritative teacher, whose life and ministry fulfill the Scriptures. Wisdom motifs also mark Matthew's presentation of Jesus. The assurance that Jesus is Emmanuel, "God-with-us," frames the whole Gospel (1:23; 28:20).

Author

Traditionally, the author of the first Gospel has been identified as Matthew, the tax collector who was called by Jesus (9:9) and sent out as an apostle (10:3). But, like many ancient authors, the evangelist nowhere identifies himself. The apostle Matthew may have been responsible for an earlier stage of the Gospel tradition, or he may have been a missionary to the area where this Gospel was composed. But most scholars agree that he was not the author of the Gospel. The composer copied extensively from the Gospel of Mark; an eyewitness would have told the story in his own words. It is also doubtful that a tax collector would have the kind of religious and literary education needed to produce this Gospel. Finally, the theological concerns in this Gospel are those of second-generation Christians. For the sake of brevity, however, we continue to refer to the author as "Matthew."

The evangelist was likely a Jewish Christian, writing for a community that was predominantly Jewish Christian. The author had

extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and a keen concern for Jewish observance and the role of the Law.

Date

Allusions to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (21:41-42; 22:7; 24:1-2) indicate that Matthew wrote after A.D. 70. A date of approximately A.D. 85 would allow time for circulation of the Gospel of Mark, one of Matthew's sources, which was composed close to A.D. 70.

Setting

We do not know the precise locale of the Matthean community, but a prosperous urban setting is likely from the twenty-six times that Matthew uses the word *polis*, "city" (cf. Mark, four times; Luke, sixteen times) and the twenty-eight times he mentions gold and silver (cf. Mark, one time; Luke, four times). Matthean Christians, like those of other locales, were women and men of diverse social and civic status, ethnic identities, and levels of wealth. They comprised only a small percentage of the total population. It was a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, striving to work out their identity as the New Israel.

The oldest tradition, and still the most frequently suggested locale for the Matthean community, is Antioch of Syria. As the third largest city of the empire, it had a sizable Jewish population. It was an important center of emerging Christianity (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3), where Jewish and Gentile Christians struggled to work out their new relationship in Christ (Gal 2:11-13). Other possible settings include Caesarea Maritima, Sepphoris, Alexandria, Edessa, Tyre, and Sidon.

Jews and Christians

The relationship of the Matthean community to their Jewish counterparts is not entirely clear. Pointing to a rupture between the two groups are references to "their synagogues"

(4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54), “your synagogues” (23:34), “their scribes” (7:29), “the Jews to the present [day]” (28:15), Jewish persecution of Jesus’ followers (10:17; 23:34), and bitter denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees (ch. 23). There are stories of exemplary faith of those who are not Jews: the magi (2:1-12); a Roman centurion (8:5-13); a Canaanite woman (15:21-28); a Roman soldier (27:54). That Jesus’ message is for Gentiles is seen clearly in the final commission (28:19) and more subtly in the inclusion of Ruth and Rahab in Jesus’ genealogy (1:5); the coming of the magi to worship Jesus (2:11); the saying “in his name the Gentiles will hope” (12:21); the faith of a Canaanite woman (15:21-28); and in the parables of the tenants (21:33-43) and the marriage feast (22:1-10).

Yet, at the same time, Matthew stresses a specific outreach to Israel. Only in Matthew does Jesus tell his disciples to confine their mission to the towns of Israel (10:5-6, 23; 15:24). And Matthew’s Gospel, overall, is strongly Jewish in tone, emphasizing the abiding validity of the Law and fulfillment of the Scriptures.

This Gospel is designed to offer Matthew’s Jewish Christians an account of Jesus’ life and mission that enables them to relate to the two loyalties that pull them. On the one hand, they are Jews who are trying to define themselves in relation to other Jews who have not accepted Jesus. The latter see them as disloyal to the Mosaic covenant, engaged in dangerous partnership with pagans. On the other hand, they are Christians trying to relate to a community in which the majority is now Gentile, for whom the continued adherence of Jewish Christians to Jewish Law and customs would prove problematic. Matthew’s Gospel tries to defend and define Jewish Christianity, on the one hand, and unity with Gentile Christians, on the other. It validates the community’s continuity with the past promises to Israel, while at the same time justifies their new allegiance to the person of Christ and his mission.

A prime pastoral concern is the impact that Christian use of the Gospel of Matthew has had on Jewish-Christian relations. Statements in

the Gospel that reflect the historical tensions of an emerging Jewish Christian community struggling to define itself in relation to other Jews need to be clearly explained as such so that they are not used to fuel anti-Judaism in contemporary contexts.

Composition

Most modern scholars think that Matthew relied on the Markan tradition as one of his prime sources. Matthew has retained some 600 of Mark’s 660 verses, often streamlining the story and converting narration into dialogue. He follows Mark more closely from chapter 13 onward than in the first twelve chapters. Matthew adds infancy narratives and resurrection appearance stories, and recasts Jesus’ teaching into five large blocks of discourse. He adapts the story to his predominantly Jewish Christian community by omitting explanations of Jewish customs (e.g., Matt 15:2; cf. Mark 7:3-4). Matthew also emphasizes more explicitly Jesus’ fulfillment of the Scriptures, often citing specific texts from the Old Testament, particularly from the prophet Isaiah (e.g., 3:3; 4:14; 8:17). He gives more attention to the question of the Law and its observance (5:17-48).

Matthew, as well as Luke, also used a source called “Q” (for *Quelle*, German for “source”) for some two hundred sayings of Jesus. Although no copy of this collection of sayings has yet been found, its existence can be supposed, due to the similarity in the wording and order of these sayings in the two Gospels. Finally, Matthew also relied on oral and written traditions, designated “M,” that are unique to his Gospel.

Scholars take different approaches to defining the structure of Matthew’s Gospel. For detailed information about these approaches, see the addendum to this volume (page 98): “The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel.”

Purpose

This Gospel, with its emphasis on Jesus as authoritative Teacher and its stress on the ethical

Lesson One

implications of discipleship, is a powerful catechetical tool. The evangelist may have composed it with the idea of providing a handbook for church leaders to assist them in preaching, teaching, and leading worship. This text is a particularly useful guide for helping believers discern what to keep from tradition and what to let go in changing circumstances. Its strategies for peacemaking, reconciliation, and formation of community make this Gospel a potent pastoral aid. In every age it continues to bring new vision and hope to Christians in mission,

inviting them into ever deeper relationship with Jesus, who remains always with them (1:23; 28:20).

The commentary in this book is primarily based on the Greek text rather than the New American Bible, Revised Edition translation. Accordingly, the translation of words or phrases in the commentary sometimes differs from the translation provided in the outside columns of this book. It is hoped that these complementary translations will enhance understanding of the Gospel.

THE ORIGINS OF JESUS

Matthew 1:1–4:11

The opening chapters set the stage for the whole Gospel. Matthew, like Luke, begins with two introductory chapters of infancy narratives. The differences between the two accounts indicate that they did not share the same sources for this portion of the story. Matthew tells the story of Jesus' origins, the unusual circumstances surrounding his birth, and the threat to Jesus' life by Herod from the perspective of Joseph. Luke, in contrast, makes Mary central. Beginning with the infancy narratives, Matthew calls attention to the fulfillment of Scripture through Jesus' life and ministry. In the opening two chapters he highlights Jesus' Davidic descent and presents Jesus as recapitulating in his own life important events in the history of Israel. Matthew then situates Jesus in relation to John the Baptist, followed by his account of Jesus' testing in the desert in preparation for his public ministry.

1:1 Book of origins

The title verse introduces motifs that run throughout the whole of the Gospel. The opening phrase, "book of the genealogy (*biblos geneseōs*)," can also be translated "account of the birth" or "book of origin." This same phrase begins the account of creation in Genesis 2:4 (LXX) and the list of descendants of Adam in Genesis 5:1. Matthew narrates a new creative act of God. Three important titles follow. Jesus is *christos*, "messiah," the "anointed" of God. This term designates one who is set apart by God for particular service, such as kings (Pss 2:2; 89:20); priests (Lev 4:3, 5); prophets (1 Kgs 19:16). Some Jewish writings spoke of a coming messiah who would carry out God's purposes in a new way. Expectations surrounding this figure were by no means uniform. "Son of David," one of Matthew's favorite designations of Jesus (1:1, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42-45), underscores Jesus' royal status and also recalls God's choice of unlikely persons for important roles in salvation history. "Son of Abraham" relates Jesus to the prime

I: The Infancy Narrative

CHAPTER 1

The Genealogy of Jesus

¹The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. ³Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, ⁶Jesse the father of David the king.

continue

figure in Israel's history, the one whose struggle to be obedient to God brought blessing for all the peoples on earth.

1:2-17 The genealogy of Jesus (cf. Luke 3:23-38)

The genealogy functions not as a historical record but as a way to situate Jesus in relation to the memorable characters in Israel's history. It tells who he is by recounting who his people are. Drawing on 1 Chronicles 1:28-42; 3:5-24; Ruth 4:12-22, Matthew outlines Jesus' ancestors in three schematized sections of fourteen generations each (v. 17). The progression is from Israel's origin in Abraham to its glorious days under David (vv. 2-6a), then to the disastrous time of the Babylonian exile (vv. 6b-11), and finally to the hope-filled future with the birth of the Messiah (vv. 12-16). The number fourteen is symbolic. Some think that it represents the numerical value of the name David ($d + v + d = 4 + 6 + 4 = 14$), but more likely it signifies fullness or completion, being double