

## MATTHEW & PROPHECY FULFILLED

Heresies can come in many forms. To a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, Matthew's gospel is the "greatest story ever told." But, to first century Judaism, Matthew uttered the heresy of Jesus as Messiah – as prophecy fulfilled.

As lead-off gospel to the New Testament, Matthew's purpose of *prophecy fulfilled* is made clear right at the outset. The author begins the gospel story this way:

"An account of the genealogy of *Jesus the Messiah*, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

The prime thesis of Matthew's gospel is that Jesus is not a blasphemer intent on overthrowing Judaism. Rather, Jesus represents the fulfillment of both the "law and the prophets."

More on this subject is yet to come. But first, turn to a brief review of what is known and not known about the time when this gospel was written, the author, and the audience.

### BACKGROUND OF MATTHEW THE GOSPEL

While Matthew appears to be addressed to a Jewish audience, all of the currently known early versions of this gospel were written in Greek. Some early traditions reference a document that may have been written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Though scholars feel that the work contains at least some Semitic language influence, today the Greek version Matthew generally is not viewed as a straight-across translation from the Aramaic – which may be problematic.

However, this was not necessarily the early church view. As one of the leading authorities of the second century church (about 150 AD), Papias proclaimed that "Matthew organized the sayings *in the Hebrew (Aramaic) language, but everyone has translated them as best he could.*" If this is the case, there should be an early version of Matthew that predates the earliest available and extant manuscripts in Greek.

Similarly, the third century theologian Origen states that Matthew was written in Aramaic for a Jewish audience. Like Papias, Irenaeus of the late second century and Origen of the third century all describe Matthew as the first gospel to be written. In contrast, the modern scholarly opinion more often centers on Mark as first of the gospel accounts.

**Gospel Dating:** As with the other gospels, there is no clear consensus as to where or when Matthew was written. By tradition, Matthew is often viewed to have originated perhaps in Syria.

Dates suggested range from the early 50s to a time as late as 80-90 AD. The Bishop Ignatius provides the first documented example of a person who appears to have cited Matthean passages as early as 110 AD.

Modern scholars including more liberal theologians are more likely to posit a date for the composition of Matthew's gospel that is post-70 AD – after Jerusalem was destroyed. More fundamental theologians tend toward a pre-70 date of composition.

**Authorship:** Answers to the question of who wrote Matthew also tend to split along theological lines. More fundamental theologians note that early church patriarchs were virtually unanimous in holding that Matthew, one of the 12 disciples, was the author of this Gospel. Since at least the time of second century Christian leader Irenaeus, the first gospel has been ascribed to the apostle Matthew.

Fourth century historian Eusebius wrote that:

Matthew had begun by preaching to Hebrews; and when he made up his mind to go to others too, he committed his own gospel to writing in his native tongue, so that for those with whom he was no longer present the gap left by his departure was filled by what he wrote.

Eusebius also quotes Origen who had offered a similar view, specifically that: "First to be written was that of the one-time exciseman who became an apostle of Jesus Christ – Matthew; it was published *for believers of Jewish origin, and was composed in Aramaic.*"

Recent scholarship tends toward a different view of authorship for this and other gospels influenced, in part, by dating the time of writing beyond the likely life span of the apostles. Modern scholarship views authorship as often being claimed in the name of an early disciple but by a later adherent.

**The Tradition of Matthew:** Matthew (also identified as Levi) was a tax collector who left a vocation reviled by Jewish society to follow Jesus. His name translated means "gift of the Lord." In the gospels of Mark and Luke, Matthew is referred to as Levi.

The fourth century church historian Eusebius of Caesarea articulated the view that Matthew's mission was primarily oriented to a Jewish audience. The tradition of Roman martyrology indicates he died in Ethiopia.

## PROPHETIC FULFILLMENT

The theme that what are now described by Christians as Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled by the life and message of Jesus is central to Matthew's gospel. Of the four New Testament gospel writers, Matthew makes the greatest use of prophecy. A total of 14 items are quoted by Matthew, most introduced with a statement to the effect that: "...all this took place *to fulfill ...*"

Isaiah is the prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures most widely cited by Matthew. There also are references to Samuel, Psalms, Jeremiah, Hosea, Micah and Zechariah.

The Matthean fulfillment statements typically are followed by an account of Jesus casting out spirits and healing the sick. For example, the author of Matthew writes: “This was to fulfill what had been spoken *through the prophet Isaiah*, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.’ ”

Matthew’s drive to demonstrate that Jesus’ life is a fulfillment of prophecy leads this writer to dangerous (if not erroneous) applications of Old Testament scriptures – beginning with the *virgin birth* of Jesus:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.”  
(Matthew 1:23, from Isaiah 7:14)

Matthew’s first citation best illustrates the far-reaching (and heretical) consequences of this over-reach – and the insult to those steeped in the traditions of Judaism. This is because the *virgin* described by Isaiah is not necessarily a virgin, but simply *an unmarried young woman*.

Matthew’s misquotation of Isaiah comes as the result of a mis-translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew to the Greek Septuagint (in about the third century BC). While the Matthean account cites correctly from the Septuagint, in the process this author misrepresents the words and the meaning of the original Hebrew.

The Greek term used by Matthew and the Septuagint translation of Isaiah is *parthenos*, meaning a virgin. However, the original word from the original Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 is *almah*, more appropriately translated as maiden, young woman or unmarried woman.

The term *almah* is used five other times in the Hebrew scriptures – referring to women ranging from older children to those being seduced. Perhaps the most graphic depiction is to be found in the Proverbs:

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
four I do not understand:  
the way of an eagle in the sky,  
the way of a snake on a rock,  
the way of a ship on the high seas,  
and the way of a man with a girl (*almah*).

Matthew’s misquotation of Isaiah does not necessarily mean that there is no virgin birth. Luke gives a similar account of a virgin birth without reference to any Old Testament prophecy. However, the historical precedent cited by Matthew to prove the historical fulfillment is essentially misconstrued.

Other prophecies cited by Matthew as being fulfilled through Jesus are also fraught with problems:

- Matthew refers to statements in Samuel and Micah that a ruler of Judah will emerge from Bethlehem. The original citation in Samuel is that of a forerunner to the kingship of David, not Jesus. It is not clear whether the subsequent statement in Micah is looking back to David or forward to someone who is yet to come.
- Upon his return from Egypt (after Herod's reputed slaughter of the innocents), Matthew refers back to the statement of the prophet Hosea that: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." However, Hosea's use of the term son clearly refers to the entire nation of Israel rather than to a Messiah. The full text of the verse in Hosea is: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."
- In describing Herod's massacre of the young males of Bethlehem, Matthew recalls Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." However, Ramah is not Bethlehem, but a town in northern Israel. Jeremiah is writing of the exile of the Northern tribes of Israel to Assyria.
- Regarding the use of parables rather than a more straightforward message delivered to the masses, Matthew's Jesus once more quotes Isaiah: "You will indeed listen, but never understand." Again Isaiah does not appear to have been writing of a future time, but of a message that Isaiah was to take to his contemporaries. However, centuries later, Matthew has Jesus (somewhat erroneously) suggesting a direct prophetic link, quoting Jesus as saying: "With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah..."
- In remorse for betraying Jesus, Judas returns the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests. Matthew reports that the priests use the money to buy a potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. This is in fulfillment of a prophecy made by Jeremiah: "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me." Matthew is mistaken; there is no similar verse in Jeremiah. Rather, Matthew's quote appears to be a very loose paraphrase of a verse in Zechariah.

**Fulfillment of Torah Law:** Matthew saw Jesus not only as a fulfillment of specific events foretold by Jewish prophets of the scripture. Jesus also serves as a fulfillment of Jewish teaching – and more specifically of Judaic law or the *torah*.

Of the four gospel writers, Matthew is the only one to refer repeatedly to the "law and the prophets." For example, in the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus asks the crowd: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come *not to abolish but to fulfill*. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

More so than with the other gospels, Matthew's account is particularly critical of the Jewish sect known as the Pharisees. As a first century movement, the Pharisees were intent on assuring devoted adherence to all forms of Jewish law – including customs built up over the centuries – particularly since the return from Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BC.

While Matthew's Jesus is highly critical of the Pharisees, the criticism is not focused on the fine details of the law. Rather, Jesus criticism is that in prescribing detailed rules (as for tithing and other matters), the Pharisees had "neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."

**Jesus as Messiah:** A final theme of fulfillment important to Matthew's gospel is Jesus' role as the Messiah or *anointed one* of God. As noted, Matthew makes known his view of the messiahship of Jesus right from the outset of his gospel. In verse 1 of chapter 1, Matthew states his purpose as: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah..."

**Beyond the Obvious:** There is one other possible explanation to Matthew's apparent misinterpretation of Old Testament prophecy. This is raised by the possibility that Jesus and other New Testament writers were, in fact, legitimately re-interpreting OT scripture.

For example, the authors of a recent book *Beyond the Obvious* observe that: "It becomes increasingly clear the more we pursue this issue that there are several instances where the New Testament interprets the Old in strange and varied ways, and surely not in a literal way." In effect, the Spirit of God may have intended a meaning for Scripture beyond that of the original author.

**Acceptance of Matthew:** Early Christian literature generally indicates that Matthew was accepted as the first of the New Testament gospels. No less an authority than Clement, Bishop of Rome (writing about 95 AD) mentions "the Gospel according to Matthew." Some Jewish Christian congregations such as the Ebionites who emigrated to Transjordan after the first destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 AD) reportedly preferred or admitted only the authority of Matthew.

However, Matthew's acceptance as authoritative was not completely endorsed by the early Church. For example, the late first century Christian leader Clement also notes that Matthew added several phrases to the Beatitudes.

## **MATTHEW IN SUMMARY**

Matthew's gospel has been widely cited down through the last two millennia as the primary source for *the greatest story ever told*. Unfortunately, there is clear evidence that the story as told by this writer may be, in fact, too good to be true.

Matthew endeavored to weave a tale that would serve to keep a nascent Christianity within the folds of Judaism. Jesus represented a righteous form of Judaism in contrast to the retrograde Judaism practices by Jewish leaders of the day – scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees.

In the end, this gospel as we now have it may have over-reached. Whether by malevolent design, sloppy homework or simple exuberance, Matthew reached beyond the intent of the original Old Testament authors. Another possibility is that this re-interpretation is in fact justified, if spirit led and consistent with other scripture.

Despite these difficulties, Matthew's grand purpose was served. By the heresy of Jesus as God's fulfillment, Matthew found a niche for Christianity that could be exploited not only for Jewish consumption, but also for a broader gentile audience by Paul the apostle.

There is a price to be paid for such exuberance. To his own contemporaries and to succeeding generations, Matthew's heresy raises doubts not only as to the legitimacy of the prophetic claims offered, but as to the integrity of the rest of this gospel. If the author stretched to reinterpret history in one place, would he have done so elsewhere?

As the first of our dozen heretics of the faith (profiled by [jesustheheresy.com](http://jesustheheresy.com)), Matthew serves a vital purpose for the church that was to be. Jesus is the bridge between the old order and the new. Through Matthew, the Christian church was not just an upstart, but a religion with a heritage.

To the Jewish establishment of the first century, Matthew's gospel was *in your face*. Corrupt Judaism was to be replaced by a new Judaism – through Jesus as the fulfillment of those whom the prophets had spoken.

Matthew's heresy was critical to the flowering of a church that could leave behind the old for the new. However, in his ultimate mission, Matthew may have missed the mark.

Rather than reforming Judaism from within, the Matthean *over-reach* served instead to help drive Christianity out from the Judaic fold – separating and embittering people who worship the same *Yahweh* for two succeeding millennia.

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This excerpt is adapted from the "The Heresy of Matthew: Prophecy Fulfilled," further detailed in the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more information, check out [www.jesustheheresy.com](http://www.jesustheheresy.com).