Matthew’s Gospel:  
A Community Effort

by John Wijngaards

Who wrote Matthew’s Gospel? This sounds like a trick question, and in a way it is. No, Matthew did not write Matthew’s Gospel, at least not in the way we think of an author writing a book. Though one author put his personal stamp on style and expression, it was only after the text had been refined in discussion with others in the community. Matthew’s Gospel, like the other three Gospels, emerged from a first-century community of believers.

Many scholars suggest that the city of Antioch was the setting in which Matthew’s Gospel was composed. Antioch in Syria is often mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments. Lying just north of the Holy Land, it dominated Palestinian fortunes for three centuries (from 333 B.C.). Antiochus IV, the king of Antioch in the second century B.C., tried to force Greek culture on the Jews. The story of the Maccabees recounts the dramatic consequences.

In New Testament times Antioch featured even more prominently. It was in Antioch that the first uncircumcised gentiles joined a Christian community (Acts 11:19-24). Acts tells us that "it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians" (11:26b).

Antioch became the center from which Paul launched his missionary journeys (Acts 13:1-3). Antioch was also the place where Peter and Paul clashed regarding the observance of the Law (Galatians 2:11-13).

Shaping the Gospel

The Christian community at Antioch left a lasting imprint on this fascinating Gospel. The context may even explain how the Gospel came to be written. For example, we can recognize in the Gospel traces of the concerns of the local Christian community: a prosperous urban environment, intense preoccupation with Jewish-Christian relations, familiarity with Palestine and the prominent role of Peter in the community. According to ancient tradition Peter was "bishop" of Antioch before moving to Rome.

The language of the Gospel is an intermediate standard Greek that reflects a knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic as well. This is consistent with what we know about the Jewish population of Antioch.
The core of Matthew’s Gospel is derived from a collection of Jesus’ teachings. According to ancient tradition this collection of sayings was ascribed to the apostle Matthew. It may have been written in Aramaic and is commonly referred to as the "M" source.

This collection of "words" corresponded closely to a source often called "Q" from the German word for source, Quelle. A Greek-speaking Christian scribe in Antioch took the material from "M" and "Q" as well as another source, the Gospel of Mark, and composed the Gospel of Matthew from it. Modern authors follow ancient custom in referring to this final author as Matthew.

The Gospel was not written all at once. Matthew, who was perhaps a catechist, may have prepared certain texts for special occasions.

He may have composed the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, to give a comprehensive view of Jesus’ new moral principles (Matthew 5-7).

He gathered seven parables to express Jesus’ view of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13).

A string of ten miracles proved Jesus’ role as the messianic healer (Matthew 8-10).

Such texts were presented to the community, reflected on, discussed and improved upon. Then Christian scribes well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures refined the scriptural references. Gentile Christians sharpened the universal implications.

Jesus tells his followers: "...every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old" (Matthew 13:52). We see this lesson heeded in the construction of the Gospel.

In pastoral instructions and celebrations of the word, text after text was tested, refined, approved. Only at the end did the final compiler sit down and construct the whole Gospel, putting various sections into their present places, linking them, integrating them, weaving them into a tapestry of rich material.

The name of the final author has not been recorded, even though we know from other sources that ordinary writers in the first century did attach their names to the texts they wrote. This was not done in the case of the Gospels because they were community productions. They reflected not one person—s view but the faith of the Church.
Jesus as the New Torah

With half a million inhabitants, Antioch ranked as the third largest city in the Greco-Roman empire. Antioch also contained large Jewish populations surpassed in size only by those in Jerusalem and Alexandria.

Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century A.D., tells us that the Jews in Antioch were well organized. They enjoyed full civil rights. They had their own leaders and magistrates.

They had built a sumptuous synagogue, decorated throughout with votive offerings made of brass. They often sent magnificent gifts to the temple in Jerusalem.

Life for these Jews revolved around the Torah, the word of God as contained in the five books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy in our Bibles), also called the Pentateuch. All sects within Judaism accepted the Pentateuch.

These five books were God—s law. They determined worship, ritual practice and everyday morality. Those who listened to a reading from any of these five sacred scrolls knew they were listening to God.

According to a common theory among Scripture scholars, the Gospel of Matthew is constructed around five collections of sayings of Jesus:

I. The Sermon on the Mount (5-7);
II. The Sermon to the Apostles (10);
III. The Sermon on the Kingdom (13);
IV. The Sermon on Leadership (18);
V. The Sermon on the Last Things (22-23).

This is not a coincidence. In Matthew—s plan for his Gospel Jesus— five sermons replace the five scrolls of the Pentateuch.

Don—t think, however, because these are called sermons that Jesus actually spoke these texts on five specific occasions. We know from a comparison with Mark and Luke that the sermons are each composed of dozens of separate teachings.

By his presentation of Jesus— teaching in five books, so the theory goes, the author presents Jesus as the new Moses, or even more, as the new Law, the revelation of God.
**Rabbinical Subtleties**

You might think, "But such a scheme is subtle. Would the intended readers even notice it, let alone understand its implications?" The answer is, yes, they certainly would. The intended readers of this Gospel were quite sophisticated.

Matthew—s Gospel is an elaborately constructed document that aims to prove to sophisticated Jewish scholars that Jesus is indeed the Messiah promised in the Scriptures. The Gospel contains 24 explicit references to the Old Testament. Accounts frequently include phrases such as: "This happened in order that what is written in the Scriptures might be fulfilled" (see, for example, Matthew 1:22).

Matthew wrote first and foremost for the influential Pharisees and scribes in Antioch. They were trained to pay attention to detail. Every letter in the Pentateuch counted. The position of each word was analyzed. Old Testament texts were combined into instructional meditations known as midrash.

To give an example, the story of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-23) is an elaborate midrash around seven Old Testament prophecies: Numbers 24:17; Micah 5:1; 2 Samuel 5:2; Psalm 72:10-11, 15; Isaiah 60:6; Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 31:5. Throughout his Gospel Matthew describes Jesus— ministry through the use of Old Testament prophecies.

A technique that may be more challenging to modern readers is that of messages hidden in the numerical value of certain phrases. The Hebrew language assigned a numerical value to letters, and so could refer to a word by the use of numerical combinations.

We see this theory at work, for example, in the genealogy of Jesus— ancestors. They have been artificially grouped into three lists of 14 persons each (see Matthew 1:1-16). Why 14? Because the name "David" has the numerical value of 14. Counting the consonants only, D (Daleth ) was the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet and W (Waw) the sixth. David (D+W+D) therefore totalled 4+6+4=14.

The whole structure proclaims Jesus as the messianic son of David. The number seven represented perfection. This is Matthew—s way of telling us that Jesus was born in the fullness of time, in the seventh series of seven times seven generations.
God's Universal Banquet

The Christian community in Antioch was, as we have seen, a mixed community. It brought together converts from pagan backgrounds as well as converts from Judaism. Such universalism was a departure from generally accepted Jewish conviction and practice, especially as gentiles were not required to become Jews by circumcision.

The author of the Gospel had to show that God—s promise of salvation was meant for all nations, that Jesus was a truly universal savior. Matthew—s arguments are both subtle and all-pervasive.

In the genealogy, among 42 men, Matthew pointedly inserts four pagan women in Jesus— ancestry: Tamar and Rahab (both Canaanites), Ruth the Moabite and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. By this he wants to show that Jesus himself was not purely Jewish. Gentile blood flowed through his veins.

Matthew begins his Gospel with the nations seeking Jesus in the persons of the Magi. He concludes with Jesus sending his apostles to make disciples of all the nations (see Matthew 28:18-20). This style of narrative is known as a "ring construction" or "inclusion." Matthew uses it to suggest that gentiles were important in the whole life and ministry of Jesus.

Throughout the Gospel Matthew highlights Jesus— encounter with gentiles, usually with a note of praise. "Great is your faith, woman!" Jesus says to the Canaanite woman whose daughter he cured (see Matthew 15:21-28).

Commenting on the faith of the Roman centurion, he exclaims: "Nations shall come from the east and west and take their place in the kingdom of heaven" (see Matthew 8:5-13). There is an obvious reference here to the prophet Isaiah and the banquet God had promised to give to all nations of the world (see Isaiah 25:6-9).

The Gospel of Matthew was born from the faith, the skill, the pastoral zeal and literary sophistication of the Christian Church in Antioch. It has guided the Church for nearly 20 centuries and continues to speak to our community today.

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