



**As you go, proclaim the good news,  
“The kingdom of heaven has come near.”** Matt 10:7

## Jesus, the Messianic King (Part 1)

**T**he Gospel According to Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, is a proclamation of the good news of Jesus from the church of the first century. It testifies to the fact that what God has revealed through the events and writings of Israel's history has come to its completion in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He himself is *the* gospel, the proclamation of God's good tidings. Jesus is the answer to God's promises revealed through the centuries of ancient Israel.

The more we study the Bible, the more we realize how exquisitely it all fits together, how each part is essential to the whole. We see how important it is that we have four gospels instead of one, how each complements the others by showing us a unique portrait of Jesus. The more we study the gospels, the more we realize how they grow out of the Old Testament, how the ancient Scriptures are filled with anticipation of the One to Come. The meaning and significance of the life of Jesus are seen in and through the Scriptures of Israel.

It should not be surprising that Matthew's gospel is significantly different from the other three gospels. Jesus did not demand from his followers a precise accounting of his deeds or a verbatim repetition of his teachings. He

wanted from them a personal understanding of himself and his mission. So Matthew, like the other evangelists, used the oral and written traditions he received from others to form his own unique account of the good news of Jesus. He creatively structured and rewrote the material to meet the special needs of the community to which he wrote.

The way Matthew selected, shaped, and arranged the materials he received to form his gospel can tell us something about the setting and audience to which he wrote. The most obvious aspect of this gospel is its Jewish perspective. Its author was a Jewish Christian who wrote within a community that was mostly, though not exclusively, composed of Jews who believed in Jesus. The frequent quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures and the references throughout to Jewish practices indicate a community that was concerned with the meaning of Jesus' life in the context of the tradition of Israel. The gospel was written largely to help Jewish Christians understand that their faith in Jesus was entirely consistent with their Jewish heritage.

In trying to determine this gospel's place of origin, the evidence from the gospel itself is helpful in placing it most likely at Antioch in Syria. Here was the largest Jewish population outside of Palestine, which accounts for the Jewish Christian community as well as its Jewish opponents. There was also a sizable Gentile population, which accounts for the favorable comments about the Gentiles throughout the gospel. Antioch was a place where Greek was commonly used, and we know from the Acts of the Apostles that Jewish Christians from Jerusalem established a church there. As one of the most important cities of the Roman Empire, Antioch was the ideal place from which the gospel could be spread to "all the nations" (28:19).

The primary conflict within Judaism at the time of Matthew's writing concerned how Judaism would continue to exist after the destruction of Jerusalem's temple by the Romans in A.D. 70. One popular response to this issue was rabbinical Judaism, which developed from the tradition of the Pharisees and the scribes. This movement centered around the synagogues and was concerned with living out the Torah in the ways in which the rabbis were interpreting it. Another response to this conflict was Jewish Christianity. The community of Matthew claimed that the messianic movement begun in Jesus was the most authentic way of living out the tradition of Israel in the latter decades of the first century and beyond. For this reason, the Gospel of Matthew demonstrated that the life of Jesus was the fulfillment of the Hebrew

Scriptures and that Jesus is the most authoritative interpreter of Israel's Torah.

## Reflection and Discussion

- What might be some reasons why the Gospel of Matthew was chosen by the church as the first book of the New Testament?

- What seem to be some of the characteristic features of this gospel that distinguish it from the other gospels?

## Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham

The gospel offers us the most important titles or descriptors of Jesus' identity in the first verse: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." These three titles of Jesus are the key to Matthew's expression of Jesus' identity in this gospel. Each of these is a royal title within the tradition of Israel and links Jesus with Israel's history and with all the hopes of God's people.

"Messiah" is the Hebrew word for the "anointed" of God; it is *Christos* in Greek. The word originally referred to one designated by God for a chosen role, such as a king (Psalm 2:2), priest (Lev 4:3), or prophet (1 Kings 19:16). In later writings, Messiah was a royal title, designating a future ruler who would play a decisive role in fulfilling God's plans for Israel. Based on proph-

cies given to King David, the Messiah to come would free God's people from oppression and usher in a new age. The gospel will clarify what it means to call Jesus the Messiah, the Christ.

"Son of David" is a messianic title used frequently for Jesus throughout the gospel. It highlights the fact that the Messiah was to come from the royal line of King David. He would be a descendant of David to whom God had promised an everlasting reign (2 Sam 7:12–16). This Son of David would use his royal power to heal the needy and to bring about God's rule of justice upon his people. His messianic reign would be revealed not through force and conquest but through self-sacrificial love and service.

"Son of Abraham" links Jesus with the beginning of God's covenant with Israel, a covenant initiated with Abraham. Abraham is the father of all believers, the head of Israel's royal lineage leading to David and Jesus. The title portrays Jesus as the one who culminates God's plans that originated in Abraham. God had pledged to Abraham that his call and obedience would benefit all the peoples and nations of the earth (Gen 12:3; 22:18). As Son of Abraham, what God accomplishes in Jesus fulfills that promise for the whole human race.

The word translated "genealogy" in the gospel's first verse is the Greek word *genesis*. It may also be translated as "beginning," or "origin." It is quite possible that Matthew chose the word "genesis" for his gospel's opening verse to evoke associations with the first book of the Bible. As Genesis is about the origins of creation, humanity, and Israel, so Jesus is a new beginning for creation, humanity, and Israel. What God is doing in Jesus the Messiah is a fresh, definitive, creative action for the sake of the world. All that God had planned and promised throughout the Scriptures is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.

## Reflection and Discussion

- Why is a familiarity with the Old Testament so helpful in understanding Matthew's gospel?

- Why is it so important that the origins of Jesus be connected with both Abraham and David?

### **The True King Who Establishes His Kingdom**

After Matthew's gospel begins by linking Jesus with the royal line of David, its infancy account demonstrates that Jesus is born to be king. As Israel's anointed one, Jesus is the royal Messiah to whom the prophecies point. His entry into Jerusalem toward the end of his life is the action of a king. In the gospel Jesus is given these royal titles: Messiah, Son of David, King of the Jews, King of Israel, and Son of God. In the person of Jesus Christ, the divine kingship, asserted throughout the Old Testament, and the human kingship, exemplified in David, finally and uniquely merge. In the final scene of the gospel, Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

As God's anointed, Jesus brings the kingdom of God to the sphere of human experience. God's kingdom is at the center of his preaching ministry: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). Matthew refers to the divine reign more often as the "kingdom of heaven" than as the "kingdom of God." This is due either to his Jewish reverence for the name of God or to emphasize that it is the kingdom of both the Father and the Son. The miracles of Jesus demonstrate that Jesus brings the kingdom near and makes it effective in the lives of individuals. His parables illustrate the paradoxical nature of the kingdom and its distinctive aspects. The teachings of Jesus present the lifestyle and mindset of one who lives in view of the kingdom's coming and they demonstrate the childlike trust required to enter God's reign. The royal power of God is dynamically present in Jesus' words and deeds.

The gospel presents the kingdom of heaven as both present and future. In the present, Jesus' healings, exorcisms, and miracles reveal the transforming power of the kingdom breaking into human history and defeating the enslaving control of evil, sin, and death. The kingdom has been inaugurated in the

coming of Jesus and will be consummated in his glorious return. What we experience now in microcosm through the presence of Jesus living in his church, we will one day experience in macrocosm when Christ reigns over all creation and the oppressive powers of evil, sin, and death are thoroughly vanquished. The gospel demonstrates that Jesus is God's kingdom in person. While we live in hope of the future, God's kingdom has come upon us in the life, death, and resurrection of the messianic King.

### **Reflection and Discussion**

- What aspects of the kingship of Jesus make it uniquely different from the rule of this world's kings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- In what sense can we say that the Gospel of Matthew is all about the coming of God's kingdom?

### **The Unique Content of Matthew's Gospel**

Matthew's description of a Christian scribe, as one who "brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (13:52), may be an autobiographical statement about how he sees his role as an evangelist. For, more than any other gospel writer, Matthew presents references to God's word and work in the Old Testament and places them in relation to God's new word and work in Jesus Christ. This unique presentation of the old and the new makes

Matthew's gospel the ideal, first book of the New Testament. His presentation of the good news is the entryway from the ancient covenant to the new, the threshold leading the believer from the history of Israel into the proclamation to all the nations.

One of Matthew's most notable characteristics as a writer is his enrichment of the text with numerous quotations from the Old Testament. In conjunction with a quote, the writer usually states that the life of Jesus is a fulfillment of what was spoken through the ancient text. Yet, beyond these obvious quotations, the writer alludes to many other words, images, or events from the Hebrew Scriptures. Through the use of such references, Matthew demonstrates his conviction that the saving life of Jesus is accomplishing the ancient promises of God.

One unique characteristic of this gospel is the way the evangelist gathers the various teachings of Jesus into five blocks of teaching. These great discourses are the sermon on the mount (Mt 5–7), the sermon to the apostles (Mt 10), the sermon on the kingdom (Mt 13), the sermon on leadership (Mt 18), and the sermon on the last things (Mt 24–25). These five discourses have been compared to the five books of Moses, which compose the Torah of Israel. With these five sermons, Jesus instructs his disciples and his church, and as his disciples and as his church, we sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to his teachings in order to be formed for the kingdom.

By presenting Jesus as the authoritative teacher of his church, this gospel helped Jewish Christians understand how to be loyal to the old covenant with Moses while engaging with Gentile believers. It confirmed the community's continuity with God's past promises to Israel while also validating the members' new loyalty to Jesus and his saving mission. As such, the gospel became an effective pastoral tool for the church's preaching, teaching, and worship. In every age it has brought direction and hope for Christ's disciples, inviting them into an ever deeper relationship with Jesus, who promises to remain always with his church.

Our study of the Gospel of Matthew is divided into roughly two halves. The first half, chapters 1 through 16, leads up to the profession of Peter and to Jesus' announcement of his own coming suffering, death, and resurrection. The second half, chapters 17 through 28, follows the journey of Jesus with his disciples to Jerusalem, where he will experience the climactic moments of his saving ministry. Through the study of this gospel, we will experience the sav-

ing news of Jesus as it was experienced by that early community of Jews and Gentiles to which Matthew addressed his gospel. As the gospel equipped those ancient Christians with the teaching of Jesus the Messiah so they could spread the message of the kingdom to all the nations, the gospel will prepare us with the transforming experience of Jesus Christ to be bearers of the good news in the world today.

### Reflection and Discussion

- Keeping in mind the Jewish context and audience of Matthew's gospel, how do I understand the importance of the Jewish tradition for my appreciation of Jesus?
- In what way do I want to draw closer to Jesus as I study the Gospel of Matthew?

### Prayer

*Creating and Redeeming God, you prepared the people of Israel with hope for the coming of the Messiah. In the coming of Jesus you brought your ancient promises to fulfillment and opened salvation to all the nations of the world. Stir up within me a deep desire to know Jesus Christ more fully and to listen carefully to his teachings. Enlighten and encourage me as I read and contemplate your inspired word in these sacred Scriptures. Show me how to make my life a testimony to the presence of your kingdom.*