

## Matthew

**Author:** Matthew means “gift of God” in Hebrew (Mattityahu). He was a tax collector who left his work to follow Jesus (9:9–13). In Mark and Luke he is called by his other name, Levi.

Another word for tax collector is publican. Matthew resided at Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. This was a lucrative spot because there was a considerable amount of fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Also there was the major road, the *via maris* or the way of the sea. The way of the Sea went all the way over to Babylon. It came down through Damascus and Israel and went all the way down to Egypt. This was one of the roads primarily used when Israel was invaded. It was a road of commerce. We would compare the *via maris* to something like an interstate highway system of that day. Matthew was the man who was named by the Romans to be the tax collector in this particular city.

**Place of Writing:** The Jewish nature of Matthew’s Gospel suggest that it may have been written in the Holy Land.

**Recipients:** Many elements point to Matthew’s Gospel being written to a Jewish audience:

- Matthew’s concern with fulfillment of OT prophecy (he has more quotations from and allusions to the OT than any other NT author). And of course, the Jews at that time expected a Messiah.
- His tracing of Jesus’ descent from Abraham (1:1–17);
- His lack of explanation of Jewish customs (especially in contrast to Mark);
- His use of Jewish terminology (such as “kingdom of heaven,” where “heaven” shows the Jewish reluctance to use the name of God);
- His emphasis on Jesus’ role as “Son of David” (1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9,15; 22:41–45).
- This does not mean that Matthew restricts his Gospel to Jews. He records the coming of the Magi (non-Jews) to worship the infant Jesus (2:1–12), as well as Jesus’ statement that the “field is the world” (13:38). He also gives a full statement of the Great Commission (28:18–20). These passages show that, although Matthew’s Gospel is Jewish, it has a universal outlook.

**Purpose:** Matthew’s main purpose is to prove to Jewish readers that Jesus is their Messiah. He does this primarily by showing how Jesus in his life and ministry fulfilled the OT Scriptures. Matthew also emphasizes Jesus being a descendant of King David, as the Messiah was to be.

**Structure:** Matthew’s Gospel is woven around five great discourses: the sermon on the mount in chapters 5-7. The commission to the 12 disciples in chapter 10. Then the parables of the kingdom in chapter 13. And then the necessity for humility and forgiveness in Matthew 18. And then the Olivet Prophecy in chapters 24-25. That this is deliberate is clear from the refrain that concludes each discourse: “When Jesus had finished saying these things,” or similar words (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). The narrative sections, in each case, appropriately lead up to the discourses.

You could also argue that there are two other discourses. One is Matthew 23, where he condemns the religious hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. And the other is Matthew 28:16-20, which is the great commission.

## Mark

**Author:** The author appears to be Mark or John Mark as he is called in Acts 12:12, 25. Mark is probably the person referred to in Mark 14:51-52, the young man who runs away naked when Jesus is captured in Gethsemane and someone grabs his outer garment.

Mark was a close associate of Peter, from whom he received the information he gives in his Gospel. It seems that this information did not come to Mark as a finished account of the life of Jesus, but the preaching of Peter arranged and shaped by Mark. Some refer to this as “Peter’s gospel” or “Peter’s story.”

The first mention of Mark is in connection with his mother, Mary, who had a house in Jerusalem that served as a meeting place for believers (Ac 12:12). When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from Jerusalem after the famine visit, Mark accompanied them (Ac 12:25). Mark next appears as a “helper” to Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Ac 13:5), but he deserted them at Perga to return to Jerusalem (Ac 13:13).

Paul was deeply disappointed with Mark’s actions, because when Barnabas proposed taking Mark on the second journey, Paul refused, a refusal that broke up their working relationship (Ac 15:36–39). Barnabas took Mark, who was his cousin (Col 4:10), and departed for Cyprus. No further mention is made of either of them in the book of Acts. Mark reappears in Paul’s letter to the Colossians written from Rome. Paul sends a greeting from Mark and adds: “You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him” (Col 4:10). In Philemon 24 Paul calls Mark one of his “fellow laborers.” Mark had worked his way back into Paul’s confidence. By the end of Paul’s life, Mark had fully regained Paul’s favor (see 2Ti 4:11).

**Place of writing:** Mark was probably written from Rome.

**Recipients:** The evidence points to the church at Rome, or at least to Gentile readers. Mark explains Jewish customs (7:2–4; 15:42), translates Aramaic words (3:17; 5:41; 7:11,34; 15:22,34) and seems to have a special interest in persecution and martyrdom (8:34–38; 13:9–13)—subjects of special concern to Roman believers. He also includes several Latin phrases that would have meant nothing to Jewish readers.

### Emphases

- *Jesus is the Son of God.* Mark emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, but also emphasizes that He is the Son of God. One of the ways he does this is by emphasizing miracles. He includes 18 miracles in his Gospel.
- *The death of Jesus.* He emphasizes that the Jewish leadership conspired to kill Jesus, but that also this was a divine necessity that He die for the sins of mankind.
- *The teachings of Jesus.* Although Mark records far fewer actual teachings of Jesus than the other Gospel writers, there is a strong emphasis on Jesus as teacher. The words “teacher,” “teach” or “teaching,” and “Rabbi” are applied to Jesus 39 times in Mark.
- *Discipleship.* He talks a great deal about what it means to be a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ (8:34—9:1; 9:35—10:31; 10:42–45).

Mark’s Gospel has an emphasis on action. It’s a simple but vivid account of Jesus’ ministry, emphasizing more what Jesus *did* than what He said. Why does he do this? Two reasons. First, Peter, who was the source of this material, was a man of action. So it’s only natural that Mark’s

Gospel would reflect that. Also, the Romans were people of action. One thing that the Roman world would really appreciate was people who got things done. The Romans were road builders. They were constructors. They were wall builders and city builders. They built an empire. They built things you can still see today all over Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Mark seems to include that in his Gospel because the Romans could identify with men of action.

## Luke

**Author:** This Gospel is a companion volume to the book of Acts, and the language and structure of these two books indicate that both were written by the same person. They are addressed to the same individual, Theophilus, and the second volume refers to the first (Ac 1:1).

Certain sections in Acts use the pronoun “we,” showing that the author was with Paul when the events in these passages took place. By process of elimination, Paul’s “dear friend Luke, the doctor” (as he is called in Col 4:14) and “fellow worker” (as he is called in Philemon 24), becomes the most likely candidate.

Luke was probably a Gentile by birth, well educated in Greek culture, a physician by profession, and had outstanding command of the Greek language. He was a companion of Paul at various times from his second missionary journey to his final imprisonment in Rome, and a loyal friend who remained with the apostle after others had deserted him (2Ti 4:11).

Because Paul went largely to the Greek world, that is what Luke’s Gospel seems oriented to. His Gospel is historical and detailed because he is trying to establish in the Greek world the history of Jesus Christ. He writes to logically explain Jesus Christ because the Greek mind is supposed to be logical. He also includes a lot of detail in his Gospel and the book of Acts that has been verified by archaeology, such as individuals who held office in particular cities at a particular time. He included all this to prove his message then, and ironically it has allowed historians and archaeologists to prove his message today also.

**Recipient and Purpose:** The Gospel is specifically directed to Theophilus (1:3), an individual whose name means “one who loves God” or “lover of God.” The use of “most excellent” with the name indicates this was an individual, and supports the idea that Theophilus may have been a Roman official or at least someone of high position and wealth. He was possibly Luke’s patron, responsible for seeing that the writings were copied and distributed. Such a dedication to the publisher was common at that time. The fact that the Gospel was initially directed to Theophilus does not narrow or limit its purpose. It was written to strengthen the faith of all believers and to answer the attacks of unbelievers.

Luke was *not* an eyewitness. He spoke to those who *were* eyewitnesses. He spent a lot of time with the apostle Paul, so obviously he was one of the sources. He begins his Gospel with:

**“Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us,**

**2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us,**

And then he spells out the purpose in verses 3-4: **“It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.”**

**Place of Writing:** The place of writing was probably Rome. By its detailed designations of places in the Holy Land, the Gospel seems to be intended for readers who were unfamiliar with that land.

**Key points:** Luke’s Gospel presents the works and teachings of Jesus that are especially important for understanding the way of salvation. He covers the entire story from the birth of Christ to His ascension to heaven, and in the book of Acts continues the story of the early Church. His writing appeals to both Jews and Gentiles. It is characterized by literary excellence, historical detail and warm, sensitive understanding of Jesus and those around him. He has a tender heart with a special emphasis on women, children, the family and the poor, as we see from the stories and parables he includes. He recognizes the place of Gentiles as well as Jews in God’s plan.

**Sources:** Luke tells us that many others had written of Jesus’ life (1:1), but he went beyond this for his own writing. He wrote based on testimony from “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (1:2)—including the preaching and oral accounts of the apostles. His blocks of distinctive material indicate independent work that doesn’t appear in Matthew or Mark, though he obviously used some of the same sources as Matthew and Mark.

**Plan:** Luke basically covers Jesus’ ministry geographically: (1) the events that occurred in and around Galilee (4:14—9:50), (2) those that took place in Judea and Perea (9:51—19:27), and (3) those of the final week in Jerusalem (19:28—24:53). The main theme of the Gospel is the nature of Jesus’ Messiahship and mission, and a key verse is Luke 19:10— “for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

## John

**Author:** The author is the apostle John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” John is the brother of another apostle, James, the sons of Zebedee. John is also known as the apostle of love. You will find that word often in John and also in the letters of John. James and John were at first called “the sons of thunder.” They were the ones who wanted to bring fire down out of heaven, and Christ said you do not know of what spirit you are. But John changed through God’s Spirit.

He became a good example of a man who was very deeply, deeply converted. He had a love of Christ, so much so that Jesus, when He was dying, looked at John and told him to take care of His mother. John was also a cousin of Jesus Christ. We don’t have time to go into the evidence for that, but you can read about it in the booklet *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*.

John knew Jewish life well. We see this from references to popular Messianic speculations, to the hostility between Jews and Samaritans, and to Jewish customs, such as the duty of circumcision on the eighth day taking precedence over the prohibition of working on the Sabbath.

He knew the geography of the Holy Land, mentioning Bethany being about two miles from Jerusalem (11:18) and mentioning Cana, a village not referred to in any earlier writing known to us. The Gospel of John has many touches that appear to reflect the recollections of an eyewitness—such as the house at Bethany being filled with the fragrance of the broken perfume jar when Mary anointed Jesus before His death in John 12:3.

**Date:** Most believe John’s Gospel was written much later, probably in the 90s, to supplement the accounts found in the other Gospels. Some also believe that the more developed theology of the

fourth Gospel and its counterarguments to Gnosticism indicates that it originated later. It's also thought that John wrote independently of the other Gospels, and thus was likely written considerably later.

**Purpose and Emphases:** John's Gospel is rather different from the other three. The others are called the *synoptic* Gospels. "Optic," of course, is to view or to see. "Syn" is the same or together. So *synoptic* means having the same view, or the view that is together. The three gospels that are referred to as the synoptic are Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are very similar. They give a similar view, the same kind of view, of Jesus Christ in general.

John is totally different. John gives a view of Christ that is quite different from the others. He highlights matters that the other Gospels don't. There is very little overlap between what John covers and what we find in the synoptic Gospels. The literary style of this Gospel is also unique among the Gospels. The gospel of John has no parables in it. His focus is on the "signs" of Jesus' identity and mission and on deep, detailed theological discussions.

John states his main purpose clearly in **20:31: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."**

John is also combating Gnosticism, which we'll talk about more as we get into his Gospel. Gnosticism taught that anything that was physical was created by an evil power, and anything that is spiritual was created by God. So John emphasizes that Jesus was God who came in the flesh. The Gnostics would deny that Jesus was the Messiah because He was physical. So John spends a lot of time countering that in his Gospel and also in his letters. This is a primary reason many date John's Gospel to the 90s A.D.

John talks a lot about Jesus' humanity. He shows that Jesus got tired—He was a human being who got tired. And John was an eye witness to this. He says Jesus got thirsty. He says Jesus was troubled. He shows that Jesus truly loved people. All of these were diametrically opposed to what Gnosticism taught.