



**THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE GOSPEL  
ATTRIBUTED TO ST. MATTHEW**

By John Gayford

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The very early church after Pentecost had no need for scriptures; they already heard Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic versions. They had the oral tradition of the Good News from living witnesses of the ministry of the Lord. These told and retold their story; their audience was the safeguard that they told the truth. In all probability they had written aids to memory which could just be lists: lists of the sayings of Jesus and more specifically parables or actions of Jesus and again most specifically miracles. The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus were probably told with the real force of an eyewitness. As time went on the eyewitnesses were growing old and there became a need for written accounts of the Good News; the Gospel. We now know that many Gospels were written each telling the story in their own way for their own community using the accounts of the eyewitness and written lists that had been used. Each Gospel would be attributed to what the community thought was a reliable source, such as Mark, Matthew, Luke and John together with others like Thomas, Nicodemus, Bartholomew, Philip and many others. Eventually the Church had to make decisions on which to accept. Some of these Gospels were starting to present distorted and heretical views. We note that of the four Gospels that were accepted into the canon of the New Testament two were possibly not eyewitness, namely Mark and Luke. Claims had to be made that they derived their material from reliable sources and eyewitnesses. The Gospels attributed to Matthew and John did not suffer from this disability and were more easily accepted. Matthew Gospel comes first in our Bible and was accepted as the first Gospel by the early Church, even though it is now known that Mark's Gospel probably came first. Each Gospel has its own evolution of sources, origin and development.

In tracing the origins of St. Matthew's Gospel we encounter a number of interesting questions; few of which have simple answers. Sometimes there is more than one possible answer and on other occasions we have to admit that we do not have the answer. Some of the questions we will discuss include:-

- Who wrote the Gospel?
- Where was it written?
- In what language was it written?
- For whom was it possibly intended?
- Where did the material in the Gospel come from?
- Why did it become the first Gospel in the New Testament?

In spite of this there is no doubt that St Matthew's Gospel was a favorite of the early Church especially for proclaiming the Gospel and for catechesis. Its connection with the Old Testament was useful in its dialogue with Jews who became Christians.

## **WHO WAS MATTHEW?**

In all three synoptic Gospels we have lists of the twelve Apostles (St. Matthew 10:1-4; St Mark 3:13-19 and St Luke 6: 12-16, to this can be added Luke's second list minus Judas Iscariot in the Acts of the Apostles 1:13-14). St. Mark and St Luke call Matthew by the name of Levi but it is certainly the same person.

*Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.*

*(St Mark 2:13-14)*

Brownrigg (2002, p. 176) asks if Matthew's immediate response and following of Jesus indicated that they had been previously acquainted?

In the Gospel that is attributed to St Matthew (9:9) exactly the same words are used, but the name Matthew is used instead of Levi with no mention of his parentage. St Luke (5: 27-28) uses exactly the same words as St Mark, but again with no mention of parentage. All three Synoptic Gospels follow with an account of a dinner at a house of a tax-collector where there were other tax-collectors to the disapproval of the Pharisees (Mark 2:15-17; Matthew 9:10-13 and Luke 5:29-32). Both Mark and Luke make it clear that this was at the house of Levi.

So why the two names? Apparently it was not uncommon for Jews who had frequent dealings with Greek speaking gentiles to have a Jewish name and a Greek name. Alternatively Levi may have changed his name when he became a disciple of Jesus or this was the name he had in his Christian community. Albright and Mann (1971, p.105) inform us that Matthew (Greek *Mattaios*) reflects the Hebrew and Aramaic *Mattay* which is a shortened form of *Mattatyahu*, which means "gift of God". Harrington (1991, p. 126) offers a further explanation of the name Matthew in that it may be a play on the Greek word *mathetes* which means disciple. Before Matthew became a disciple of Jesus he was a tax-collector in Capernaum. Luncford (2000, p 871) suggests that this must have been a very lucrative position as he would collect tax from local farmers and craftsmen coming to market but he also collected tax from caravans travelling between Egypt and the Orient. Tax-collectors were despised by Jews and others from whom they collected tax and also by the Romans who received such tax. Spencer (2000, pp. 1277-1278) discusses the system of tax farming that was used by the Romans in the first century. The Romans auctioned off contracts to publicans<sup>1</sup> who had to pay a fixed sum to the Roman authorities but then they were allowed to recover their money as they wanted from the public. Roman soldiers were even provided to assist the extortion of the money. Many of these publicans became very rich as with Zacchaeus of Jericho (Luke 19:1-2). The whole system was open to bribery and corruption yet Jesus did not turn away from these men. Matthew is listed in the Acts of the Apostles as present in the upper room awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit (Act 1:12-14). Sarah Thomas (1999, p. 199) has to admit we have no further Biblical information about St Matthew and there is only conflicting and therefore unreliable account in legend. According to this he preached the Gospel in Judea before many other possible destinations which include Ethiopia, Persia, Syria, Macedonia and even Ireland. Traditionally he is celebrated as a martyr but

<sup>1</sup> The name given to tax collectors in English translations. McKenzie (2002 p. 707) informs us in Greek they were called *telones* but in Latin *publicanus* as in the Vulgate.

there are differing accounts of his mode of martyrdom. Against this St Clement was prepared to accept that he died a natural death. Again there are many sites that are claimed for his death as are churches that claim to have relics.

Thomas (1999, p. 200) tells us that he is the patron saint of the city and diocese of Salerno in Italy. It is not surprising that he is the patron saint of tax-collectors, customs officials, money changers and even accountants but it is more surprising that he is the patron saint of alcoholics, hospitals and ships. Most of us have some memory of the four evangelists being assigned one of the four living winged animals found in Ezekiel and the book of Revelation but it is not so easy to place them with the correct evangelist. Thurston and Attwater (1956, III, p. 610) places the eagle with St John and the ox with St. Luke and states that some give the lion to St Matthew but tells us that St Jerome and St. Augustine gave this to St. Mark and the man to St Matthew (symbolic of his depiction of the humanity of Jesus and his incarnation).

In art in the late middle ages Matthew is sometimes given reading glasses (Thomas 1999, p. 200). He may in statues appear with the supposed instruments of his martyrdom namely the sword, spear or axe. Not surprisingly he may be depicted with a money bag or box. His call and the subsequent feast are the usual subject of famous paintings that involve St. Matthew. Often he is depicted with a pen, scroll or book with an angel dictating to him (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995, p. 238).

In the Western Church St. Matthew's feast day is 21<sup>st</sup> September but in the Eastern Church it is usually celebrated on 16<sup>th</sup> November. At the modern Office of Readings (the old Vigils) the second reading is taken from an ancient homily of St. Bede.

## **DID MATTHEW WRITE THE GOSPEL?**

McKnight (2004, p.784) leads us through some of the evidence attributing the Gospel to St Matthew himself.

Eusebius<sup>1</sup> in his *Historia ecclesiastica* (3.39.16) wrote quoting Papias<sup>2</sup>–

*Matthew compiled the oracles in the Hebrew language and each interpreted them the best he could*  
(Stevenson 1987, p. 49).

Next Eusebius quotes Pantaenus<sup>3</sup> (*Historia ecclesiastica* 5.10.3)

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius bishop of Caesarea according to Rebecca Lyman (1998, pp. 339-401) lived between about 260 and 339 and was a prolific writer on many subjects including church history. He is regarded as the first church historian, recording his ten volumes of church history. He has been criticised as a poor writer and collected information from various sources regrettably often with errors. The last three volumes of his Church History relate to events that happened in his own lifetime. It would appear that he finished writing his Church History about 300 AD but did make some revisions.

<sup>2</sup> Papias (c. 60-130 AD) was Bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia (Asia Minor). All we know about him is that St Irenaeus (c. 130-200) refers to him as “a man long ago” and that he was a disciple of St John the Evangelist and a companion of St Polycarp (c. 69-c. 155). None of his original work in five volume “Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord” survive except in quotations from Irenaeus and Eusebius (Cross and Livingstone, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Pantaenus was a convert to the Christian faith from Stoicism and taught in the Catechetical School of Al-

*Pantaenus also was one of those, and is mentioned as having gone to India; and the story goes that there he found, in the hands of some persons who had come to know Christ in that land, the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his arrival; for that Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them and left behind the writing of Matthew in the actual Hebrew characters, and that it is preserved up to the said time (Stevenson, 1987. P. 179) .*

This was the view of the early church that is reflected in St Matthew's being the first Gospel in the Canon of the New Testament. Over the years a number of problems have been found with this view. It is now accepted that St Mark's was the first Gospel to be written and that the writer of St. Matthew's Gospel had access to this, using the material in St. Mark which he edited and expanded in his own way. This includes a theoretical document that has never been found but has been called *Logion-Quelle* or just *Q*.<sup>1</sup> Both Matthew and Luke had additional material of their own that they incorporated into their respective Gospels. It has been estimated that some 20% of St. Matthew's Gospel is not found in the other Synoptic Gospels. Sometimes this source is called *M*<sup>2</sup>. Some scholars in the past have tried to argue without proof to back their argument that Matthew wrote *Q* or a document like *Q* of the sayings of Jesus in Aramaic and that this was later, perhaps after 70 AD, translated into Greek with additions from Mark into the Gospel we attribute to Matthew. This translating and editing could have been done by Matthew or by an unknown evangelist. We now believe that the original was written in Greek and may not have been by Matthew but attributed to Matthew by the community for whom it was written honouring him as a father figure and possible contribution he made as an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus. A theory of the formation of the Synoptic Gospels is shown in Figure 1.

Viviano (1992, p. 630) feels the Gospel itself suggest that the author was a church leader and may have been a converted rabbi, scribe or catechist.

*Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a household who brings out his treasures what is new and what is old.*

(St Matthew 13:52)

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exandria in the later part of his life, dying c. 190 AD (Cross and Livingstone, 1997, p. 1215)

<sup>1</sup> *Q* or *Quelle*, the German for source. *Logion* means sayings or oracles. It is believed that the sayings of Jesus were written down by one or more people. They have never been found but it is postulated that St. Matthew and St. Luke had access to them giving material that is common to these two Gospels but absent from St Mark. *Q* was not like the canonical Gospels as it had no story but just consisted of a series of sayings like the Book of Proverbs. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct this work as for example Richard Valantasis (2005) *The New Q*. The format is similar to the *Gospel of Thomas* which had existed in fragment form for many years but was found complete at Nag Hammadi in 1945 (Davies, 2002)

<sup>2</sup> There can be speculation on who *M* was or if it was even a single source. It is tempting to say it was Matthew himself. Albright and Mann (1971, p.CLXXXIII) put forward an imaginative conjecture, they themselves admit it is without proof. They drew our attention to Matthias who was chosen to replace Judas as one of the twelve (Acts 1:15-26). It is pointed out that Matthias has the same Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac derivation as Matthew. The requirement was that this person had been an eye of the ministry of Jesus from his baptism to his resurrection. It is suggested as a mere speculation that this person could have contributed in some way to the historical framework of the Gospel.

Linguistic scholars claim that the early Greek version (the earliest we have from late second or early third century) does not show evidence of being translated from another language. This has caused careful examination of Papias as quoted by Eusebius *Historia ecclesiastica* (3.39.16). Does this mean “*in the Hebrew language*” or “*in a Hebrew rhetorical style*”?

Even so it is not impossible that a Jewish tax-collector could have written in Greek. It is good Greek, with a play on Greek words and quotations from the Septuagint scriptures. Harrington (1991, p. 3) describes the Greek as good in a simplistic straight forward style. He goes on to say that is an improvement on the Greek of Mark. The Greek is in line with the Septuagint which he calls “Semitic Greek with Hebrew idioms”. Again there is criticism of the Papias statement; asking why claim the sayings of Jesus to be in Hebrew when Jesus spoke Aramaic? Harrington concludes that the words attributed to Papias are at least ambiguous. There are parts of the Gospel that show ignorance of Jewish practices. An example of this is seen in the parable of the unforgiving debtor (18: 23-34) where the use of torture is used to extract a debt which was certainly not a Jewish practice.

*Early copies of the Gospel do not bear the name of Matthew. Could there have been a “school of Matthew followers” who put his testimony together with material from Mark and Q? As stated the majority of biblical scholars agree that Mark’s Gospel came first but not all. Johann Jakob Greisbach (1745-1812) a German Protestant Theologian rejected the idea that St. Mark’s Gospel was written first and claimed that St. Matthew’s Gospel was first. His claim was that Mark and Luke edited Matthew’s Gospel using Q as well. He has to admit that this applies more to St. Luke’s Gospel than it does to St. Mark’s Gospel. This minority view has become known as the Griesbach Hypothesis.*

## **THE FIRST JEWISH-ROMAN WAR, THE SEIGE OF JERUSALEM AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE AS A SETTING TO ST. MATTHEW’S GOSPEL.**

Harrington (1991, pp. 10-16) considers these events so important as a background to the origins of St. Matthew’s Gospel that he give them considerable space in his introduction to a commentary on the Gospel. He has to admit that we are rather dependant on the account given by Josephus<sup>1</sup> who like many historians had his own agenda. War broke out in 66 AD in Caesarea Maritima following a series of Jewish grievances against the Roman Procurator who used auxiliary troops who were defeated in an ambush at Beth Horon by Jewish Zealots. This shocked the Romans and caused the Emperor Nero to appoint Vespasian to crush the rebellion. Galilee was quickly subdued. Vespasian with considerable forces seemed placed to crush the rest of the

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<sup>1</sup> Flavius Josephus (c. 37- c. 100 AD) Described as a Jewish historian but had become a Roman collaborator and citizen, and lived in Rome with a pension when he wrote his account of the Jewish War in 77-78 AD possible written in Aramaic (Cross and Livingstone 1997, 903). Josephus was many things: he was of priestly descent, had studied Jewish Law, spent time as a desert hermit, and became a Pharisee. In 64 AD he went to Rome and pleaded the release of Jewish prisoners through the intercession of Emperor Nero’s wife Poppea. He returned to his roots and a Jewish military leader against the Romans. In 67 AD he was besieged and captured at Jotopata but saved his life by becoming a Roman informer advising Titus during the siege of Jerusalem when he took the name of Flavius.

rebellion, but the assassination of Nero (who was followed by a series of Emperors who did not rule for long) allowed time to pass, contemporaneously with a series of skirmishes and infighting among the Jews. There was brutal infighting in Jerusalem with Zealots executing those who threatened to surrender to the Romans. It would appear that the Christians left Jerusalem to settle in Pella east of the Jordan. In 69 AD Vespasian himself became emperor and sent his son Titus to complete the task he had started. The siege of Jerusalem started in 70 AD and lasted six months, the end hastened by the new Roman siege engines. Roman brutality was stimulated by previous defeats, with destruction and brutal revenge that was horrific even by the standards of the time.

With the Temple which had been the focus of Jewish religion destroyed, only the Torah was left. Authority developed slowly with the Scribes and Pharisees at Jamnia from about 75-90 AD. Study of the Torah and its exact implementation became the focus of Jewish religion. Later Christians started to return to Jerusalem and the clash with the Scribes and Pharisees can clearly be seen in St Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 23) that was in formation while all these events were going on.

## **THE GOSPELS OF THE EARLY JEWISH-CHRISTIANS.**

There was not just one early Jewish-Christian but a number, representing a spectrum of religious thought on the Jewish-Christian dimension. This section shows some of the complex problems the early church faced in the transmission of the text of the Gospels. It underlines the fact that text was transmitted by scribes copying, translating and even editing which could mean projecting their views in the material for their own community, who were their sponsors.

### **Some Jews initially converted to Christianity but then went back to their own faith.**

It would be easy to dismiss this group from our present discussion if it were not possible that they were exposed to a version of Matthew's Gospel of which they later became critical and this reverberated through history. It is difficult to know how much of the Christian faith they took with them. In the Middle Ages Jewish writers were quoting from St. Matthew's Gospel but it became obvious that they were quoting from a different text to the canonical Greek. In 1380 a Spanish Jewish polemist Shemtob ben Issac Shaprut incorporated the whole of Matthew's Gospel in Hebrew into the text of *Eben Bohan* (Howard, 2000, p. 874). In the sixteenth century Sebastian Munster and Jean du Tillet produced separate editions of St Matthew's Gospel in Hebrew claiming they had received them from the Jews, but different from Shemtob's text. Later analysis of sixteenth century texts shows that they had been revised so that the text then read in Hebrew what were already accepted as established in Greek and Latin Christian texts.

**Jewish Christians** These were Jews who converted to Christianity accepting Jesus as the Messiah but some believed that he was born of a natural birth as the son of Joseph and Mary. Some continued with their Jewish faith including all the requirements of the Jewish Law, rituals and taboos (Porter, 2000, pp140-143). There were a number of Gospels that were used by these groups that represented various amounts of orthodox Christian belief. The subject is very confusing as none of these Gospels now exist and we only have fragments as quoted by early Church Fathers like Epiphanius (c.315-403 AD) and Jerome (c. 342-420 AD) but they are

not always certain which version they are quoting from. It would seem that most of these Gospels were written in the middle of the second century. Some of these Gospels have been named and seemed to have been based on or heavily influenced by St. Matthew's Gospel.

### **The Gospel of the Hebrews**

Elliott (1992, p. 5) tells us that the Gospel to the Hebrews is quoted by Clement, Origen and Didymus the Blind. St. Jerome is reputed to have witnessed its contents, and claimed to have translated it from Hebrew into both Greek and Latin. This Gospel has caused considerable confusion as it at one time was thought to be the original Gospel of St. Matthew written in Hebrew but it is now best thought of as a non-canonical Gospel. Most accept that the work was written in Greek, probably in Egypt at the beginning of the second century. It has much akin to the Jewish Wisdom Literature.

### **Gospel of the Nazarenes**

Both St Jerome and Origen refer to this work in their commentaries on St. Matthew's Gospel. It appears to have been used by the Nazarenes who lived around Beroea. Bauckham and Porter (2000, p. 75) claim what fragments we have show that it was free targumic translation<sup>1</sup> of St. Matthew's Gospel into Aramaic or Syrian in the first half of the second century. In Medieval times it was accepted as the Aramaic version of St. Matthew's Gospel.

### **Gospel of the Ebionites**

All we have of this Gospel is quotations from Epiphanius. It seems to be based principally on St. Matthew's Gospel but also uses the other synoptic Gospels. They rejected the works of St. Paul. The Gospel of the Ebionites is said to have originally been written in Greek in the first half of the second century for the Ebionites who were a scattered community but flourished east of the Jordan (Cross and Livingstone (1997, p. 523). It appears that they were a poor community who lead an ascetical life. As vegetarians they amended text to support their practice. They thought that Jesus was the natural son of Mary and Joseph but was adopted by God at the baptism.

### **GOSPEL OF PSEUDO- MATTHEW**

Pseudo-Matthew belongs to a group of books generally referred to as infancy narratives. It is an attempt to fill in information not found in the Infancy account in St. Matthews Gospel. In the Middle Ages there was a great thirst to find something about the background Jesus, the missing years from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, and more about Mary and her parents. Clearly stories had been told and retold so they had become part of legend, which had many layers. In other words legend was added on legend. Some of this material like Pseudo-Matthew was very late; with Elliot (1992, p. 86) claiming this work was composed in Latin in the eighth or ninth century with the oldest extant text coming from the fourteenth century. The reality is that it has nothing to do with the Gospel of St Matthew but just says what speculative imagination would like this Gospel

<sup>1</sup> Targum; Hayward (1990, p. 671) tells us that this is Aramaic word meaning a special type of translation that was popular in the first century Judaism for most books of the Hebrew Bible. It combines translation with interpretation often with textural criticism woven in. It was often used for the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic for ordinary people.

to say. This is projected in the title *Pseudo-Matthew*, though its real titles are in Latin (*Liber de Infantia* or *Historia de Nativitate Mariae et de Infantia Salvatoris*). In an attempt to give the work authenticity there is a supposed preface falsely attributed to St. Jerome. In spite of these condemnations we have to admit that the story of Jesus being born in a stable with the ox and ass looking on comes to us from Pseudo-Matthew as do the details of what happened on the flight into Egypt.

## **THE DATE AND PLACE OF ORIGIN**

In the first century AD text for reading did not appear like it does with modern publications where there can be a print run of several thousand for a first edition. Each edition had to be copied which was a slow, laborious and expensive task. Usually the community for which it was being written bore such cost. Small or even large changes could be made in each copy. It should come as no surprise that when early texts are available for study they do not all agree exactly.

Most scholars agree that Matthew's Gospel was written after Mark's Gospel which is generally placed between 64-69 AD. Matthew's Gospel is usually placed between 80-90 AD and certainly after 70 AD with the conclusion of the first Roman-Jewish war but more likely while the Rabbis were meeting at Jamnia (75-90 AD). It was certainly before 110 as it was well known by Ignatius of Antioch (Vivano, 1990. p. 630). Allison (2001, p. 845) adds to this the Didache and Papias to this list with the suggestion it was written before 100 AD. It would seem that Matthew's Gospel was written about the same time as Luke's Gospel. Drane (1999, p.208) states it is wide spread belief that Matthew was written after Luke. This is based on the dual assumption that the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD is being referred to in Matthew 22:7 and 24:3-28, also this was not a prophetic statement before the event.

Many places have been suggested as the site of the authorship and these include Antioch which is favourite but other places are offered which include Alexandria, Caesarea Maritima, or even Jerusalem itself. All these places would have had a Jewish community living with Christians and so would be possible sites. Although Luke was said to be a native of Antioch<sup>1</sup>, there is no evidence that the two met. Fitzmyer (1970 pp 73-75) makes a robust defence that Luke was not dependant on Matthew. It is not possible to make a similar defence that Matthew did not have some knowledge of Luke's Gospel or the so called Proto-Luke.

## **THE COMMUNITY FOR WHOM THE GOSPEL WAS WRITTEN.**

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<sup>1</sup> Antioch: there are two cities called Antioch.

1. Antioch Pisidan, where St Paul went on his first missionary journey (Acts 13: 14) and this had been a great city in its day.
2. Antioch Syria, which in the first century had a large population and was the home of a wealthy Jewish community with a beautifully decorated synagogue. Christian missionaries, some of whom had fled from Jerusalem due to persecution worked among the Gentile population. It became the first city where a Gentile Christian church was formed (Harrison, (1965, pp. 40-41 and McRay, 2000, pp. 67-68)

As with St. Luke's Gospel, we see something of the community for whom the Gospel was written in the text. Christianity was new and Judaism was changing rapidly in a Roman world. This complex mixture is seen in St. Matthew's Gospel. McKnight (1997, p.724) asks the question was the Gospel written from inside Judaism (*intra muros*) or from outside (*extra muros*). It is generally assumed that Matthew's Gospel was written for mainly Jews or Jewish converts to Christianity but Harrington (1991, p. 10) concludes that it was written for a cultured group where Greek was used. This would suggest a Hellenistic town or city where Jews and Gentiles mixed freely. Even so it is possible that the Gospel developed over a period of time perhaps starting in or near Jerusalem but moving to Pella or some other safer area when the Roman-Jewish war started. Kingsbury (1991, p. 50) deduces that there was conflict between the Jews and Christians quoting texts like

*Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me as a testimony to them and the gentiles.* (St Matthew 10: 17 and 18)

There can be little doubt that the early members of St. Matthew's community were Jewish, highlighted by mention of the covenant with Abraham, Moses and David. Viviano (1992, p. 631) concludes that Matthew's Gospel was written principally *extra muros* after the community had been expelled by the Rabbis of Jamnia in a ban called the *birkat hamminim* in about 80 AD.

As in most religious movements where there is rapid change there is conflict between the old religion and the new religion. There would be a spectrum of opinion between the old and the new. The old would see their mission primarily to the Jews. The conflict is seen in the following quotations.

*Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* (Matthew 10: 5-6)

*I was not sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* (Matthew 15: 24)

By the end of the Gospel we have a theology of universalism-

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* (St. Matthew 28:19)

Matthew 24:17-24 is about paying Temple tax and chapter 23 is a bitter attack on the Pharisees. The question arises did the Gospel writer manipulate the words of Jesus to be in keeping with the situation after Jamnia. The opponents of the Matthew community were the Pharisees after the separation from the synagogue. Speculative guesses have been made as to where the Gospel was written. Top of this list is Antioch where the Church was first called Christian (Acts 11:26). It is also assumed that they were an affluent community, with little mention of the poor as in St. Luke's Gospel.

## **WHY IS ST. MATTHEW'S THE FIRST GOSPEL OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?**

First we need to take a brief look at how the canon of the New Testament was formed. DeToit (1993, pp. 102-104) suggests that from a historical perspective the formation of the canon of the New Testament can be divided into the following phases-

3. ***Creation of various early Christian documents.***[Latter part of the first century AD.]

At the time of Our Lord's earthly ministry, sacred writings consisted of The Law, Prophets and other writings that were of Jewish heritage. The early Christians called this the Scriptures. Jesus left no written work and initially the Gospel message was transmitted orally. Apostles were the chosen messengers and commissioned to preach the Gospel and became the link between Christian believers and the Jesus they believed in. Eventually apostolic witness developed into apostolic tradition. While the Church consisted of a Palestinian group around Jerusalem, with living witness to tell the story of Jesus and all that he stood for, there was no pressing need for writings. We have no writings between 30-50 AD. The "canon" was what Peter, James and Paul etc. preached. As time passed and the Church spread, things changed. Perhaps distance more than time changed things. Paul with his missionary journeys made the Jerusalem centered Church a thing of the past. Apostolic instruction had to be given from a distance, and thus letters were needed, giving the first Christian writings, far more than we now have in our existing New Testament. The authors of the early church did not see their writing as part of the canon of scripture, but rather as pastoral guidance to a young church. There were probably pre-gospel collections of the sayings of Jesus, and even accounts of his passion, both oral and written later to be incorporated into the Gospels.

4. ***Growing recognition of writings, and the placing and collection of them in basic groups, eg. Letters and gospels.*** [From the close of the first century to the middle of the second century, ie. 95-150 AD. The period from Clement of Rome to Justin the Martyr.]

In this period the oral tradition was replaced by the written word. Even so living voices still enjoyed preference to the written word, according to Papias in the early part of the second century. All the now accepted works that make up our present New Testament were written between 50–150 AD. The dates at which they were collected and accepted is much broader.

5. ***The New Testament Canon becomes a reality.*** [Middle to the end of the second century, c150-c190 AD.]

It was heresy that made the Church act in definition of the canon of the New Testament in a similar way to that which was to stimulate definition of doctrine. The Gnostics had claimed new revelation and were starting to produce so called scripture to support their teachings. Other writers with a variety of motives were producing new and inaccurate literature. The Montanists (an apocalyptic movement in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, with reforming zeal and ascetic traits) wanted to close the canon with their edited version.

6. ***The closing of the Canon.***[c190 –c400 AD.]

The lists we have for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century were still open, agreeing on the majority of the books, but with a degree of flexibility with local variation. Some books were accepted, some had variable acceptance and others were rejected. This dispute was to go on well into the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The Easter letter from the much-exiled Archbishop Athanasius in 367 was intended to settle the matter for his own jurisdiction, listing books that could be read in public in church but allowing other for private reading. He had good relationships with the Western Church and his list or canon as he called it was approved by the

synod of Rome in 382. Under the influence of St Augustine the North African Church followed this same line at the Council of Hippo in 392, with the Council of Carthage also agreeing in 397. Pope Innocent I made the declaration *Consulenti tibi* on 5<sup>th</sup> February 405, giving our present canon of the New Testament. By this stage acceptance had spread throughout Christendom. At first the Syrian Church did not conform but did so in the sixth century; the Ethiopian has still not completely conformed.

The criteria that seem to have been use for the inclusion of a book in the Canon of the New Testament are that it has apostolicity (real or reputed) orthodoxy (accepted by the Church) usage by a community and inspiration which is difficult to define. St. Matthew's Gospel seems to tick all these boxes.

There is little doubt that St. Matthew's Gospel was the most used by the early Church. St. Mark's and St. Luke's Gospels could not claim to have been written directly by an eye-witness apostle. St. John's Gospel was written later when Gnostic heresy was having an effect on the Church, he knew some of their terminology and used it as in his beautiful prologue which caused some hesitation in use of the Gospel outside his community.

### **ANCIENT TEXTS OF ST. MATTHEW'S GOSPEL**

First we need to have knowledge about writing materials and methods at the time of the early Church as discussed by Mathisen (2008, pp140-151). Papyrus was the most commonly available material but unfortunately it degenerated into fragments over the course of time. It was made from bulrush or paper reed that grew along the banks of the river Nile. The preparation was not easy but usually resulted in sheets or *charta* of about ten inches square but these could be stuck together to form a scroll. This was not cheap and had to be transported from Egypt. Wax tablets usually on wood could be strung together in pairs (*Diptics*) which could be written on with a metal stylus and were often used for draft documents. The most expensive writing material was vellum which was the shin of an animal. The process was lengthy and very expensive. Skin from young animals gave the best quality but a large number of animals were needed to produce a *codex* which was a number of sheets of vellum bound together. Bothe papyrus and vellum were at first inscribed by a reed pen (Greek- *kalamos* and Latin- *calamos*) with black ink. By the sixth century this was replaced by the quill of a goose feather (*penna*- Latin for feather). Paper was not available to the early Church. Arabs learned to manufacture it from the Chinese in the eighth century but it was not until the late eleventh century that Christians were using it in Spain and not until about 1400 that its use had spread to the rest of Europe.

Clearly a mobile missionary unit had problems making contemporaneous notes during the ministry of Jesus. This did not stop records being made when they returned to base. Early texts that were written on papyrus are not surprisingly only extant in fragments. Copyists were in demand especially when texts were destroyed either by natural process or by persecution. Origen (c. 184-254) employed girls who were skilled in elegant writing.

According to Koester (1990, pp. 314-318) St. Matthew's Gospel is the best attested Gospel historically, followed by St. John, then St. Luke and lastly St. Mark whose Gospel at one time was thought to be an abridged version of St. Matthew. There are papyri fragments of St Matthew from about 200 AD. The oldest

almost complete manuscripts of St Matthew are in *Codex Sinaiticus*<sup>1</sup> and *Codex Vaticanus*<sup>2</sup> both dating from the fourth century.

## CONCLUSIONS

(The Chronology of the history of St. Matthew's Gospel is shown in Figure 2)

Most Biblical scholars now accept that the Gospel attributed to St. Matthew was not written by the Apostle but he may have provided some of the material. There is still some argument if he was a Jew or a Gentile but the majority opinion is that he was a convert from Judaism, possibly even a rabbi, but wrote in good Greek not in Hebrew as reported by Eusebius, though it is correct to say in a Hebrew rhetorical style. There are clear links with Judaism though the Gospel can be critical of Jewish practices. There were a number of Jewish-Christian sects with their own versions of the Gospel based on St. Matthew's Gospel, that were probably translated from Greek to Hebrew and have led to historical confusion. Most scholars think that the majority of the Gospel was written after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. It is again almost universally accepted by modern scholars that it was not the first Gospel written and that it relies on Mark and Q for much of its material but there was another source or sources that account for material in St. Matthew's Gospel that is unique to the Gospel. We do not know for certainty where it was written but it is assumed that it was written for a large community where Jews and Christians lived together not always in harmony. Many of the Christians were probably Jewish converts but others were likely to have been of Gentile origin. Antioch seems to be a favourite suggestion as this would provide the sort of mixed possibly affluent well organized community describe. There can be no denying the immense importance the Gospel attributed to St. Matthew had for the early church, who regarded it as an eye witness account of the ministry and earthly life of Jesus. There is good evidence that St. Matthew's Gospel was in wide circulation by the second century. It was seen as a more complete record than St. John's Gospel as it had some account of the incarnation and infancy of Jesus. Also it provided a good link with the Old Testament seeing Jesus as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. There were some very early church communities that would only accept St. Matthew's Gospel. It is a Gospel that reads well and has formed a major part in liturgy and catechesis. For these reasons the compilers of the Canon of the New Testament had little hesitation in placing it as the first of the Gospels.

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<sup>1</sup> *Codex Sinaiticus* is a fourth century Greek manuscript of the Bible written on vellum. It contains the whole of the New Testament as we know it but also contains other books that are not in the present Canon of the New Testament (Adair, 2000, p. 267)

<sup>2</sup> *Codex Vaticanus* is from around the middle of the fourth century and has been in the Vatican Library since the fifteenth century. It contains the whole of the modern accepted New Testament and much of the Old Testament (Rogers, 2000, pp. 267-268).

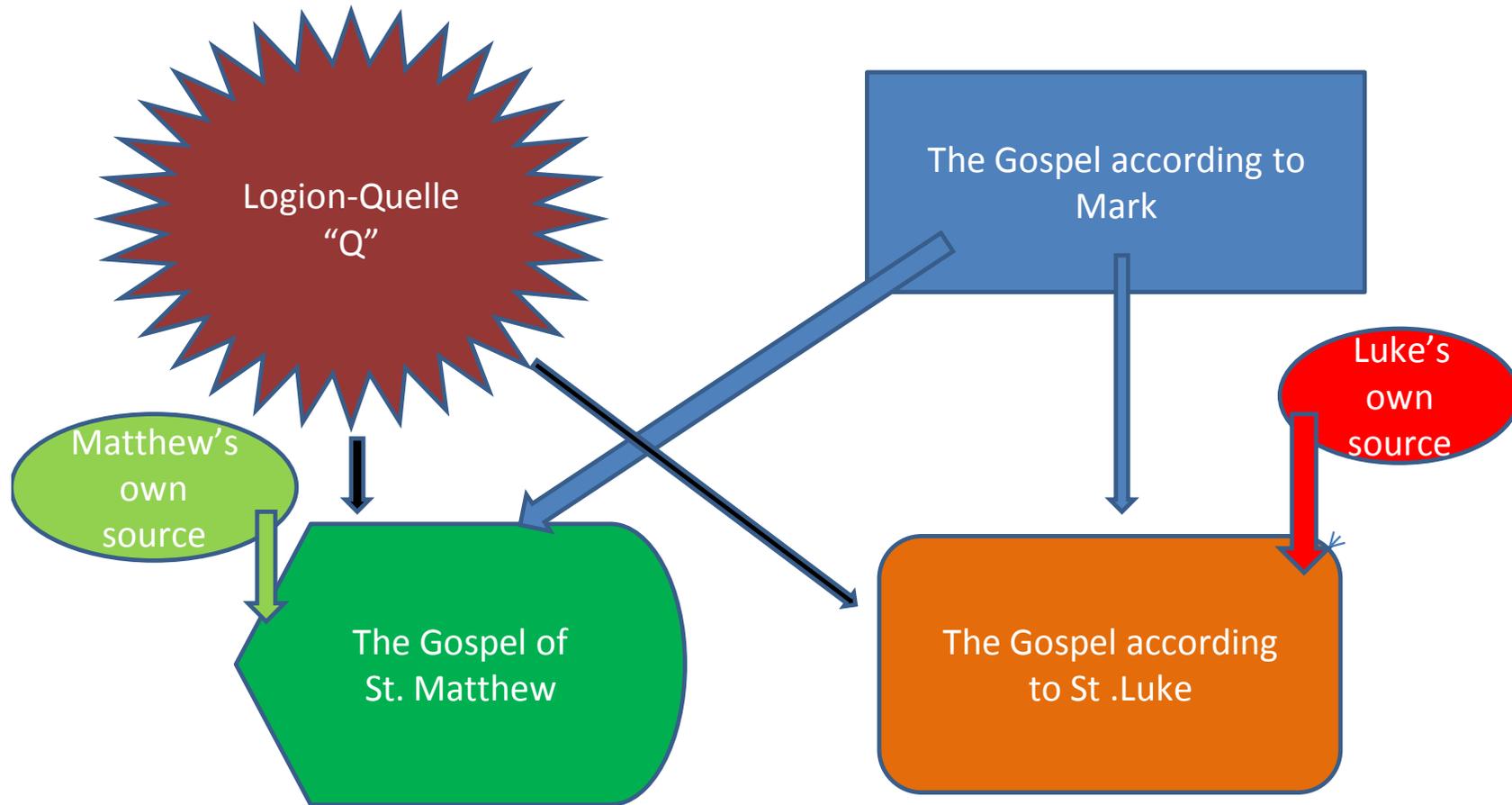
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THEORY OF THE FORMATION OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Figure 1.



# CHRONOLOGY

Figure 2

