



The Gospel of Matthew was written anonymously, but was universally attributed to Jesus apostle Matthew, until the 1800's. Today, most scholars, and skeptics and critics no longer believe this. Instead, they claim the Gospel of Matthew is based largely on the Gospel of Mark, which they assert was written first, and also on the totally speculative "Q" source. They claim, therefore, that Matthew is unlikely to have been written by one of Jesus closest followers, namely the former tax collector, and apostle of Jesus, Matthew Levi, but instead was written in the 80's or 90's CE by one or more second generation disciples. What does the evidence actually show as to when the Gospel of Matthew was written?

There are many clues that Matthew did not use Mark as a source of information. For one thing, Matthew uses the expression **"the kingdom of heaven"** (**Matthew 13:24,31,33,44,45,47**) thirty-two times, whereas none of the other New Testament writers use it. Based on their own speculations, those who deny the apostle Matthew's writership claim that it is highly unlikely that an apostle of Jesus would have used secondary source. And why would he? Why would an eyewitness of so many events in Jesus life use a secondary source? — The answer is that he wouldn't!

MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

Carsten Peter Thiede, an expert in papyrology, by comparison with a Greek text, called the Oxyrhynchus Papi, dated 66 CE, found in Egypt, and with a leather Qumran Dead Sea Scroll dated to about the same time, has been able to paleographically date three fragments of

[Matthew 26](#) (called the Magdalen Papyrus) to about the same time, or even a little earlier. Since Matthew's original manuscript would have been written some time earlier, this puts the Magdalen fragments within about 25 years of Mathew's original. This paleographical dating of the Oxyrhynchus Papri of Matthew's Gospel, helps us to estimate the date of the original writing of Matthew's Gospel as being possibly as early as the late 30's, or early 40's CE.

INTERNAL EVIDENCE — PRIOR TO JERUSALEM'S DESTRUCTION IN 70 CE

“The king was enraged and sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city” ([Matthew 22:7 NAB](#)). In this parable, Jerusalem's future destruction is pictured. Critics have claimed this indicates a [post 70 CE](#) date of writing, because they deny that prophetic prediction is possible. However, the prediction in this parable is no different from Jesus predicting his death, which was yet future ([Matthew 16:21](#); [17:22,23](#); [20:17-19](#))

“Jesus left the temple area and was going away, when his disciples approached him to point out the temple buildings. He said to them in reply, ‘You see all these things, do you not? Amen, I say to you, there will be not be left here a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down” ([Matthew 24:1,2 NAB](#)). Matthew recorded Jesus' prediction of the Temple's destruction, but his gospel records nothing about the prophesy's fulfillment in 70 CE, nor are there any clues in the book to indicate the prophecy had been fulfilled at the time of writing. This gives a clue that the prophecy was written prior to 70 CE, in view of Matthew's fondness for noting fulfilled prophecy. The language used to describe the temple's destruction reflects Old Testament prophecies of divine judgement that Jesus drew upon.

“So when you see the desolating abomination spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place . . . then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, a person on the housetop must not go down to get things out out of his house . . . Pray that your flight will not be in winter or on the sabbath, for at that time there will be great tribulation” ([Matthew 24:15-21 NAB](#)). A [post 70 CE](#) date

of writing would make these instructions historic, and unnecessary, for then current Christians. Although it is historical for us today, Matthew records Jesus prediction and exhortation, without recording any fulfillment, which is another clue as to its pre 70 CE date of writing.

“Those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter and said, ‘Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?’ . . . Jesus said [to Peter] . . . ‘go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater. Take that and give it to them for Me and you’” (Matthew 17:24-27 LSB). Matthew’s recording of the issue of paying the temple tax gives us another clue that the book was written while the temple was still standing, because he doesn’t provide any clarifying comments. This would seem a little strange if the gospel was written after 70 CE.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadduces’” (Matthew 16:6 ESV). Jesus’ warning here seems likely to have been written prior to 70 CE, since the Sadducees declined rapidly after the destruction of Jerusalem.

“That field has been called the Field of Blood to this day” (Matthew 27:8 LSB).
“This story was widely spread among the Jews and is to this day” (Matthew 28:15 LSB). These two reports indicate three things: (1) Jerusalem and Judea had not been yet destroyed and Jews still lived in the area; (2) some time had passed since the recorded events; and (3) the writer was familiar with the then current views of the Jews.

These are more evidences of Matthew’s writership some time prior to 70 CE. We thus have much internal evidence to answer the question, “When was the gospel of Matthew written?”

EVIDENCE OF MATHEW’S EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

Matthew is presented as a tax collector in the gospel, as Matthew writes in his third person

account – **“As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” (Matthew 9:9-11 NIV).** This clue helps support the gospel’s ascription to Matthew. Why? Because both [Mark 2:14](#) and [Luke 5:27](#), in their reporting of this event, use what was likely Matthew’s birth name, “Levi”. Matthew’s use of the name “Matthew” may be his personal touch, a self-reference to the name that Jesus gave Levi after he chose to follow Christ. The fact that Matthew was a tax collector is very unlikely to be fabricated. Why? This would have been very embarrassing, even shameful, for the writer, because tax collectors were classed with the worst of people in the Roman Empire ([Matthew 11:19; 18:17; Luke 18:11](#)).

Matthew 23:37 - “Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I wanted to gather your children” (NIV). Critics have claimed that in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus is never recorded as having visited Jerusalem during his earthly ministry prior to his last week alive. How could Jesus statement at [Matthew 23:37](#) be true if Jesus had not visited Jerusalem previously, as some skeptics claim, during his ministry? Notice the following paraphrased rendering: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times I wanted to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!” ([Matthew 22:37 Good News Translation](#)). Eyewitness apostle Matthew, who accompanied Jesus in his extensive travels knew that Jesus had visited Jerusalem a number of times. John’s later gospel reported on the fact that Jesus had already spent considerable time in the Jerusalem area ([John 2:13; 4:1-4; 5:1; 7:2,10,14; 10:22,23](#)).

The eyewitness, Matthew, puts Jesus, not only in Jerusalem, but right in the temple complex during his last week, when he reports: **“Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there . . . ‘It is written,’ he said to them, ‘My house**

will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it “a den of robbers”’. The blind and the lame came to him at the temple and he healed them” (Matthew 21:12,14 NIV). What is also notable in giving us a clue that the temple was still standing when Matthew wrote his account is that Jesus is quoted speaking in the present tense, “making it”, about the actions of the merchants in in the temple, whereas Mark’s and Luke’s accounts quote Jesus speaking in past tense (Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46).

“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer up your gift” (Matthew 5:23,24 NIV). This is also notable in giving us a clue that the temple was still standing when Matthew wrote his account, because the temple would have to be standing for this to be literally applied. Of course, Christians can, and should, apply the principle Jesus expressed here.

“Do not swear at all . . . nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king” (Matthew 5:34,35 NAB). Quoting Jesus speaking in present tense, saying, ‘Jerusalem is the city of the great King’ is a clue the temple was still standing when Matthew wrote.

“The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, ‘This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” (Matthew 26:59-61 NIV) - This statement or charge does not make much sense without knowing the details John 2:19 later reports: “Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (NIV). The two false witnesses perverted Jesus’ statement, because “the temple he had spoken of was his body” (John 2:21 NIV). John’s gospel had not yet been written when Matthew wrote his gospel. Yet, eyewitness Matthew, who did not need to rely on other sources, shows us why they were false witnesses - it was because of their twisted misquote of Jesus’ words.

WRITTEN PRIMARILY FOR JEWS

There are many clues that Matthew was written during the earliest years of Christianity when Christians were **“speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone” (Acts 11:19 NASB)**, and the early years thereafter.

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham became the father of Isaac . . . ” (Matthew 1:1,2 NAB). Matthew only traces Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham, which is all that is necessary for Matthew’s primarily Jewish audience to prove Jesus’ genealogical pedigree to being the Messiah. He doesn’t trace it all the way back to Adam, as Luke does. Luke’s Gospel appears to have been written to all people, and to that audience Jesus Jewishness is not as important to the wider public as it is to Jews. Also notable here is that Matthew uses the expression “son of David” many times, which was very important to the Jews.

“This was to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son’” (Matthew 2:15 NRSV). Joseph was told by God’s angel to escape with Mary and young Jesus to Egypt (Matthew 2:13,14). The Jews would have been very familiar with what Matthew is inspired to record the fulfillment of the prophecy at Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (NRSV). Matthew makes the connection to Jesus, this points to Jesus as being God’s Son, as well as making the connection of Jesus being **“leader and commander for the peoples” (Isaiah 55:4 ESV; NASB)** of the forthcoming Christian **“Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16 LSB)**.

“The was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah . . . ’”(Matthew 2:17,18 NRSV). **“so that what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled . . . ” (Matthew 8:17 HCSB)**. “What was spoken through the prophet” is used nine times in Matthew’s gospel, but none in the other three gospels. Matthew uses more Old Testament quotes and allusions than any other New Testament book (almost 130). Matthew quotes and records the fulfillments of 60 prophecies

from the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament. Matthew has the strongest connection to the Hebrew Scriptures of any New Testament book, and serves as a natural bridge, a gateway, an excellent transition between the Old and New Testaments. These are likely some of the reasons that Matthew's gospel is placed first in the New Testament. The fulfillment of prophecies is important for everyone to know, but the Jews especially would have a particularly keen interest in such fulfillments.

Other clues that Matthew was written primarily for the Jews are: Many of the Old Testament quotations in Matthew are more closely matched with the Hebrew text than with the Greek Septuagint Version that is often quoted by New Testament writers. Matthew never explains Jewish customs and traditions, whereas the other three gospels, Mark, Luke and John, do. Compare [Matthew 15:1-3](#) with [Mark 7:1-5](#). Also notice the explanations of Jewish customs at [Luke 1:8,9](#) and [John 2:6](#).

These are some of the many evidences in Matthew that his gospel was written primarily for the Jews, which is a clue that it was written during the earlier years of Christianity, before Gentiles began to outnumber Jews as Christians. This helps to place the book's time of writing as being prior to Paul's missionary journeys, which began in the late 40's.

EARLY OUTSIDE TESTIMONY

Many of the early church leaders, called "Fathers", such as Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaeus, and Origin, testified that Matthew was written by Jesus' apostle Matthew, who had been a tax collector. These early church leaders testified that Matthew was the first gospel written, and there is some testimony (Papias) that it was written in Hebrew first, then later translated by Matthew into Greek. If true, this would also possibly place Matthew as likely being written as in the 30's to the early 40's.

CONCLUSION

After considering all the evidence available, when was the Gospel of Matthew written? – We can safely conclude that the Gospel of Matthew was the earliest of the inspired gospels that were written, likely in the late 30's to the mid 40's CE.