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CHAPTER 1

MATTHEW

Whether in ancient times or modern, human beings are capable of great evil. Yet none is beyond redemption.

Eighteenth-century pastor John Newton was once a slave-trader, which meant he was involved in one of the most heinous travesties the earth has ever known. This was a man whose daily treatment of his fellow human beings was abusive and unjust. Only later did Newton come to realize what a blind and wandering wretch he truly was. His sense of awe at God's sweet mercy and forgiveness inspired him to write the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace."

If the timeline of history were different, perhaps the biblical disciple Matthew would have appreciated John Newton's great hymn. Matthew was a tax collector, a profession notorious in ancient times for its abusive practices. In fact, a genuine form of enslavement was being perpetrated against the Jews through excessive taxes. Yet when Jesus of Nazareth showed up at the tax booth, Matthew's life—like Newton's—was suddenly diverted down a new path toward freedom and redemption. So what did Matthew do with the bountiful forgiveness he found in Christ? In other words, what did he accomplish for his Savior after Acts?

To answer that question, we must first understand who Matthew was before he discovered the amazing grace of God.

THE COLLABORATOR IS CALLED

During Matthew's lifetime, his homeland of Galilee was controlled by the Romans through the puppet ruler Herod Antipas. The foreign overlords demanded two things of their subjects: peace and taxes. Yet the job of tax collection didn't originally belong to the Roman government like our IRS today. Instead, aristocratic capitalists called *publicans* formed tax-collecting businesses. Though these big shots operated out of Rome or the provincial capitals, local tax gatherers from the nearby population provided the necessary "boots on the ground" at each collection point.

Matthew was a man like this—a Jewish collaborator with Rome's appointee, Herod Antipas, who levied heavy taxes to fund his many building projects. Obviously the traitors who helped Antipas would be resented by those who had to hand over their hard-earned wealth. Sellouts like Matthew were agents of the oppressive Roman regime, often getting filthy rich by overcharging the little guy. The Jews hated the publicans in general, but they especially despised the local Jewish representatives who carried out the actual process of examining goods and exacting taxes. Such people were lumped with other "sinners" as hardly worthy of being considered Jews—until Jesus came along and offered Matthew a new life.

The calling of Matthew as a disciple of Jesus is recounted in the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., the three gospels that outline their story the same way—Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Mark's gospel puts it like this:

> [Jesus] went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw *Levi the son of Alphaeus* sitting at the tax

> booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:13–17, italics added.)

This account, like Luke's version, calls the tax-collecting disciple "Levi." Matthew's gospel, however, changes the name to "Matthew" (9:9). Apparently this disciple went by two names. When the gospel of Matthew was written, his identity needed to be clarified so everyone could see that the man writing the story was one and the same as the despicable tax collector. This demonstrates that the early Christians weren't shy about reading a biography of Jesus attributed to a notorious sinner. Just the opposite—Matthew's sinfulness is highlighted in the text. Yet due to his transformation by the Lord, he was able to write the ancient church's most widely read gospel account!

As a tax agent, Matthew would have been literate in both Aramaic and Greek. He was no peasant laborer but a businessman who worked for Gentile bosses, kept careful records, and wrote out customs slips. The Bible portrays him as having a very nice home with a dining room large and well-furnished enough for many other rich men to gather there. Yet underneath all the trappings of wealth, Matthew may have felt pangs of guilt. Here was a man who, instead of commiserating with his countrymen, joined an abusive system and worked the angles to profit at the expense of his fellow Jews.

The place where Matthew's traitorous work took place was Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. But unbeknownst to him, Jesus

had decided to make this little fishing village the home base of His ministry in fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah (Matt. 4:12–17). Capernaum was also the probable hometown of Peter. We can imagine Matthew living a life of considerable comfort here, yet always having to bear the burden of social rejection. For that reason he was ripe for the harvest when Jesus issued the call, "Follow me."

Abandoning his life as a tax collector, Matthew became one of Jesus' inner circle, the Twelve. He lived and ate and prayed with his Rabbi on a daily basis. Then, after the Romans crucified Jesus on the cross of Calvary, Matthew was one of those who witnessed the risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:5) and saw Him ascend into heaven (Acts 1:1–14). From this point on, Matthew disappears from further mention in the Bible. Yet he is known by all Christians today because of his one great legacy to the church: he wrote the first gospel in the New Testament.

Or did he?

MATTHEW WRITING MATTHEW

For many years—centuries, even—the church believed Matthew wrote the first of the four gospels. The canonical order of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is familiar to anyone who has ever cracked open the Good Book. Yet despite this long tradition, most scholars today don't consider this order of authorship to be correct. Only a few conservatives still defend it, while many other conservatives do not, along with the majority of liberals (refer to the introduction for clarification of these approaches).

The Synoptic Problem

The questions of when Matthew's gospel was written, and according to what sources, and in what relation to the other gospels, are all part of the complex academic debate called the Synoptic Problem. The issue arises because Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so alike in their wording and outlook that mere coincidence cannot explain these similarities; yet it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the exact literary relationship between the three

works. Scholars have put forth many complicated theories about how the Synoptic Gospels came to be.

Fortunately for us, an in-depth examination of this problem goes beyond the topics we are addressing in this book. Though we will touch on a few key synoptic issues, we want to focus instead on what the apostles did for Christ's kingdom after our inspired record of them comes to an end. In the case of the apostle Matthew, ancient tradition doesn't tell us much about his later life. Though we will examine those traditional accounts in a moment, the early church has mainly remembered Matthew for one preeminent deed: his authorship of the gospel that bears his name. But since many modern scholars doubt even this, what are we to believe? Did the greedy tax collector who was so radically transformed by the call of Jesus actually pen the first gospel? Without delving into all the complexities of the Synoptic Problem, we should at least try and determine whether the apostle Matthew can rightly be considered a New Testament author.

Papias

The earliest mention of Matthew (and remember: in studying history, earlier accounts tend to be the most reliable) comes from an ancient church father named Papias of Hierapolis. The city of Hierapolis was no small village but a bustling metropolis famous for its hot springs, which drew visitors from far and wide. Even today, people still come to modern Pamukkale, Turkey, to visit them. In Colossians 4:12–13 we read that a Christian church had been planted there through the ministry of Epaphras in nearby Colossae (see also Col. 1:6–7). So when Papias was pastoring the congregation at Hierapolis in the early second century, his city had a rich ecclesial tradition going all the way back to the apostolic age.

Papias himself states that whenever church leaders came to visit, he always asked for their recollections about anything the Lord's disciples ever said or did (NPNF2, vol. 1, *Church History* 3.39.2–4). Apparently Papias was a man who made it his business

to know what the earliest apostles had been up to. Therefore, one of his statements preserved by the later church historian Eusebius is very relevant to our inquiry. Papias declared: "Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and everyone [translated] them as he was able" (*C.H.* 3.39.16).[1] The meaning of this statement is hotly contested by scholars today. The Greek word for "oracles" is *logia*, or sayings, but what exactly does that mean? The most plausible view is that it was a collection of sayings Jesus Himself uttered in Aramaic—and who better to compile such a text than an educated and detail-oriented Jew like Matthew who was in Jesus' inner circle?

The Q-Source

As it turns out, Matthew's gospel actually does provide strong evidence of having used a collection of Jesus' sayings as one of its sources. We can infer this because Luke's gospel, though written in a different time and place, has preserved much of the same material. Luke displays close affinities to Matthew in his presentation of Jesus' teachings, often using exactly the same wording. However, most scholars believe that neither of these writers was dependent on the other.[2] If this is so, they must have both had access to a shared "sayings source" that they used to fill out their narratives. Borrowing from a common text is the only plausible explanation for two independent authors recording almost exactly the same material in their respective works.

Indeed, an editorial process like this is to be expected from good historians. Luke states outright that he used written eyewitness sources (Luke 1:1–4). Apparently one of these was a text or dossier that is now lost, yet is partially preserved in Matthew and Luke. The scholars in Germany who advanced this theory called the collection of sayings *Quelle*, or Source, and today it is abbreviated as Q. Could this ancient document (or more likely, a collection of documents in various editions) have grown out of the handwritten

notes captured by one of Jesus' most grateful disciples as he sat at his Master's feet? The suggestion is intriguing.

Unfortunately, the hypothetical collection called Q has not survived today as a separate text, so we cannot say exactly what was in it—or even for certain that it existed. However, since Jewish disciples often captured the wise sayings of their rabbis, and since the church father Papias had heard that Matthew served as a scribal recorder of Jesus' *logia*, it is at least plausible that the Q-source did exist, and that it originally had a Matthean core.

Mark as a Source

What is interesting about the gospels of Matthew and Luke, however, is that they don't just use Q as a common source. They also use Mark. About 95 percent of Mark is reproduced in Matthew or Luke in some form, though the elements of the narrative are moved around, amplified, abbreviated, or polished into better Greek style. Themes that would have been especially important to Jewish-Christians[3]— such as the hostility of Israel's national leaders to the teachings of Jesus—are developed by Matthew. On the other hand, historically irrelevant material is pruned away. For example, the side note explaining Jewish customs in Mark 7:3–4 is omitted as unnecessary in Matthew 15:1–2.

Matthew's Audience

All of this points to a Jewish-Christian audience for Matthew's gospel. It was written by a well-educated Jewish man with urban sensibilities, using Mark and a collection of Jesus' sayings as its main sources. This means it wasn't the first gospel written. It was at least the second; and as we will see in chapter 3, it was probably the third (after Luke).

On the face of things, then, it would seem the apostle Matthew has given the church a gospel that shapes its narrative to highlight the Jewishness of Jesus. Even if this wasn't the earliest of the

four gospels, it is still a precious treasure that celebrates Israel's Messiah in a unique way.

Yet this historical reconstruction of the book's authorship raises an interesting question: Why would an eyewitness of the Lord like Matthew use a non-eyewitness author like Mark as the basis of his account? To many modern observers, this is a very big problem. In fact, scholars in the liberal camp typically *deny* that the disciple Matthew wrote the gospel that bears his name—and one of the main reasons is its use of Mark, which is thought to be inexplicable for an apostle who actually saw Jesus. Other arguments for non-Matthean authorship include the gospel's more developed theology, which is believed to reflect Jewish-Christian relations at a later time than when Matthew would have been writing; and also its excellent Greek prose, suggesting a better education than would be expected for a Galilean tax collector. What are we to make of such seemingly radical claims?

THE GOSPEL "ACCORDING TO" MATTHEW

As we consider the question of Matthean authorship, let us first recall that the ancient church has always attributed this gospel to Matthew. By the second century—and probably very early in that century—the titles of the four canonical gospels had been settled and were included with the books. All the surviving manuscripts of Matthew's gospel name him in the title (except a few that are so tattered, we can't be certain of the ascribed author). Furthermore, the church fathers unanimously agree that Matthew was the author of a gospel.

Matthew's Languages

Following the lead of Papias, we find Irenaeus of Lyons saying, "Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the church"—that is, during the 60s AD (ANF, vol. 1, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1). Likewise, Origen of

Alexandria reports, "Among the four Gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language" (NPNF2, vol. 1, *C.H.* 6.25.4). Thus, according to widespread ancient church recollections, Matthew published a gospel for Jewish-Christians in their own language (which would have been Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew).

But as we have seen, the biblical gospel of Matthew was almost certainly composed in Greek. What prompted these statements about an Aramaic version? The fact is, an Aramaic gospel (or gospels) linked to Matthew's name did circulate in antiquity. However, the inspired Greek text in the New Testament was not a direct translation of any such work. On the other hand, that doesn't mean Aramaic writings couldn't have served as historical sources for our inspired text. The evidence suggests the biblical gospel of Matthew was the result of a complex editorial process in which a variety of sources were stitched together—including the original Aramaic sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ, translated into Greek.

Matthew's Editorial Team

To carry out this complicated literary task, there is a distinct possibility that Matthew did not work alone but assigned the writing of his gospel to a church community under his direction. Such a process wouldn't have been foreign to the concept of authorship in antiquity, since the ancients cared more about the authority behind a book than the exact method of its production.

We should picture the editorial work being performed by a Jewish-Christian congregation in which the apostle was prominent and respected, yet other capable scribes were available to help shape the final version of the narrative. Matthew, the authoritative eyewitness of the Lord, would have been the driving force

behind the publication process, even if other Christians may have put some personal touches on the final product.

Many conservative scholars are willing to grant that the gospel's central Matthean core—his eyewitness remembrances, recorded sayings of Jesus, and major narrative themes—was nonetheless shaped and molded over time by Matthew's community to give us the text we now have. This does not contradict anything stated in the Word of God. We would simply understand that the Holy Spirit's ministry of inspiration guided any writers who helped produce our Scripture. Yet behind it all, the early church fathers recognized Matthew's essential contribution to the book—including his use of original Aramaic sources—and rightly credited its authorship to him.

So, then, perhaps we might imagine that the literary efforts of Matthew looked something like this. An initial version of the gospel was composed by a gifted Greek stylist under Matthew's leadership in the mid-60s. This would have been before the destruction of the Jewish temple, which explains why some verses assume its continued existence. Why would Matthew decide to preserve Jesus' command to leave sacrificial gifts before the altar (5:24) or his affirmation that God dwells within the temple (23:21), if the church now knew the temple had been obliterated by the Romans? There are many good reasons to think the bulk of Matthew's work happened before AD 70, the year the temple was destroyed. And yet, after this initial effort was complete, we can suppose some further editing may have taken place to help later Christians understand their situation in the post-70 world.[4]

Matthew's Sources

As all good historians should do, Matthew used whatever textual evidence he had at his disposal. One of his most important sources was the collection of Jesus' sayings that may have grown out of his own note-taking efforts in Aramaic. In addition, Matthew surely would have held Peter, with his bold personality and obvious close-

ness to Jesus, in high esteem as the leader of the Twelve. Therefore Matthew structured his work around the gospel that Peter's assistant Mark had recently composed at Rome (see chapter 2).

In light of the ancient church's desire to preserve the unity of its proclamation about Jesus, the use of Mark is not only plausible, it is extremely likely. Relying especially on these two sources (Q and Mark), along with his own personal memories and any other sources available to him, Matthew employed a skilled writer to compose a gospel that suited the needs of his Jewish-Christian congregation.

Matthew's Home Base

Where did all of this writing and editing take place? Since it must have occurred at a major intellectual center with a substantial Jewish population, the most commonly suggested location is Syrian Antioch. We know the apostle Peter, who plays an especially prominent role in Matthew's gospel, had been a respected and influential leader there (Gal. 2:11–14; and see chapter 9 on Peter). It would make sense for Matthew to highlight this well-known figure from his own Antiochian church (and from his hometown of Capernaum!).

The book of Acts also depicts a large Jewish-Christian community in Antioch, very devoted to Hebraic customs, yet possessing a zeal for Gentile evangelism. This profile dovetails with the themes emphasized in Matthew, such as the Great Commission to go into all the world, baptizing and making disciples (28:18–20). Furthermore, the later bishop at Antioch named Ignatius, who ministered in the early second century, reflects awareness of Matthew's text in his letters. All this to say, the gospel of Matthew fits perfectly with the type of congregation we know existed in Antioch. Though we cannot be 100 percent certain, we can imagine a writing like this being intended for Antiochian believers. At the same time, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit ensured that the gospel's message was timelessly relevant to all generations.

THE SINNER PENS A CLASSIC

The gospel of Matthew is this apostle's greatest legacy. Although some obscure church legends try to give Matthew a pious concern for evangelism by describing his missionary journeys to various lands, scholars today put little credence in those late-appearing accounts. For example, an early medieval text incorrectly attributed to a certain Babylonian bishop named Abdias recounts Matthew's daring exploits and miraculous adventures in the land of Ethiopia (Pseudo-Abdias, book 6). A Matthean ministry in Ethiopia is also attested by the church father Rufinus in his Latin translation and updating of Eusebius's historical work (*Ecclesiastical History* 10.9). Although this Ethiopian destination for Matthew is doubtful because the idea didn't emerge until around AD 400, it has nonetheless entered official Catholic tradition in the text called the Roman Martyrology, which is still used liturgically today.

Other sources link Matthew with various locales such as Parthia or Persia. Yet another story situates him in an unknown city called Myrna, inhabited by a race of cannibals whose persecutions led to his death (ANF, vol. 8, *Acts and Martyrdom of St. Matthew the Apostle*; see also the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, where the replacement disciple Matthias may be confused with Matthew). Any reader of these texts will quickly discern they are legendary and devoid of accurate historical detail. As opposed to the careful and meticulous way that the canonical gospels unfold their narratives, these apocryphal texts jump straight into fantastic tales that have the obvious ring of later church piety.

On the other hand, the testimony of Eusebius is much less speculative: "Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue" (NPNF2, vol. 1, *C.H.* 3.24.6). Here we see again the tradition that Matthew wrote in Aramaic and was associated with Jewish-Christian circles. However, the precise identity of the "other peoples" to whom he supposedly ministered is lost in the sands of time. Nobody close to the apostle's own life-

time recorded what he did. We have no historically solid traditions about Matthew's missionary journeys or his martyrdom. The most we can say is that he was likely involved in evangelizing Aramaic-speaking Jews, probably around Antioch.

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Thus, what the apostle Matthew actually accomplished for Jesus was not to travel around the empire defeating pagan opponents but to craft and produce the New Testament gospel that bears his name. Like the slaver-turned-preacher John Newton who composed a glorious hymn, Matthew, the former tax extortionist, received the great privilege of writing the very words of Scripture. The pen that once kept false and abusive ledger books was used instead to record the greatest story ever told. Now *that* is amazing grace!

MATTHEW

REPORT CARD

Ministered in Antioch	B
Published a Jewish-Christian gospel in Aramaic	C-
Led a Jewish-Christian congregation	B+
Took notes that were used in the composition of his biblical gospel	A-
Directly shaped the composition of his biblical gospel	A
Wrote his biblical gospel by himself	B-
Went on evangelistic missions to Ethiopia or cannibalistic tribes	F

A= Excellent, B= Good, C= Average, D= Below average, F= Not passing