

The Authorship of the Book of Matthew

by Joe Spivy

Establishing the authorship of any of the four canonical gospels is a difficult process due, in no small part, to the paucity of internal evidence. The anonymity of Matthew, similar to the other three Gospels, contrasts sharply with the traditional support beginning in the second century for Matthew the tax collector as its author (Matthew 9:9-13).

Very possibly predating the evidence of the patristic writers is the title of the book which was likely affixed prior to the middle of the second century (“KATA MAΘΘΑΙΟΝ”). Hengel addresses this issue and argues that the title very likely was affixed much earlier than commonly accepted (Cited by Chouinard 1997, 13).

The external evidence for Matthean authorship appears substantial. In his Ecclesiastical History (3.39.14-16) Eusebius (ca. 260-340) quotes Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (ca. 60-130):

This is related by Papias about Mark, and about Matthew this was said, ‘Matthew collected the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each interpreted them as best he could.

The work of Papias apparently being available for some centuries, though not presently preserved, may have served as the source for the several others who subsequently gave testimony in support of Matthean authorship. Those who perpetuated this tradition include Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine (Chouinard 1997, 14). However, there are some problems associated with this testimony (Harrington 1991, 3).

If Papias served as the catalyst for this tradition, then an inaccuracy in his statement that perpetuated the tradition could be sufficient cause by many to dismiss his claim in its entirety. The difficulty with the statement is the apparent claim that Matthew originally “collected” the book in Hebrew and the Greek text available was a translation from the Hebrew (Chouinard 1997, 15; Harrington 1991, 4).

Several have noted that the book of Matthew does not read like translated Greek. On these grounds the statement of Papias concerning Matthean authorship has been discounted (Chouinard 1996, 12-15). Thus they surmise that Papias was mistaken about the Hebrew character of the original version of Matthew and therefore mistaken also about the book’s authorship.

A few have countered that “in the Hebrew language” may simply refer to a Jewish style or literary form (Harrington 1991, 3-4). This, however, appears to be a strained translation of the phrase (Εβραϊδι διαλεκτω).

It is possible that Papias was mistaken about a Hebrew Matthew. This admission does not necessitate the rejection of everything that he stated. There is still the question of how Matthew, who does not figure prominently in any of the Gospels, would have come to have his named

affixed to this Gospel. It is possible that the patristic tradition had some reason, other than Papias, for attributing the book to Matthew.

Internally the book provides evidence that has led to conflicting views. The emphasis upon Jewish themes (illustrated by frequent quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures and the assertion that in Jesus these were “fulfilled”) suggests a Jewish author. Matthew, as a tax collector, therefore does not initially appear to be strong candidate for authorship. As a publican/tax collector, it is assumed that he would the devotion to Judaism required to develop the depth and breadth of knowledge of Hebrew scripture displayed in the book. As an “outsider” (tax collectors being generally rejected and scorned by the more devout Hebrews, see Luke 15:1-2, 18:10-11) his affinity for these scriptural links would not seem to play so prominent a role in his construction of the book.

Additionally, several believe that Matthew displays reliance upon Mark with two-thirds of the stories recorded said to be the same. This would be unnecessary for one who had spent time with Jesus and personally witnessed the events. The lack of any personal testimony to the events in the book also seems to argue for someone other than Matthew, who would have been present for several events (Ehrman 1997, 79).

Curiously, the claim is made that the author of Matthew relied upon Mark for several stories (as well as consulting Q and possibly M) and then condensed them. A problem exists with this position since normally, when seeking to determine sources and antecedents, the tendency is to prefer the shorter story over the longer.

As stated earlier, the author of Matthew displays a knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures that would be inconsistent with what would be presupposed of a tax collector. Coupled with this is the observation, mentioned earlier, that Matthew’s Greek does not read like a translation (Johnson 1986, 173). In fact, the Greek could be considered too smooth to be the work of a Palestinian Jew such as Matthew.

The nature of the Greek argues for an origin outside of Palestine where Greek, not Aramaic, would be the common language. With its similarities to the Greek of the Septuagint, the book provides a strong argument for a Jewish Christian, raised outside of Palestine (perhaps Syria), as its author (Harrington 1991, 3-10). Recent discoveries about the economic, political, military, and cultural integration of several Palestinian cities into the Hellenistic world may lead to a reevaluation of this argument (Harrington 1991, 10).

The author of the Gospel of Matthew can not be determined from either the internal or external evidence. While the traditional support for Matthean authorship is strong, it is not entirely convincing.

Could the author have been Matthew? Yes, even if it is considered unlikely. His supposed dependence upon Mark is not an insurmountable hurdle since Jesus, his life and teachings, are the subject of both. Since Matthew’s accounts are usually shorter than Mark's, some continue to argue that it is Mark who is dependent upon Matthew.

A knowledge of Hebrew Scriptures would be expected of one who was a disciple of Jesus since he customarily attended synagogue (Luke 4:16). The interaction with Roman authorities could have prepared him for composing in Greek and his work as a tax collector would have prepared him for the task of maintaining or arranging records of events.

No definitive conclusion can be reached other than the book was obviously written during the first century and could have been written during the lifetime of Matthew to whom it was ascribed.

Sources consulted:

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