

Chapter Summary: Matthew

A generation after Jesus lived, the Jews living in northern Israel and Syria who believed in Jesus as their Messiah faced a strong challenge. During the Jewish-Roman War in AD 66-70, most Jews in southern Israel moved north, safely away from the fighting around Jerusalem. But the subsequent destruction of the Jerusalem Temple raised troubling questions for Jews. Without the Temple, what was the future of Judaism? Where would they find their focus and identity? Groups led by the Pharisees argued that they should focus on a recommitment to the Law of Moses as interpreted in Israel's traditions. These Pharisees saw the followers of Jesus as a threat to this renewal, especially since Jesus offered new answers to their questions. So the Pharisees sought to expel Jesus' followers from the synagogues, cutting off their ties to the Jewish community.

The Gospel of Matthew was written to help these followers of Jesus meet this challenge and remain faithful. (Although later tradition identifies the author as the apostle Matthew, the book never names its author.) Matthew's message is that Jesus really is the culmination of all that came before. Hence, Matthew highlights various ways Jesus fulfills and continues the Jewish story, as told in the Old Testament.

First, Matthew presents a list of Jesus' ancestors, organizing it into three groups of fourteen generations each. The first group identifies Jesus as a descendant of Abraham, whose calling launched Israel's story. The second group confirms that Jesus is also the descendant of David, Israel's great king. The third group of fourteen begins with Israel's exile in Babylon, highlighting that Jesus has come "to save his people from their sins." (The list can also be viewed as six groups of seven, presenting Jesus as beginning the seventh seven, a special number of completeness in Judaism.) Matthew is presenting Jesus as the new beginning God's people have been waiting for.

Second, Matthew portrays Jesus as a "new Moses" by recording parallels between the two figures. As babies, they both escaped a pagan king who was trying to kill Hebrew boys. In addition, they both lived in Egypt for a time, brought the people instruction from God, and went up a mountain just before departing (Moses by death; Jesus by ascension), urging God's people to go into the land and live under God's reign.

Third, Matthew connects Jesus to Israel's story by organizing Jesus' life into five "books." This organizational pattern reflects the Torah - the five books of Moses. In each of these books, Matthew first describes what Jesus did and then presents what Jesus taught. Each teaching section transitions to the next book with some version of the phrase, "When Jesus had finished saying these things." Overall, this combination of action and teaching reveals the present expression of God's renewal in our world, which Matthew calls "the Kingdom of Heaven."

Matthew's five books explore five themes:

- The foundations of the Kingdom of Heaven are built on a deeper righteousness that leads people to act "as true children of your Father in heaven" (Matt 1-7).
- The mission of the Kingdom of Heaven demonstrates the mercy and compassion of God by bringing people freedom from disease and oppression (Matt 8-10).
- The mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven is that it begins in barely noticeable ways and advances through suffering and sacrifice (Matt 11-13).
- The family of the Kingdom of Heaven comprises a new community marked by forgiveness, love, and restoration (Matt 14-18).
- The destiny of the Kingdom of Heaven is to bear witness to Jesus, despite persecution, until the Good News about him has been proclaimed to all nations (Matt 19-25).

Matthew's story culminates with Jesus winning the decisive victory over God's great enemies— sin and death. In Israel's story, God's ancient rescue of his people from Egypt formed the pattern for all of God's subsequent acts of salvation. The Passover meal illustrated this pattern, and Matthew shows Jesus observing a Passover meal with His twelve disciples and instituting a new covenant right before His own sacrificial death and powerful resurrection. Jesus has brought a "new exodus" - a great, new rescue of His people. Jesus the Messiah has carried Israel's story to its decisive moment: when the Good News of God's Kingdom is announced to the whole world.