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A P O L O G E T I C S

C O M M E N T A R Y

O N T H E B I B L E

The Gospels and Acts

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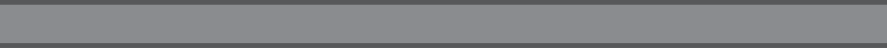
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INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLMAN APOLOGETICS COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE: GOSPELS AND ACTS

The primary purpose of the *Holman Apologetics Commentary on the Bible* is to equip readers to defend the reliability of Scripture and the historic evangelical understanding of its teachings. It is designed for use by general readers, though scholars will find it a probing and welcome resource as well. This commentary will show that much of the criticism lodged against Scripture is demonstrably incorrect. Our contributors are world-class biblical scholars whose publications have propelled them to the top of their field. In many cases they are able to answer challenges definitively, exposing error or bias in the approaches taken by Bible critics or cults. In other cases their suggested resolutions are tentative or even speculative. In all cases the contributors take the challenges seriously and seek to describe viable solutions that support faith and align with a high view of Scripture.

A secondary purpose of this commentary is to encourage awareness and discussion of Bible difficulties that are not commonly mentioned from the pulpit or even the seminary lectern. As an apologist and publisher, I am often struck by the lack of awareness about these issues. To unbelievers, this state of affairs is taken as evidence that we cling to faith uncritically or even against the evidence. But Christian ignorance about Bible difficulties is not altogether surprising, just as it is not surprising that non-believers are often ignorant of Bible-affirming solutions. Christians most often read their Bibles devotionally and vertically (from beginning to end of a book) rather than critically and horizontally (reading chronologically or by parallel accounts, such that one discovers how multiple authors treat the same event). Even the finest seminary education typically leaves graduates uninitiated in some of the most important challenges to the reliability of the Bible.

Some may say that it is best not to trouble tranquil waters. If so many disciples and ministers are happily unaware of Bible difficulties, why stir the waters? One answer is that there are others who are eager to do the stirring for us, and would do so in hopes of convincing us that the Bible is unreliable. It is far better to face the difficulties with the aid of reliable guides who intend to bolster faith. Another answer is that we are called by God to be equipped. If what we evangelicals believe about the Bible is true, surely it can withstand unblinking examination. This does not mean we will sit in judgment over the Word of God. Rather, it means we will not shirk from engaging challenges to its accuracy and authority. Bible readers of all kinds—whether they be believers or unbelievers—deserve the best answers that can be offered in response to questions, doubts, and concerns about the Bible’s reliability.

For all of the above reasons, this commentary provides a faith-affirming context for exploring Bible difficulties. It is our hope that by reading this volume, Christians

will be better equipped to give a reason for their hope (1 Pet 3:15), and that skeptics will be struck by the extent to which we can defend the reliability of the biblical accounts.

Baseline Assumptions in this Commentary

The divine inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture are baseline convictions for this commentary. It is commonly said that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy must rest on biblical testimony rather than an inductive study of all the data points presently available to us, for (1) inerrancy applies to the original manuscripts, all of which are lost, and (2) inerrancy cannot be shown to be the necessary conclusion of inductive study of manuscript, literary, scientific, or historical evidences. For this reason, this commentary does not try to prove inerrancy, but instead operates within that conviction and makes a case for biblical reliability in light of evidences currently available.

Each author writes in accordance with what can be called the *concurus* model of inspiration. This model denies that God dictated the biblical writings (such that the authors were mere automatons whose mind and will were arrested and deployed robotically in the service of God), and instead affirms in fullness the genuine participation of God, the human author, and any editor who played a role in shaping the final form of the text, with the result that the Bible is God's infallible Word given through human authors. Given such origins for the biblical texts, it is no surprise that the Bible reflects literary forms and standards that were common to the ancient context. The Bible did not descend from heaven, a timeless text without historical and human contexts. Rather, Scripture originated through the work and will of both God and human authors (e.g., Luke 1:1–4), with God providentially and miraculously ensuring that the received text was his true and reliable word to humanity (e.g., 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21).

Each of our authors holds to Markan priority, the theory that says the Gospel of Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke both made extensive use of Mark's text when composing their own accounts. Evidence for Markan priority is briefly discussed in the introductions to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but mostly our authors assume rather than argue for Markan priority. In this they stand with the clear and longstanding consensus in Gospels scholarship.

Another key conviction that informs each of our authors involves the distinction between *ipsissima vox* (the very voice) and *ipsissima verba* (the very words). This is the difference between approximate quotation (*vox*) and precise quotation (*verba*). Contributors to this commentary believe that the Bible often and properly reflects *vox* rather than *verba*. Elements of the case for *vox* include . . .

- translation from Aramaic or Hebrew (the languages Jesus and most Jews would have spoken) to Greek rules out genuine *verba*, for no two languages correspond exactly; if *verba* must be qualified, we have *vox* instead of *verba*,

- the authors significantly condensed the events they narrated (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount can be read in a few minutes, but Jesus' preaching session would have been much longer),
- parallel accounts show variance of quotation that cannot be accounted for simply by noting aspects of the translation process,
- the variance of quotation often falls into conformity with themes and emphases found elsewhere in the author's work(s), and which are to greater or lesser extents distinct from the themes and emphases of the other Gospel writers,
- *vox* was the standard, universally accepted approach taken in ancient history writing,
- *vox* best fits with the *concursum* model of biblical inspiration, meaning the human authors wrote in accordance with the regular approach to history writing, which allowed them to convey the meaning or essence of statements and teachings and not suffer under an obligation to convey such things without any condensing or editing.

Models for Inerrancy and Apologetics

The authors of this volume do not discuss the debate about inductive versus deductive approaches to biblical inerrancy, and neither do they involve themselves in points of dispute between presuppositional and evidentialist approaches to apologetics. Instead, using the tools that are common to NT studies, they attempt to make a case for the truth and reliability of biblical texts that are seen as problematic. They also give attention to verses that offer positive evidence for the truth of the Bible, as for instance Luke's disclosure about his purpose and methodology in Luke 1:1–4.

Errors Commonly Made by Critics of the Biblical Text

Readers of the biblical text who do not hold to the inspiration and truthfulness of Scripture often state that they are at an advantage over believing readers. They see themselves as objective in the reading task, able to see the merely human origins and the fallibility of the biblical writings, whereas believers are thought to be hopelessly biased, like a mother who fails to note the shortcomings of her child. Surely evangelicals should admit that there is some truth to the charge that we may read in a biased way, and yet the unbelieving reader brings his or her own biases to the text, in many cases ruling out the best-supported conclusions.

A careful reading of this commentary reveals that critics commonly make the same mistakes over and over again when they argue that a given biblical text is errant or stands in contradiction to another biblical text. For example, critics often . . .

- fail properly to account for literary and/or historical contexts,
- miss hermeneutical (interpretational) signals about how the text should be read,
- assume that silence in one account equals contradiction to the non-silence in a parallel account,

- assume that variation in detail between two or more accounts necessarily entails contradiction,
- show unwarranted preference for non-biblical accounts,
- show an exaggerated suspicion of the biblical accounts,
- assume a Bible book's borrowing of ideas that pre-dated its composition,
- fail to distinguish *ipsissima vox* from *ipsissima verba*,
- operate as if only *ipsissima verba* is an appropriate authorial approach for texts inspired by God,
- read into the text concepts or meanings that are alien to the biblical worldview,
- assume that Scripture is obligated to speak from a God's-eye, omniscient perspective,
- fail to allow the biblical authors to telescope, condense, or reshape events—approaches that are commonly accepted in ancient secular writers of history,
- disallow biblical authors to stay true to history and yet convey favored themes or tailor their accounts for their specific audiences,
- fail to acknowledge that throughout history eyewitness accounts have been deemed trustworthy even when variances are present (and variances are *always* present),
- fail to allow thematic rather than chronological approaches to ordering historical narratives,
- demand a level of precision that was foreign to ancient historiography,
- insist that the *sitz im leben* (“situation in life”) of the author biases his reporting of past events,
- incorrectly expect that the Bible should be literarily distinct from non-biblical writings,
- fail to see that variations in parallel accounts actually commend the truthfulness of the accounts, for the variations indicate that the authors did not collude with one another to support a false story,
- overlook the fact that Jesus would certainly have duplicated significant teachings and acts in various towns, leading to accounts that are similar but genuinely distinct.

Harmonization

Throughout church history it has been popular to attempt harmonizations between parallel Bible accounts. To greater or lesser extents, this project aims to show that apparently disparate Bible accounts really are saying the same thing after all, or that their distinct claims are compatible rather than contradictory. In its extreme form, the harmonization project can lead to a sort of *déjà vu*, where some events or statements occur repeatedly and unnaturally, though with minor variation. For instance, some have said that there were four different placards hanging above Jesus' head during his crucifixion. The basis for this claim is that each of the four Gospels quotes the placard differently (Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19). The contortions of this approach risk making a mockery of the biblical text

as well as the interpretive task. Significantly, many extreme critics of the Bible have Christian fundamentalist backgrounds that led them to attempt airtight harmonizations of variant biblical accounts. Upon realizing the futility of the maximalist harmonization approach, they gave up on biblical reliability rather than giving up on the faulty approach that led to their disillusionment.

This commentary seeks to avoid the extremes of unchecked harmonization, while exploring harmonization where it seems legitimate to do so. We presuppose the compatibility of accounts that do clearly purport to cover the same historical event, though we make provision for freedoms reasonably given to the narrators.

Finally, no attempt is made to harmonize the suggested solutions offered by the four authors of this commentary. You will find that they are in substantial agreement, but in some cases they favor different solutions—solutions that may not be compatible. We feel this is a sign of strength for this commentary, for it reflects the true conditions of evangelical engagement on the challenges to biblical reliability. We are not all convinced of the same solutions, but we stand in agreement on the conclusion that the Bible can be trusted.

The Gospels and Acts

The four canonical Gospels are noteworthy both for their agreement about Jesus' person, life, and works, but also for their variation of detail. Exemplifying the unity of their teachings is the fact that the early church embraced all four testimonies and did not seek to edit them into greater conformity, and that throughout church history leading Christian intellectuals have accepted as inspired and true all four Gospel accounts, seeing no cause to reject one or more of them for lack of agreement. Numerous examples could be cited to exemplify the variation in detail between the Gospels and Acts. For instance, only Matthew and Luke have anything to say about Jesus' birth and earliest years, and the differences between their accounts are striking and in some cases they are not obviously compatible. Jonathan Pennington, Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has accurately (and boldly) commented on the differences between the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke: "Despite our conflation of all these events at the annual church Christmas pageant, these stories do not in fact overlap at all. If Jesus did not appear as the named figure in both of these accounts, one would never suspect they were stories about the same person" (2012, 56).

John places a temple cleansing in the early portion of Jesus' ministry, whereas the other Gospels (the Synoptics: Matthew, Mark, and Luke) place a temple cleansing at the end. Are we to understand that Jesus performed essentially the same task twice or even three times, or are we to infer that John or the Synoptics felt free to shift this one-time event for purposes we can only guess at? Reading Luke 24 in isolation from Acts 1, a reader would conclude that Jesus ascended to heaven within 24 hours of his resurrection. Conversely, reading Acts 1 in isolation from Luke 24 would invariably lead one to understand that 40 days intervened between

these events. How are we to relate these two accounts, apparently written by the same author? These are the kinds of questions that arise when readers are presented with multiple accounts of the same events, and this commentary will offer suggestions for making sense of the differences.

The Textual Basis for this Commentary

The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) forms the textual basis of this commentary. The HCSB adopts a translation approach known as optimal equivalence. The intended outcome is that the translation is always true to the meaning of the biblical manuscripts (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), and yet is expressed in accordance with modern speech patterns. The authors sometimes comment on translation decisions made by the HCSB and other Bible translations, and at a few points you will see how this has bearing on apologetics issues.

Format of this Commentary

This is not a verse-by-verse commentary. The authors were provided an index that identified verses known to be relevant to the topics of apologetics and biblical reliability. They restricted their comments to these verses, plus any others that they recognized as germane to the aims of this project.

Typically, each commentary note begins by stating the challenge or challenges regarding the text at hand. We attempt to state the case in all its potency, as a critic would state it. This approach takes seriously the critical viewpoint and helps ensure that the reader feels the full weight of the challenge. Stating the challenge in an attenuated form, or stating only the weakest elements of the challenge, would rig the outcome and fail truly to interact with those who lodge complaints against the believer's viewpoint.

The Contributors

I want to thank our contributors for their boldness in taking on this project. There is inherent risk in offering solutions to serious challenges against the Bible's reliability. Will you have inadvertently supported unbelief if your answers seem insufficient? What if some of the topics you engage are not exactly in line with your expertise? Is it really profitable to focus so much on the difficulties? These and other concerns could have kept them away, but Andreas Köstenberger, Craig Evans, Darrell Bock, and Michael Wilkins accepted the challenge and provided world-class responses to some of the greatest challenges that can be lodged against the reliability of Scripture. If you read the material that follows, I believe you will agree with me when I say that they have done us all a tremendous service.

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APOLOGETICS COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Matthew tells the story of the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth. Judging from citations found in early Christian writers, Matthew was the most widely read and frequently used of the four Gospels in the formative years of the church. There are many reasons for its popularity, but one of the primary reasons why this Gospel is so important is because of its verification that Jesus is recognized as the long-awaited Messiah, the prophesied fulfillment of God's promise of true peace, deliverance, salvation, and new life in the kingdom of God for all of humanity, both Jew and Gentile.

Authorship

Widely recognized features of the first Gospel include its Jewish distinctives and Gentile interests. The person responsible for penning this Gospel apparently had both groups in view, which intimates that the author was acquainted with issues that were important to both Jews and Gentiles. This directs us to ascertain the identity of the author. As we open our modern translations we usually find the title, "Matthew," or "The Gospel According to Matthew," as a heading introducing the first chapter. But many longtime readers are surprised to learn that all four Gospels are technically anonymous. The titles now assigned to each one were most likely not headings to the original manuscript. Instead they were added later, to copies of the original manuscripts, in order to distinguish the four Gospels from one another. Moreover, none of the Evangelists (shorthand for authors of the Gospels) state his name explicitly within the text to identify himself as the author.

From this, many modern scholars deduce that the identities of the authors of the four Gospels were never known, that they circulated for decades as anonymous documents, and only much, much later were assigned authorial appellations by formal ecclesiastical councils in an attempt to give apostolic authority to these documents to counteract rival churches and their "Gospels."

Regarding the first Gospel in particular, many modern scholars suggest that the author was decades removed from the apostle Matthew. They concede that Matthew may have been the original inspiration for the Gospel that now bears his name, but they go on to suggest that the final form of the Gospel was the work of a Jewish Christian who wrote much later and was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus (e.g., Luz 2007, 58–60). Or some suggest that the author was a Gentile Christian well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, but whose mistakes about the Hebrew world (cf. 21:2 and 21:7) indicate an outsider's knowledge (e.g., Crosby 2002, 16–17).

However, the true identities of the authors of the four Gospels were never in question historically. From the very earliest witnesses we find the author's names associated with each Gospel. The anonymity of the Gospels themselves is not surprising since the Evangelists were not writing letters to far-off church communities. New Testament letters written by Paul, Peter, and John included identification of both the author and the addressees because it was necessary to identify all parties and the purpose of the letter since the two parties were not present to one another. Quite distinct from this, most likely the Evangelists were compiling Gospel stories for churches in which they were active participants and leaders. They may even have stood among the assembly and read their Gospel account aloud after completing it. To attach their names as authors would have been unnecessary because their audiences obviously knew their identity. Additionally, the Evangelists may have felt it was inappropriate to attach their names to their Gospel accounts since their primary intention was not to assert their own leadership or authority, but to record for their audiences the matchless story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Earliest citations by church fathers: Given the anonymity of the Gospels, we must look to the records of church history to find evidence for their authorship. The earliest church tradition unanimously ascribes the first Gospel to Matthew, the tax collector whom Jesus called to be one his original 12 disciples.

While the attribution of a specific text to Matthew by name is not found until Apollinaris of Hierapolis (c. 175), the literary influence of the first Gospel upon Christian writings outside the NT is unmistakable from the earliest days of the church. And further, the attribution of the authorship of the first Gospel to Matthew the apostle goes back to the earliest surviving patristic testimonies, and there is no patristic evidence that anyone else was ever proposed as the author.

Probably written toward the end of the first century or the beginning of the second (Ehrman 2003, 411), scholars have traditionally understood the *Didache* to demonstrate direct knowledge of the first Gospel, especially the Sermon on the Mount and the Olivet Discourse (e.g., quoting the Lord's Prayer: cf. *Didache* 8.2; Matt 6:9–11). Indeed, the *Didache* appears to draw only upon Matthew, and perhaps Luke, among all of the NT writings (Holmes 2007, 338), although NT themes abound.

A few years later a letter of Pseudo-Barnabas cites the first Gospel as divinely inspired Scripture (*Barnabas* 4.14 [Matt 22:14]). The first explicit mention of this Gospel dates to the third decade of the second century, by Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor (c. 135), and then somewhat later in the second century by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul (c. 175).

Papias lived approximately from 60 to 130, and Irenaeus claimed that he was a hearer of the apostle John, and later was a companion of Polycarp (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4). Papias was quoted and endorsed by the church historian Eusebius (c. 325) as saying, "Matthew for his part compiled/collected (*sunetaxato*) the oracles (*to logia*) in the Hebrew [Aramaic] dialect (*Hebraidi dialekto*) and every person

translated/interpreted (*hermeneusen*) them as he was able” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16).

Although there have been skeptics, there seems to be little question that Ignatius (who died around 110) knew and used Matthew as his primary Gospel (Schoedel 1985, 9). While he does not quote extensively from the text, he uses it as a platform from which he launched his theological and ethical arguments (Jefford 2005, 44–47). For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius writes, “Let no one be deceived. Anyone who is not inside the sanctuary lacks the bread of God. For if the prayer of one or two persons has ‘such’ (*tosautēn*) power, how much more will that of the bishop and the entire church?” (Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians* 5:2). Massaux (1990, 87) contends that since there is no mention in the preceding context of any “such” power, when Ignatius uses the demonstrative he assumed it was familiar to his readers. Yet it is stated only in Matthew 18:19–20 that the power of the prayer of two or three persons gathered together is efficacious, which makes it likely that Ignatius is arguing from the authority of Matthew’s Gospel.

Irenaeus was born in Asia Minor in approximately 135, studied under Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, and according to tradition died as a martyr around 200. In one of his five monumental books against the Gnostic heresies (c. 175), Irenaeus states, “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” (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1).

These early church leaders either knew the apostolic community directly or were taught by those associated with the apostles, and so were directly aware of the origins of the Gospels. While the full meaning of their statements is still open to discussion, no competing tradition assigning the first Gospel to any other author has survived, if any ever existed. Subsequent authors (e.g., Hippolytus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Novatian) cite the Gospel of Matthew regularly as inspired Scripture on the same level as the OT (Simonetti 2001, xxxvii).

We cannot overlook the significance of the testimony of the early church fathers to the apostolic authorship of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. All of the evidence uniformly supports the belief that Matthew (the tax collector turned disciple), Mark (the companion of Peter and Paul), and Luke (Paul’s “beloved physician”) were the authors of the Gospels attributed to them. It is difficult to conceive why Christians as early as the second century would ascribe these otherwise anonymous Gospels to three such unlikely candidates unless they knew with certainty that they were indeed the authors. Mark and Luke were not among Jesus’ 12 apostles, and so it is unlikely that they would be put forward as authors unless there was good evidence of their authorship. Worse still, Mark is best known for abandoning Paul during a mission (Acts 13:13; cf. 15:37–40), and Luke is particularly obscure, being mentioned by name only once in the NT (Col 4:14). Matthew, although an apostle, is also best known for a negative characteristic—his unconscionable past as a tax collector (Matt 9:9–13). Tax collectors were considered traitorous to their nation. If

the early church was motivated to invent authorship for the Synoptic Gospels, it is clear that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the last men they would have selected.

In contrast, the authors of the apocryphal Gospels consistently picked better-known and exemplary figures (such as Philip, Peter, James, Bartholomew, or Mary) and passed them off as the authors in a bid to have their writings taken more seriously. Even Thomas, despite his famous doubts about Jesus' resurrection (John 20:25), seems a more likely person to whom to attribute a Gospel than Matthew, Mark, or Luke because Thomas ultimately made such a profound declaration of faith in the risen Jesus (cf. John 20:28). This is consistent with the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas purporting to be written by the apostle Thomas. False ascription of the first Gospel to a relatively obscure apostle such as Matthew seems unlikely until a later date, when canonization of apostles was common.

Conclusion: Some modern scholars deny that Matthew was author of the Gospel of Matthew on the basis of their adoption of the theory that the Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel to be written and that the authors of the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke borrowed significantly from the Gospel of Mark. They feel it is unlikely that as an apostle and eyewitness Matthew would choose to depend so heavily on a document written by a man who was not an apostle and who witnessed only a portion of Jesus' ministry (Mark). But if Matthew did have access to Mark's Gospel, he would have known that Peter's apostolic reminiscences lay behind Mark's text, ensuring that Mark's Gospel was reliable and a ready source for reinforcing his own reminiscences about the life and works of Jesus Christ. As the apostles came to recognize that authoritative written accounts of Jesus' life and ministry were needed to ensure the future accuracy of the church's beliefs about Jesus, it was natural of them to consult other known, trusted Gospels to supplement and complement their own Gospels. Consulting other authoritative accounts would give even greater apostolic weight to their accounts.

Another argument against Matthew as the author of the Gospel of Matthew comes from dating, which we will discuss more below. Many reconstructions of the first Gospel's life-setting (*Sitz im Leben*), often based on the rigid redaction criticism of the twentieth century, place it in the last decades of the first century (e.g., AD 80–100), with the temple destroyed, the church scattered, and the church estranged from Israel. Such a late date often then excludes Matthew as a possible author since he would not have lived this long (cf. Luz 2007, 45–60).

However, it is unnecessary to base the primary purposes, themes, and theology in a late reconstruction of Matthew's community. If Matthew can accurately recall and record events from Jesus' life and ministry, and good memory is a characteristic of oral cultures, then he is primarily concerned to record the life-setting of Jesus, not the life-setting of the church for which he writes. While few doubt that Matthew writes with an eye on the needs of his community, which is at least one of the Fourth Evangelist's purposes for writing (John 20:30–31), that is a secondary horizon for Matthew. Matthew writes primarily to give to his community an accurate record of

Jesus' words and deeds, which is his first horizon. This is the stated and explicit purpose for Luke writing his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4), and reveals a significant purpose for the writing of each of the Gospels.

Therefore, with the unanimous testimony of the early church to the authorship of the first Gospel, and the above charges answered satisfactorily, it is the position of this commentary that Matthew, apostle and eyewitness to the life and works of Jesus, is the author of the Gospel that has borne his name throughout church history.

Date and Destination

Date: No precise date for the writing of Matthew is known, although scholars have used Matthew's record of Jesus' prophecy of the overthrow of Jerusalem (24:1–28) to indicate that the Gospel must have been written after Jerusalem's destruction in 70 (e.g., Saldarini 1994). However, such a conclusion is necessary only if one denies Jesus the ability to predict the future and Matthew the ability to record this prophecy. Since the early church father Irenaeus (c. 175) indicates that Matthew wrote his Gospel while Paul and Peter were still alive (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1), the traditional dating has usually settled on the late 50s or early 60s. Matthew tells us that as of the time he writes the "Blood Field" in Jerusalem continued to be called by that name (27:8), showing his continual connection with conditions in Palestine and hinting that this is prior to the devastation in Jerusalem at 70 (cf. Blomberg 1992, 41–42; Carson 2010, 43–45; France 2007, 18–19; Gundry 1994, 599–609).

Provenance: The highly influential church at Antioch in Syria, with its large Jewish Christian and Gentile contingents (cf. Acts 11:19–26; 13:1–3), has often been recognized as the place from which Matthew wrote and the church to which he wrote. This is confirmed in part because of the first Gospel's influence upon Ignatius the bishop of Antioch and upon the *Didache*. But Matthew's message was equally relevant for the fledgling church throughout the ancient world, and appears to have been disseminated fairly quickly.

Sources (Oral and Written)

The four Gospels are complex documents that comprise a mixture of shared and unique stories and sayings of Jesus. Such is what we would expect of authors who write at different times and places and with similar and yet distinct purposes. As an eyewitness of the events of Jesus Messiah's life and ministry and as an apostle in the early church, Matthew was in a unique position and had significant concerns that impelled the writing of his Gospel account. At least three issues help us to understand the sources behind the writing of Matthew's Gospel.

Oral tradition: Matthew was a part of the apostolic community that was centered in Jerusalem for up to 20 years, from the establishment of the church at Pentecost (c. AD 30) until the Jerusalem council (c. AD 49). During this time the oral tradition of Jesus' life and ministry developed, which included the basic

preaching, teaching, and interpretation of the gospel. We may refer to this as the standardized, fixed oral tradition. It was standardized, because it was told over and over again by the passionate new church. It became fixed because any errant variation would quickly become corrected by the eyewitness apostles. On the other hand, there was freedom to vary the basic story line for the needs of a given audience any time the story was told. For example, if giving the story to Hellenistic Jews, the story would vary. It would vary if told to orthodox Jews. It would vary if told to a God-fearing Gentile. And it would vary if told to children, or to old people. This was an oral culture, where telling stories was the stock of daily life. As this developed over 10–20 years, each person telling the story, especially the apostles, would have been able to retell the entire account of Jesus' life.

Content: When we compare the content of Matthew's Gospel to the other Synoptics, we find the following statistics. Matthew has 18,293 words. Approximately 20 percent of those words (3,102) represent content that is found only in Matthew's Gospel, the so-called M tradition (M stands for Matthew). Approximately 10 percent relates to content found shared between Matthew and Mark. Approximately 45 percent relates to content found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which is the so-called "triple tradition." And approximately 25 percent of Matthew's verses relate to content that is shared between Matthew and Luke and not found in Mark, which is the so-called "Q" tradition (Q stands for the German word *Quelle*, "source").

Sources: The most widely held theory for understanding Matthew's sources is that they included Mark, Matthew's own special material (M), and traditions often designated as Q. The priority of Mark is advocated primarily because it seems easier to account for Matthew using and expanding upon Mark rather than Mark using and condensing Matthew. While some posit that Q was a written source tradition, increasingly scholars understand Q to be simply those places in the developing traditions of the church (oral and written) that Matthew and Luke drew upon and are not found in Mark. The differences in the placement, structure, and wording of this shared "Q" material does not suggest that Matthew or Luke used each other's Gospel, but rather that they shared a common tradition, one that was probably both oral and written.

However, the earliest church fathers concluded that Matthew was the source that Mark and/or Luke drew upon, and this view has seen a recent revival. In that light, we may urge caution when advocating one or the other theory of Matthew's sources.

Establishment in the Canon

We have seen above that the earliest church traditions that cite or allude to Matthew's Gospel accepted it as an authentic and authoritative Gospel. It never had any of the debates surrounding it that some NT books had, such as Hebrews. Therefore, from the time of its origin the Gospel of Matthew was accepted as an inspired, authoritative writing, and regarded as Scripture. F. F. Bruce states

categorically, “There can be no doubt . . . of the canonical form of the Gospel of Matthew, nor yet of its canonical position” (Bruce 1988, 289).

Genre

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called “Gospels.” In first-century Greek, the word “gospel” (*euangelion*) referred to a message from a king or a favorable report about a significant event. The Greek translation of the OT (LXX) uses various forms of the word with the sense of “to announce or bring good news” (*euangelizō*, Isa 40:9; cf. 52:7; 61:1) of a time of joy, peace, and salvation through the intervention of God.

Jesus identified his own activities and teachings as “good news” (e.g., Matt 11:5; Mark 1:14, 15) and called people to make sacrifices for his sake and for that of the good news (Mark 8:35; 10:29). The rest of the NT, outside the Evangelists, focuses its attention on the death and resurrection of Jesus as containing the “good news” (e.g., Rom 1:15–16; cf. 1:1–4). All of Jesus’ life and ministry was seen in the context of his death and resurrection. The application of the term “good news” to the written records of the life and ministry of Jesus by both the original authors and by early Christians is an important clue toward understanding the genre of these writings. They are not biographies (*bioi*) in the formal sense of the word, but proclamations of the person and events that make up the good news that God has intervened in history in order to bring salvation to his people. As such, “Gospel” is a genre of writing that is similar to ancient biographies, but vastly different as well (cf. Alexander 2006, 13–33).

Matthew’s Gospel has been a pivotal book throughout church history to help the church to understand the relationship between Old and New Testaments. Placed first in the earliest collections of the NT canon, Matthew’s Gospel is a natural bridge between the OT and NT. Matthew demonstrates repeatedly that the person and ministry of Jesus fulfilled OT hopes and prophecies. Matthew begins with the “fulfillment” of the messianic genealogy in the birth of Jesus (1:1–17), and then goes on to demonstrate the fulfillment in Jesus’ life and ministry of various OT prophecies and themes (e.g., 1:22–23; 2:4–5, 15, 17, 23, etc.) and the fulfillment of the OT Law (5:17–48). The early church quite likely placed Matthew first in the NT canon precisely because of its value as a bridge between the testaments.

Matthew, the Person

The list of the 12 disciples in Matthew’s Gospel refers to Matthew as “Matthew the tax collector,” which harks back to the incident when Jesus called Matthew to be his disciple while Matthew was sitting in the tax office (cf. 9:9; 10:3). When recounting the call, the first Gospel refers to him as “Matthew” (9:9), while Mark’s Gospel refers to him as “Levi the son of Alphaeus” (Mark 2:14), and Luke’s Gospel refers to him as “Levi” (Luke 5:27). Speculation surrounds the reason for the variation. For example, Bauckham (2006, 108–12) argues that it is unlikely that one man

had two common Jewish names and concludes that the unknown author of the first Gospel knew Matthew was a tax collector, as was Levi, and so collated the material regarding them. However, a more likely suggestion is that this tax collector had two names, Matthew and Levi, either from birth or from the time of his conversion. For example, Hagner (1993, 237–38) suggests that the name “Matthew” was given to Levi after his conversion. On the other hand, Carson (2010, 224, 262–63) leans toward “Matthew Levi” being a double name given to him from birth, since he does not see any evidence for “Matthew” being a Christian name. Some have attempted to show that Levi was not one of the Twelve, and therefore different from Matthew, but France argues that this is unwarranted speculation, since the circumstance of the calling is the same in Matthew and Mark-Luke (2007, 352).

The name Levi may be an indication that he was from the tribe of Levi, and therefore was familiar with Levitical practices (Albright and Mann 1971, clxxvii–clxxviii, clxxxiii–clxxxiv). Mark’s record of the calling refers to him as “the son of Alphaeus” (Mark 2:14), which some have understood to mean that he was the brother of the apostle “James the son of Alphaeus” (cf. Mark 3:18). But since the other pairs of brothers are specified to be brothers and are linked as such, it is unlikely that Matthew-Levi and James were brothers.

Matthew Levi was called to follow Jesus while he was sitting in the tax collector’s booth. This booth was probably located on one of the main trade highways near Capernaum, collecting tolls for Herod Antipas from the commercial traffic traveling through this area. Matthew immediately followed Jesus and arranged a banquet for Jesus at his home, to which were invited a large crowd of tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:10–11; Luke 5:29–30). Since tax collectors generally were fairly wealthy and were despised by the local populace (cf. Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1–10), Matthew’s calling and response were completely out of the ordinary and required nothing short of a miraculous turn-around in this tax collector’s life.

Little else is known of Matthew Levi, except for the widely attested tradition that he is the author of the Gospel that now bears his name. As a tax collector he would have been trained in secular scribal techniques, and as a Galilean Jewish Christian he would have been able to interpret the life of Jesus from the perspective of the OT expectations (cf. France 2007, 10–15). Eusebius said that Matthew first preached to “Hebrews” and then to “others,” including places such as Persia, Parthia, and Syria (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3:24.6). The traditions are mixed regarding Matthew’s death, with some saying that he died a martyr’s death, while others saying that he died a natural death.

APOLOGETICS COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

MATTHEW 1:1–16

The historical record of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham:

- ² Abraham fathered Isaac,
Isaac fathered Jacob,
Jacob fathered Judah and his brothers,
- ³ Judah fathered Perez and Zerah by Tamar,
Perez fathered Hezron,
Hezron fathered Aram,
- ⁴ Aram fathered Amminadab,
Amminadab fathered Nahshon,
Nahshon fathered Salmon,
- ⁵ Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab,
Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth,
Obed fathered Jesse,
- ⁶ and Jesse fathered King David.
Then David fathered Solomon by Uriah's wife,
- ⁷ Solomon fathered Rehoboam,
Rehoboam fathered Abijah,
Abijah fathered Asa,
- ⁸ Asa fathered Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat fathered Joram,
Joram fathered Uzziah,
- ⁹ Uzziah fathered Jotham,
Jotham fathered Ahaz,
Ahaz fathered Hezekiah,
- ¹⁰ Hezekiah fathered Manasseh,
Manasseh fathered Amon,
Amon fathered Josiah,
- ¹¹ and Josiah fathered Jechoniah and his brothers
at the time of the exile to Babylon.
- ¹² Then after the exile to Babylon
Jechoniah fathered Shealtiel,
Shealtiel fathered Zerubbabel,
- ¹³ Zerubbabel fathered Abiud,
Abiud fathered Eliakim,
Eliakim fathered Azor,
- ¹⁴ Azor fathered Zadok,
Zadok fathered Achim,
Achim fathered Eliud,
- ¹⁵ Eliud fathered Eleazar,
Eleazar fathered Matthan,
Matthan fathered Jacob,

- ¹⁶ and Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary,
who gave birth to Jesus who is called the Messiah.

The historical record of Jesus Christ (1:1): To modern eyes, such a detailed genealogy as this, spanning many centuries, might seem contrived. Did the Jews really track their ancestry so carefully? Knowledge of genealogies was important in ancient times, and played an especially significant role in Israel. The OT reveals that the Jews kept extensive genealogies, which served generally as a record of a family's descendants, but their significance extended beyond simply knowing family ties. Genealogies established a person's heritage, inheritance, legitimacy, and rights, ensuring that property went to the right person (cf. Johnson 1988).

Matthew likely drew upon some OT genealogies (e.g., Gen 4:17–18; 5:3–32; 10:1–32; 46:8–27; 1 Chr 1:34; 2:1–15; 3:1–24; Ruth 4:12–22; Nolland 1996, 115–22), suggests that he studied the Genesis genealogies and patterned his own after them), and he uses similar wording (cf. Matt 1:2: *Abraam egennēsen ton Isaak* with 2 Chr 1:34 LXX: *egennēsen Abraam ton Isaak*). For the listing of individuals after Zerubbabel, when the OT ceases, Matthew probably used records that have since been lost. Historical sources such as Josephus indicate that extensive genealogical records were extant during the first century, and that records for some political and priestly families' were kept in the temple (e.g., Josephus, *Life* 6; *Against Apion* 1.28–56). Later rabbinic tradition tried to establish the descent from David of a near contemporary to Jesus, Rabbi Hillel, through a genealogical scroll that was purportedly found in Jerusalem (*Genesis Rabbah* 98:8; *j. Ta'anit* 4:2). The official extrabiblical genealogies were lost with the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD 70, yet private genealogies were retained elsewhere.

Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (1:1): Messiah's lineage was of particular importance. Matthew's Jewish audience would have caught the significance of the heading with Jesus' name and ancestry. The expressions "Son of David" and "Son of Abraham" stand in apposition to "Jesus Christ," indicating that both titles are a further explanation of Jesus' identity.

Commonly a person had a single personal name, which often carried religious or social significance. Matthew wrote about "Jesus" (Gk *Iēsous*), which is his historical, commonly used name. The name is *Yeshua* in Hebrew ("Yahweh saves"; cf. Neh 7:7), a shortened form of Joshua (*yehoshua*), "Yahweh is salvation" (Exod 24:13), and will come to have profound notions of salvation associated with it in Jesus (cf. 1:21; cf. also Gerhardsson 1999, 16–17).

"Christ" (Gk *Christos*) is a title derived from the Hebrew *mashiach* ("anointed"), which harks back to David as the anointed king of Israel. The term came to be associated with the promise of an "anointed one" who would be Israel's light of hope. God had promised David through the prophet Nathan that David's house and throne would be established forever (2 Sam 7:11b–16), a promise that is now seen as fulfilled in Jesus as the Anointed One, or Messiah.

Son of David is an important expression in Matthew’s Gospel (9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; 22:42, 45). Matthew uses the name of the great king 17 times, more than any other NT book. King David was the revered conquering warrior of Israel’s history. “Son of David” expresses a promised figure who would perpetuate David’s throne, thereby pointing to Messiah’s lineage and royal expectation (see 2 Sam 7:11b–16). The title alludes to the messianic hope of a restored kingdom that was seen to be a fulfillment of the divine promise to David.

But Jesus is also the “son of Abraham.” In tracing the ancestry not only to David, but also to Abraham, Matthew holds a light of hope to the entire world. The covenant God made with Abraham established Israel as a chosen people, but it also was a promise that his line would bless all nations (Gen 12:1–3; 22:18; see, e.g., Carroll 2000, 17–34; Erickson 2000, 35–51).

The pattern Matthew uses in detailing his genealogy gives clues to Jesus’ identity and ministry. He establishes the basic pattern in the first listing: “Abraham fathered Isaac” (1:2). This is in line with the typical OT wording, such as in the LXX rendering of 1 Chronicles 1:34: “Abraham fathered Isaac.” Throughout the rest of the genealogy the same pattern occurs 40 times, using the active voice of the verb *gennaō*, rendered “fathered” in the HCSB. This expression emphasizes the human descent of each generation, which paves the way for a dramatic change of construction in 1:16 where the passive voice occurs, by which Matthew will point to the divine origin of Jesus.

The ancestry of Jesus serves as an important key to interpreting Matthew’s writing. Matthew emphasizes the way in which Jesus’ ministry brought fulfillment of God’s covenant to the people of Israel (e.g., 10:6; 15:24), but also fulfillment of God’s promise to bring hope to all peoples (cf. 21:43; 28:19). This theme of promise to all nations becomes increasingly pronounced in Matthew’s Gospel, and will come to a climax in the concluding Great Commission (cf. 28:18–20).

King David (1:6): One of the most significant features of Matthew’s record is the emphasis on Jesus’ kingly lineage. David is not simply the son of Jesse as he is stated to be in Luke’s genealogy (Luke 3:31–32), but is David the king (Matt 1:6), an explicit emphasis upon royalty. From here Matthew maintains an emphasis upon kingship, using “king” 22 times, more than any other NT book (see 2:2; 27:11, 29, 37, 42). This is likewise emphasized by the contrast with King Herod and his son Archelaus (2:1–23), the mention of the king in the parable (22:1–13), and the Son of Man seated as King on the throne on judgment day (25:31–46).

Matthew traces Jesus’ genealogy through David’s son Solomon (1:6) who had succeeded his father as king of Israel, while Luke traces the line through David’s son Nathan (cf. 1:6; Luke 3:32; 2 Sam 5:14). Matthew demonstrates that the lineage that culminates in the birth of Jesus is the ruling royal pedigree. David’s greater Son will arrive with the birth of Jesus (cf. 22:41–46; 2 Sam 7:12–16; Pss 89:19–29, 35–37; 110:1–7; 132:11–12). We have here one of several basic differences between the genealogical record found in Matthew’s Gospel (1:2–17) and the one found in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 3:23–38). A list of differences includes:

First, Matthew gives a descending genealogy in the order of succession, with the earliest ancestor, Abraham, placed at the head and later generations placed in forward lines of descent, culminating in the birth of Jesus. This is the more common approach to genealogies in the OT (e.g., Gen 5:1–32). In contrast to Matthew, Luke gives an ascending form that reverses the order, starting with Jesus and tracing it backward to Adam (Luke 3:23–38; cf. Ezra 7:1–5). This reverse order is more commonly found in Greco-Roman genealogies.

Second, Matthew places special emphasis on the covenants made with Israel by tracing Jesus' lineage to David (1:6) and Abraham (1:2). Luke places special emphasis upon Jesus' relation to all of humanity and to God himself by tracing his lineage to “. . . Adam, son of God” (Luke 3:38).

Third, the genealogies include several different names after the Babylonian deportation. For example, Matthew follows the line through Jeconiah, Shealtiel, and Zerubbabel, while Luke follows the line through Neri, Shealtiel, and Zerubbabel.

Fourth, Matthew lacks several names that are found in Luke, likely to achieve literary symmetry for the purpose of memorization (see on Matt 1:17). The verb “fathered” (*gennaō*) is used in each link of Matthew's record of the genealogy, and is often used to indicate a more remote ancestor (e.g., grandfather or great-grandfather), not simply an immediate father.

Fifth, as mentioned above, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' kingly lineage more than Luke does.

Scholars give two basic explanations for the differences between the genealogies, although the variations are numerous. The first view emphasizes that Matthew gives Jesus' line through his father Joseph, while Luke gives Jesus' line through Mary. The second basic view proposes that both genealogies focus on Joseph, but for different purposes.

We are unable fully to account for the differences between the genealogies with the information we now possess, but it seems clear that Matthew intends to demonstrate Jesus' legal claim to the throne of David. David's greater Son, the anticipated Davidic messianic king, has arrived with the birth of Jesus (cf. 22:41–46; 2 Sam 7:12–16; Pss 89:19–29, 35–37; 110:1–7; 132:11–12). (See further comments at Luke 3:23–38, especially 3:31.)

Joram fathered Uzziah (1:8): Did Joram father Uzziah (Matt 1:8) or Ahaziah (1 Chr 3:11)? Matthew moves directly from Joram to Uzziah, omitting reference to Ahaziah (2 Kgs 8:25–26), Joash (also called Jehoash, 2 Kgs 12:1–3), and Amaziah (2 Kgs 14:1–4), who was the immediate biological father of Uzziah or Azariah (2 Kgs 14:21–22). Matthew may have patterned this section (1:6–11) after 1 Chronicles 3:10–14, because the genealogies in both Chronicles and Matthew omit several kings found in the narrative of the books of Kings and Chronicles. As in the listing from Abraham to David, names were omitted to make it uniform for ease of memorization (see on 1:17).

And Josiah fathered Jeconiah and his brothers (1:11): Matthew notes that Jesus is a descendant of Jeconiah, or Coniah, who in 1 Chronicles 3:16 is stated to be a descendant of Jehoiakim. Jeremiah 36:30 says, “Therefore, this is what the LORD says concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah: He will have no one to sit on David’s throne.” Since Jeconiah was a descendent of Jehoiakim, how do we understand Matthew’s account of Jesus’ lineage through the one about whom it was declared that there would be no descendent on David’s throne? With such a prophetic curse of Jeconiah and his offspring, we might assume this invalidates Jesus’ claim to David’s throne.

A way of resolving the difficulty is to recognize that the LXX at times uses the Greek name *Ioakim* for both Jehoiakim and his son Jehoiachin/Jeconiah (2 Kgs 24:6, 8, 12, 15; 25:27; Jer 52:31). Matthew’s reference to “Jeconiah and his brothers” may be a double entendre intended to cause the readers to think of the end of the Davidic rule in Jerusalem with Jehoiakim, and the ongoing history of David’s lineage with his son Jehoiachin. This would also help to establish the three-fold set of 14 generations that Matthew uses to structure the genealogy (see 1:17). If this is correct, then the expression “Jeconiah and his brothers” is an inclusive reference to the end of the Davidic rule with Jehoiakim, and the ongoing line of David with Jehoiachin. As with the expression Judah “and his brothers” (1:2), the reference to Jeconiah “and his brothers” is an inclusive reference to the entire covenant nation. But now the nation goes into exile and returns without a ruling king, and must await the arrival of the heir to the throne, Jesus Messiah.

In short, if Matthew followed Joseph’s legal claim to the throne, and Luke followed Mary’s biological claim to the throne, which includes Joseph’s legal claim as the adoptive heir of Heli, it helps explain how Matthew recognizes that the curse against Jeconiah does not invalidate the legal line. The curse would have prevented a natural, biological son from ascending to the throne, while the legal claim to the throne could apparently still come through Jeconiah’s line.

Matthan fathered Jacob, and Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary (1:15–16): A comparison with Luke’s account reveals a seeming discrepancy regarding Joseph’s lineage. Matthew recounts that “Matthan fathered Jacob, and Jacob fathered Joseph” (Matt 1:16), while Luke refers to “. . . Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat” (Luke 3:23–24). Here we must determine what both Evangelists meant to communicate about the identity of Joseph’s father—Jacob or Heli.

One plausible explanation may be found in understanding that Matthew traces Joseph’s biological line, which gives Jesus’ legal claim to the royal throne through David, his son Solomon, and his descendants, while Luke emphasizes Mary’s biological line, which also traces Jesus’ biological lineage to David, but through his son Nathan, who did not actually rule over Israel. The *status* of a Jew is determined from the mother, while all other things—such as tribal affiliation, priestly status, or *royalty*—depends upon the father’s lineage (see Ezra 10:1–44; Neh 10:28–30, which may stand behind the traditional expression, “If your mother is a Jew, you are a Jew; if your mother is a stranger, you are a stranger”; cf. “Jew,” *EJR*, 211). Therefore,

Matthew emphasizes Jesus' legal descent from David and Abraham, while Luke emphasizes Jesus' biological descent from David and Adam. However, when Luke states that Joseph is the son of Heli, it is possible that he indicates that Joseph is the legal heir of this side of the Davidic line also. If Mary had no brothers, then she was Heli's biological heir (cf. Num 27:1–11; 1 Chr 2:34–35), but it may be that Heli solidified the family inheritance by adopting Joseph as his son when Joseph married his daughter Mary (see Nolland 1989, 169–71; Bock 1994, 922–23). This practice occurred in other cases where a father had no physical sons as heirs (Ezra 2:61; Neh 7:63). If this is the case, then Heli is Mary's natural father and Joseph's adoptive father and father-in-law (often referred to as a father). (See further comments at Luke 3:23.)

Joseph the husband of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus (1:16): Matthew regularly displays intentional precision in his account of Jesus' earthly life and ministry in order to accentuate truths that are important for devotion and doctrine. When he comes to the listing of Jesus, Matthew says, “. . . and Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus” (1:16). The English obscures two important points that Matthew makes about Jesus in the Greek text.

First, behind the English word “who” stands a Greek feminine relative pronoun (*hēs*). The feminine gender of the relative pronoun points to Mary as the one from whom Jesus was born. The genealogy regularly emphasizes the male who fathers a child, but here Matthew shifts and delivers a precise statement about the relationship of Jesus to Joseph and Mary. Matthew establishes that Joseph is the legal father of Jesus, but emphasizes that Mary is the biological parent “who gave birth to Jesus,” preparing the reader for the announcement of the virgin birth by shifting attention from Joseph to Mary.

Second, the expression “was born” translates a verb (*gennaō*) that is in the passive voice (*egennēthē*) and gives further clarification about the origin of Jesus. As we noted earlier, from 1:2 through 1:16 there are 40 occurrences of the same verb. All the others are in the active voice (e.g., 1:2: “Abraham fathered” or “gave birth to” Israel), emphasizing the human action in fathering the child. But in 1:16 the verb is in the passive voice, where the subject, Mary, receives the action or is acted upon. By this Matthew specifies that it was not the sole action of Mary who gave birth, preparing the reader for the angelic announcement of divine action in Jesus' conception and birth (1:18–25). This is a fairly common construction in the NT, which many grammarians call a “divine passive,” where God is the unstated but assumed agent of action (BDF, 72 [§130.1]; Wallace 1996, 437). By way of contrast, Matthew uses another verb (*tiktō*) in the active voice where Mary is the *subject* who gives birth to Jesus (1:25).

By the use of the feminine form of the relative pronoun “who,” and by use of the passive form of the verb “was born,” Matthew stresses that Mary is the mother of Jesus, but that she was “acted upon” to give birth to the child. We see here a hint that Jesus' conception and birth are God's work. Later Matthew clarifies that Jesus'

conception was miraculous, brought about by the Spirit of God coming upon Mary (1:18–25). Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (1:1), but he is also the Son of God, Immanuel, “God is with us” (1:23).

14 generations . . . 14 generations . . . 14 generations (1:17): Matthew builds his genealogy into three groups of 14. Does such intentional stylization (inspired most likely by the sum of consonants in David’s name; more on this below) call into question his accuracy? And why does the third group of 14 actually only include 13 names?

Matthew reveals further that even the structure of the genealogy intends to culminate in Jesus. Genealogies were often organized for ease of memorization. Matthew structures the genealogy to count 14 generations from the covenant made with Abraham to the covenant made with David, 14 generations from the end of David’s reign to the deportation to Babylon, and 14 generations from the Babylonian deportation down to Jesus.

There are 41 names in the genealogy, which creates a difficulty, because 14 generations multiplied by the three groups of generations equals 42 required names. This probably indicates that one name needs to be counted twice. On this reckoning, the 14 names in the first group begin with Abraham and end with David. The second group runs from David to the deportation to Babylon, and the 14 names to be counted in this group begin with Solomon and end with Jeconiah. The third group of 14 generations, from the deportation to Jesus, begins by again counting Jeconiah and ends with Jesus’ name. The name “Jeconiah” may serve as a double entendre to indicate both Jehoiakim and the end of the second group of generations, and also to indicate Jehoiachin and the beginning of the third group of generations after the deportation. On this supposition, the name “Jeconiah” is counted twice to indicate the two different rulers and eras in Matthew’s genealogy. The breakdown of the three groups of 14 would be as follows: Abraham to David; Solomon to Jeconiah/Jehoiakim; Jeconiah/Jehoiachin to Jesus.

Some generations in the lineage were skipped so that the structure could be made uniform for memorization, while other members were given certain kinds of prominence to make a particular point. David is mentioned twice, although only counted once, to emphasize that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah. The number 14 appears to be a subtle reference to David because the numerical value of the Hebrew consonants of his name is 14 ($dwd = 4 + 6 + 4$). The Jewish practice of counting the numerical value for letters is called *gematria* (“Gematria,” *EJR*, 154). In its most basic form the practice helped in memorization and for encoding theological meaning.

MATTHEW 1:18–19

¹⁸The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹So her husband Joseph, being

a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.

She was pregnant by the Holy Spirit (1:18): Matthew states simply that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Some, including Mormons and Muslims, have taken this to imply sexual relations between Mary and God. Mormons take this as literally true, and Muslims take it to be absurd. This literal approach, however, misrepresents what the passage says about the miraculous nature of Jesus' conception. The Holy Spirit is the agency, or the source of Jesus' conception, but the Gospel narratives make it clear that Mary was a virgin who had never had sexual relations. It was on the basis of her virginity that Joseph was reassured to take Mary as his wife after being visited by an angel who proclaimed the miraculous conception (cf. Matt 1:20–25; Luke 1:26–35).

Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly (1:19): If the Law called for the stoning of adulteresses (Lev 20:10), how is it that Joseph was considered righteous for wanting to protect Mary from public shame? In the first place, it is likely that stoning was reserved for repeat offenders who refused correction (see also comments on 5:18). Secondly, as a righteous man it was appropriate for Joseph to obtain a certificate of divorce. Divorce for adultery was not merely optional but mandatory among many Jewish groups (Bockmuehl 1989, 291–95). Joseph's concern for Mary compelled him to shield her from public disgrace. Therefore he did not regard public divorce as an option, for she would be subjected to disgrace and possibly stoning (Lev 20:10; 22:23–24; Deut 22:13–21). His one option was to divorce her privately. The Law did not require the deed to be made public, making allowance for a private divorce (two or three witnesses; Num 5:11–31; Deut 24:1; as interpreted in *m. Sotah* 1:1–5; *m. Gittin* 9:1–5, 10).

MATTHEW 1:20–25

²⁰ But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.”

²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ **See, the virgin will become pregnant
and give birth to a son,
and they will name Him Immanuel,**

which is translated “God is with us.”

²⁴When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her ²⁵but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus.

The virgin will become pregnant (1:23): Several questions arise from this text. Of primary importance, is “virgin” an accurate translation of the Hebrew original, or is “young maiden,” which does not necessitate virginity, more accurate? Matthew declares (v. 22) that the events surrounding the conception of Jesus fulfill Isaiah's prophecy (Isa 7:14) made during the days of national threat under the reign of Ahaz, king of Judah. In 734 BC Ahaz feared that his reign would be ended by an attack from the north. Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Aram (Syria), had formed an alliance and were threatening to invade Judah and replace Ahaz with a puppet king, the son of Tabeel (Isa 7:6). Isaiah declared that God would not allow this to happen, reassuring Ahaz that God would maintain his promise that a descendent of David would sit on his throne forever (2 Sam 7:11–17). In order to confirm that the two northern kings would not conquer Judah, Isaiah prophesied that the Lord would give to Ahaz a sign: a virgin would give birth.

There are two primary words for “virgin” in Hebrew. The term *almah*, which occurs in the prophecy of Isa 7:14, means “maiden” or “young girl,” and most scholars contend that it almost always refers to an unmarried, virgin woman (e.g., Gen 24:43; Exod 2:8; Ps 68:25; the debated passage is Prov 30:19; see Ross 1991, 5:1124). The other primary term is *betulah*, which can indicate a “virgin” (Gen 24:16; Lev 21:3), but also “old widow” (Joel 1:8). The Jewish translators of Isa 7:14 (LXX) rendered the Hebrew term *almah* with the Greek term *parthenos*, which almost without exception specified a sexually mature, unmarried woman who was a virgin (the exception is Gen 34:4).

The history of interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 and its relationship to Matthew 1:22–23 is extensive and varied, but three basic views emerge. First, some suggest that the original sign was intended solely for the historical circumstances of Ahaz and Judah, and that Matthew takes it typologically to refer to Jesus (e.g., Watts 1985, 98–104; Davies and Allison 1988, 213; Carter 2000, 503–20). In this view, Isaiah had in mind a young woman who was a virgin at the time, but who would later become married and have a child that she would name Immanuel as a sign of God's presence. Isaiah was referring only to a child of his day, whether it was the royal son Hezekiah who was born heir to the throne of king Ahaz, or Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (cf. Isa 8:4, 8), or some anonymous child born to a woman Ahaz knew. At the time that this child was born and named Immanuel, Ahaz would know that Isaiah's prophecies were correct and that deliverance was near. In this view Matthew's use of the text goes beyond the original intentions of the prophecy. A variation on this view suggests that there was not even a reference to the virginity of this child's mother in Isaiah's text. It says Isaiah had in view a young woman, and that the Hebrew *almah* is not intended to mean “virgin.” The weakness of this view is that it does not do justice to the majority usage of *almah* to mean “virgin.”

Second, others suggest that there was no real fulfillment in the birth of any child at the time of Ahaz, but that the prophecy was intended strictly as a messianic prophecy that was only fulfilled once, in the birth of Jesus. The term *almah* must be taken as referring to a “virgin,” which means that the prophecy was not fulfilled by a birth at the time of Isaiah, but could only point ahead to the fulfillment in the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus (e.g., Carson 2010, 102–6, citing an earlier work by Motyer 1970, 118–25).

Third, a more satisfactory interpretation takes the best of these views and recognizes that God was giving through Isaiah a sign that had historical significance and fulfillment in the days of Ahaz, but that God was also giving through Isaiah a prophecy of a future messianic deliverer that was fulfilled in the conception and birth of Jesus (e.g., Grogan 1986, 6:62–65; Hagner, 1993, 20–21; Blomberg 1992, 58–59; Sailhamer 2001, 5–23). The Jewish translators of the LXX, hundreds of years before Christ’s birth, seem to indicate by the use of *parthenos* that something deeper was meant by the prophet than was completely fulfilled in the events of Isaiah’s day. And later Jewish scribes saw a deeper meaning in the context, when they interpreted Immanuel, “God with us,” to be a promise of the golden age (cf. Isa 2:2–4; 9:2–7; 11:1–16) when the messianic son of David would bring judgment on the wicked and blessing on the righteous.

And give birth to a son (1:23): When was this prophecy fulfilled? Isaiah prophesied that a woman who was a virgin at the time of Ahaz (734 BC) would bear a son named Immanuel. Since neither the queen nor Isaiah’s wife was a virgin, and since we have argued above that Isaiah meant to signify a virgin specifically and not just a young woman, Isaiah most likely signified an unmarried young woman within the royal house, one known to Ahaz. She would soon marry and conceive a child, and name it Immanuel as a symbolic hope of God’s presence in times of national difficulty. Before the child was old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, Judah would be delivered from the threat of invasion from the two northern kings (Isa 7:14–17). The northern alliance was broken in 732 BC when Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria destroyed Damascus, conquered Aram, and put Rezin to death. All this was within the time-frame predicted as the sign to Ahaz, plenty of time for the virgin to marry, carry a child, and raise the child for the approximately two years it would take for the boy to learn moral discernment. Thus there was an immediate fulfillment of Isaiah’s prediction in the time of Ahaz.

Matthew declares that the birth of Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. Thus the sign given to Ahaz and the house of Judah (“you” in Isa 7:14 is plural) was God’s prediction of military salvation, but it was also a prediction of a future messianic figure who would provide spiritual salvation. Isaiah’s sign functioned both as an indication of the way that a boy named Immanuel would signify to Ahaz and the house of David God’s promised deliverance from invasion, but also a future messianic deliverer named Immanuel, truly God with us.

This double-fulfillment reading takes seriously both the immediate context of the prediction to Ahaz in 7:14, but also the broader context of Isaiah’s prophecy, in which a future messianic age would honor Galilee of the Gentiles (9:1–2) with a child born who would be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6).

And they will name Him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us” (1:23): Earlier the angel instructed Joseph to name the child Jesus (1:21), which is what we find him called through his earthly life in Scripture as well as in the writings of the early church. We have no record of Jesus ever being called “Immanuel” by his family or followers. This does not indicate that Matthew was in error or that Isaiah’s prophecy does not apply to Jesus. Instead, as Matthew translates the name for us, we see that “Immanuel” is intended not as a personal name but as a title that signifies Jesus’ Messianic identity: “God with us.” Both Jesus’ common name and his titular name indicate profound truths: *Jesus* specifies what he does (“God saves”), and *Immanuel* specifies who he is (“God with us”).

Joseph . . . did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son (1:24–25): Some traditions hold that Mary remained a lifelong virgin. What bearing does this verse have on this matter? When Joseph awoke from the dream, he obeyed the angel’s command and carried out the second phase of the marital process by undertaking a formal wedding ceremony. At the conclusion of the rites, Joseph took Mary home to live with him (and perhaps with his extended family) as his wife. They were a fully married couple, except that Joseph “did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son” (1:25). Matthew’s expression (lit. “he was not knowing her”) was a common way of referring to sexual intercourse. Sexual abstinence during pregnancy was widely observed in Judaism. The early Jewish pseudepigraphic wisdom poem *Pseudo-Phocylides* 186 (c. 100 BC–AD 100) declares, “Do not lay your hand upon your wife when she is pregnant.” Josephus struck a similar note: “For the same reason none who has intercourse with a woman who is with child can be considered pure” (*Against Apion* 2.202–203).

Matthew’s note about Joseph abstaining is not a hint of continued celibacy between him and Mary after Jesus’ birth. In fact the expression “until” (*heos hou*) most naturally indicates that Mary and Joseph had normal marital sexual relations after Jesus’ birth, from which other children were born (see 12:46 and 13:55; Allison 1993, 6n16). For more, see comments on 12:46–50 and 13:55.

MATTHEW 2:1–12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem, ²saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”