

Authorship of Matthew's Gospel

Author (R T France)

I think that much modern scholarship has too hastily assumed that the gospels circulated for a generation or more without attribution and that the names of proposed authors were rather arbitrarily attached to them some time in the second century. Attribution of this gospel to Matthew the apostle goes back to our earliest surviving patristic testimonies, and there is no evidence that any other author was ever proposed. As far back as we can trace it, and from the earliest manuscript attributions that have survived, it is always the Gospel *kata Matthaion*. It often seems to be assumed that whatever the early church said about the origins of the NT books must be treated with suspicion unless it can be independently proved, but I do not share that assumption. Of course authorship cannot now be proved, and for practical purposes of exegesis it does not matter very much, but the contents and tone of the gospel (including its “love-hate relationship” with Judaism, see below) seem to me to make someone like the apostle Matthew as likely a candidate as any, once it is accepted that the gospel is likely to have been written well within his lifetime (see below).¹

Date

I shall comment briefly on the literary relations of the Synoptic Gospels in the next section. As for the wider dating scheme, I believe there are sound reasons for questioning the consensus, and for exploring an alternative scheme which takes its cue from the lack of reference in the Book of Acts to any events later than AD 62, even though the Neronian persecution in Rome in AD 64/5 had such major implications for the church in Rome and was the probable cause of the death of both Peter and Paul, the two key figures of the book. In my commentary on Mark I have noted the patristic tradition that Mark's gospel was written while Peter was still alive, i.e. not later than the early sixties, and while there is probably an element of guesswork in such traditions, such a dating would tie in with the proposal³³ that the main period of the writing of the Synoptic Gospels was in the sixties (a period when, incidentally, it is more likely that the apostle Matthew would still be active than in the fourth quarter of the century). A pre-70 date for Matthew remains a minority view, but one which has been strongly supported, and which is usually dismissed not so much by specific arguments as on the basis of a preferred overall dating scheme. The issue is not of great exegetical importance for most of the gospel, but it does clearly affect one's assessment of the anti-temple theme which is such a prominent emphasis in Matthew. In the commentary that follows I shall favor the possibility that the gospel was, as Irenaeus declared, written in the sixties, while the temple was still standing.²

Relationship to Mark

Within such a flexible process I would regard Mark as the earliest of the surviving compilations, but this does not necessarily mean that at every point Mark's version of a saying or event must be the “original” from which the others are “deviations.” The most obvious point at which Mark has, on this view, provided a formative influence is in the

¹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (15). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

² France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (19). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

overall narrative structure of his gospel, which, as we have noted above, is taken up and expanded by Matthew, and, rather less closely, by Luke. If, as I believe, Mark's narrative structure with a single journey of Jesus from north to south is an artificial construction rather than a reflection of the likely geographical pattern of Jesus' total ministry (as perhaps more faithfully reflected in the Gospel of John), it is improbable that two or three writers independently made the same literary decision. To that extent Mark must be understood to be the foundation gospel among the three, but that is far from demanding that we assume that in the detailed contents of the gospel Matthew is always simply copying and/or editing Mark's text in the final form in which we know it. And as for a unitary document "Q", I am among the growing number of scholars who find it an improbably simple hypothesis; I am happy to talk about "Q tradition" (which may have been oral or written, and not necessarily all gathered into a single source), but not about Matthew "editing Q" if by that is meant making alterations to a supposedly fixed text (which is in any case not available to us). And I am afraid that the even more esoteric and hypothetical debates about "the Q community" or "recensions of Q" leave me cold.

Given this understanding of the Synoptic Problem I am more reluctant than many other interpreters to speak simply of how Matthew has "redacted" Mark's material or to attempt in Q material to discern how Matthew has "adapted" the common tradition. I regard the Marcan and Lucan parallels as other witnesses to the traditions Matthew had available, but not necessarily as his direct sources. Where he differs from them it may be because he is deliberately altering the tradition as they have recorded it, but it may also be because he has received the tradition in a rather different form. This commentary will therefore call attention to differences between the synoptic accounts where they help to highlight the distinctive contribution of Matthew, but without always assuming direct dependence and therefore deliberate alteration of an already formulated tradition. The results may in many cases be quite similar to what would have been reached by a more rigid x-copied-y approach, but they are likely to be more cautiously expressed.³

Author (L Morris)

In the last resort it appears that the authorship of this Gospel will remain in dispute. In my opinion there is more to be said for the apostle Matthew than recent scholarship commonly allows and more for Matthew than for any other candidate. But the evidence certainly falls short of complete proof, and in the end divergent views will continue to be held.⁴

Author

³ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (21–22). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

⁴ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (15). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.