

The Gospel of Matthew in its Historical and Theological Context

Edited by
MIKHAIL SELEZNEV,
William R.G. Loader
and KARL-WILHELM NIEBUHR

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
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Papers from the International Conference in Moscow,
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Edited by

Mikhail Seleznev, William R. G. Loader,
and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr

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Preface

On 24–28 September 2018, New Testament scholars gathered in Moscow for an international conference on the Gospel according to Matthew. The event was generously hosted by the Aspirantura/Doktorantura of the Russian Orthodox Church and the program prepared in association with the Eastern European Liaison Committee (EELC) of *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* (SNTS).

The conference was opened by His Eminence, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of Volokolamsk, also a member of SNTS, and brought together scholars from across the Russian Federation as well as fifteen invited scholars from Western Europe, Australia, and the USA. The conference was a sequel to the Seventh International Symposium of New Testament Scholars which took place in Moscow, 26 September to 1 October, 2016, on the topic “History and Theology in the Gospel Narratives” and a forerunner of the conference on Mark held in Moscow in 2019 and planned future conferences on Luke and John.

The conference witnessed once again to the openness of the Orthodox World in its yearning for a sincere dialogue with Western biblical scholarship. Already in 2013, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, opening the International Conference on Modern Bible Studies and the Tradition of the Church, stated: “I regard it very useful, that our Church educational centres establish and develop ties with foreign research and educational centres, with institutions and departments studying the Bible. In this way we re-establish the tradition of international scholarly ties of our Church, that was forcibly interrupted 100 years ago.”

The need for a dialogue with modern Biblical scholarship felt by the Orthodox scholars was mirrored with an openness of the Western participants. It was felt that a dialogue of this kind is essential for a deeper understanding of the Scripture and its role in our lives in the modern world where what some see as the superiority of the rationalistic mindset characteristic of the Western word should no more be taken for granted.

This volume brings together the papers which were presented, as well as including some further contributions from specialists in Matthew not present in Moscow. For those who participated directly in the conference it was a rich experience, a meeting of diverse traditions of faith and of culture. The generosity of the hosts helped build friendships and connections, so important both for international scholarship and for developing understanding across the nations.

His Eminence Metropolitan Hilarion had from the beginning given strong impetus to the mounting of these conferences and generously supported them. The present age is well served by international and ecumenical dialogue, which this conference represents, in the interests of furthering academic research as well as international, intercultural, and interfaith communication.

October 2020

Mikhail Seleznev
William Loader
Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr

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Part One:
Matthew in Reception and Research

The Gospel of Matthew in Church Tradition and Modern Scholarship

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk

Dear participants of the conference!

Dear fathers, brothers, and sisters!

Our meeting is devoted to the first book of the New Testament canon – the Gospel of Matthew. It is often called the “Gospel of the Church,” primarily because in the early Church it enjoyed much greater popularity than the Gospels of Mark and Luke. From the earliest periods of Christian history, it attracted the greatest attention of exegetes. As early as the beginning of the second century it was referred to by Ignatius Theophorus, and in the first half of the third century Origen wrote a full commentary on it. In the fourth century a full commentary on it was compiled by John Chrysostom.

It is no surprise that during the Modern Era, in the period of emerging academic studies on the New Testament, this Gospel became a subject of discussions. In my essay I would like to identify and discuss the contradictions that exist between Church Tradition and modern biblical Scholarship regarding questions of origin, dating, and content of this Gospel. I would like to offer my reflections on Church Tradition that have preserved the information about the origin of the Gospel of Matthew and call for more confidence in these testimonies. In addition, I would like to evaluate the significance of the contradictions between Church Tradition and academic biblical studies for contemporary Orthodox theology.

In the first part of my essay I will describe the image of the author of the Gospel of Matthew, which can be reconstructed on the basis of the Gospel text itself. In this part I will draw on the account given in the first volume of my study about Jesus Christ.¹ In the second part I will examine the evidence of the emergence of the Gospel of Matthew, which can be gleaned from Church Tradition, and will analyze it using the criterion of theological conditioning. In conclusion I will outline my thoughts on the theological “background” of the

¹ Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, *The History and Canonical Structure of the Orthodox Church*, vol. 1 of *Orthodox Christianity*, trans. Basil Bush (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011).

Gospel narrative, starting from the discussion about the concept of church in the Matthew's Gospel.

A. The Gospel of Matthew: What Does the Text Tell about Its Author?

Let us start with a presentation of positions that are evident from the Gospel text itself and that can be considered as a consensus both for the ecclesiastical tradition and for the community of scholars.

What can we tell from the text of Matthew's Gospel about its author? It is obvious that he is a Jew who is well acquainted with the Jewish environment and the interpretation of the Old Testament, which is traditional for this environment. Multiple references to the Old Testament are also characteristic of the other evangelists, but Matthew stands out among them in that he most consistently pursues the idea of fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies in the life of Jesus as the promised Messiah.

In its composition, the Gospel of Matthew differs from the other two Synoptic Gospels. A significant place is given to the speeches of Jesus. As is well known, there are five such speeches in Matthew: The Sermon on the Mount (5:3–7:27), instruction to disciples (10:5–42), teaching in parables (13:3–52), one more lesson to disciples (18:3–35), and prophecies and parables of the last times (24:3–25:46). Each of these speeches is stitched together with the subsequent narrative by means of the concluding formula “When Jesus finished these sayings” (7:28; 19:1) or other similar phrases (cf. 11:1; 13:53; 19:1). The fifth discourse is followed by the words of the evangelist, “When Jesus had finished *all* these sayings ...” (26:1). Thus, Matthew places special emphasis on the teaching ministry of Jesus, incorporating several lengthy speeches into the narrative fabric.

Matthew to a greater extent than other evangelists stresses the royal dignity of Jesus. It is no coincidence that in the very first verse he calls him “the Son of David,” emphasizing His descent from the royal family:

Matthew shows the Messiah as King – crowned, rejected and coming again. In this Gospel, as in no other, Jesus is depicted in royal colors. His origin is determined by the royal line of Israel, His life is threatened by the envious king, the magi from the East bring a king's gifts to the baby Jesus, and John the Baptist proclaims Him King and announces that His Kingdom is coming soon. Even temptations in the desert reach their apogee when Satan offers Christ possession of all the kingdoms of the world. The Sermon on the Mount is the manifesto of a King, miracles confirm His royal regalia, and many of the parables reveal the secrets of His Kingdom. In one of the parables Jesus compares Himself with the son of the king, and later regally enters Jerusalem. In the face of death on the cross He predicts His future rule and

declares power over the angels of heaven. In His last words it is stated that all power is given to Him in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18).²

The text of the Gospel of Matthew testifies that its main audience were readers from among the Jews. It is confirmed by numerous examples. In particular, Matthew calls Jerusalem “the holy city” (4:5). Mark and Luke would probably have explained what city they actually meant; for Matthew and his readers it is clear that the holy city is Jerusalem, because for Jews there was no other “holy city” in the universe, just as there was no other temple except the Temple of Jerusalem.

In the Gospel of Matthew there are many Aramaic words left without translation, for example, “Whoever says to his brother ‘raka’ – shall be liable to the fire of hell” (5:22) or “You cannot serve God and mammon” (6:24). Borrowings from the Hebrew or Aramaic languages are also found in Mark, but Mark usually translates them (e.g., Mark 5:41), while Matthew in a number of cases considers this unnecessary, since obviously the meaning of these words was known to its readers, unlike the readers of Mark.

Many events from the life of Jesus are represented in Matthew as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Allusions to the Old Testament and quotations from it are also found in other Gospels, but their share in Matthew is much larger: in his Gospel we find about 60 such quotations and allusions, while, for example, Mark has only about a third as many – roughly 20.

In the Gospel of Matthew there are parallelisms typical of Semitic literature; for example, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (10:39). As is well known, parallelism is especially characteristic of Hebrew poetry; thus, in many psalms, verses are clearly divided into two parts, parallel to one another (e.g., Ps 50). Apparently, these parallelisms reflect one of the distinctive features of Jesus’s oral speech preserved by Matthew.

Also typical for Hebrew poetry is the use of a particular phrase as a refrain. When Matthew reproduces the speech of Jesus, such formulas are repeated many times; for example, “You will know them by their fruits” (7:16, 20); “There men will weep and gnash their teeth” (8:12; 13:42; 22:13); “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites” (23:13–15, 23, 25, 27); “You blind fools!” (Matthew 23:17, 19). These refrains also reflect one of the characteristics of Jesus’s speech.

Another example showing that the Gospel of Matthew was addressed primarily to a Jewish audience are the following words of Jesus: “Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath” (24:20). The mention of

² Мак-Артур Дж. Ф. Толкование Книг Нового Завета. Матфея 1–7, trans. of *Matthew 1–7: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Moody, 1985 (Славянское Евангельское Общество: Slavic Gospel Association, 2006), 10.

the Sabbath mattered only to Jews, for whom the flight on Saturday meant a violation of the Sabbath rest rule.

The Gospel of Matthew begins where the Old Testament ends. The last book of the section “*Nevi’im*” (Prophets) – the Book of Malachi – ends with a prophecy, which in the Christian tradition is interpreted as referring to John the Baptist. Matthew begins his story with the birth of Jesus and the preaching of John the Baptist. Perhaps this was the reason why this Gospel was placed first in the canon of the New Testament, as if connecting the Old Testament with the New. Another reason was the general orientation of the Gospel of Matthew, whose audience primarily consisted of Christians from the Jewish community.

The relationship between the two Testaments is one of the central concerns of Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus builds his main teaching – the Sermon on the Mount – by relating his moral demands to the commandments of the law of Moses: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old … But I say to you” (5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). However, only in Matthew does Jesus say, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them … till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (5:17–18). Matthew emphasizes the abiding authority of the Old Testament law in a way that the other two Synoptic Evangelists do not. Moreover, in Matthew, although Jesus criticizes the Pharisees, he still says that they must be obeyed: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’s seat; so *practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do*” (23:2–3). In no other Gospel do we find such advice.

The controversies of Jesus with the Pharisees recorded in the Gospel of Matthew often relate to subjects concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament law. In Jesus’s time, representatives of various schools of rabbinical thought engaged in similar disputes. Reflections of these disputes can be seen in Jesus’s words about swearing an oath by the Temple or by the gold of the Temple, or by the altar or a gift that is on it, tithing from mint, anise, and cummin, and cleansing the exterior and interior of the cup or dish (23:16–26). For the readers of Mark and Luke, these problems were irrelevant, whereas Matthew’s readers would have known the context in which Jesus was giving these teachings.

B. The Tradition of the Church about Writing the Gospel of Matthew and the Criterion of Theological Conditioning

This section will discuss the indirect evidence about the author of the Gospel of Matthew, which the Gospel text itself gives us. We can draw conclusions about the author’s origin and worldview, but *the biblical text does not give us obvious answers* on other issues. Further discussion is required to discern the

author's identity, time, geographical location, and his reasons for writing the text.

The answers to these questions were kept and handed down by the Church from the earliest times, and if we follow the thread of Church Tradition, we can get close to the period of the New Testament. In fact, the earliest ecclesiastical testimony of the authorship of the first book of the New Testament is almost as old as the earliest manuscript evidence of the New Testament itself. It comes from the second half of the second century and belongs to the hieromartyr Irenaeus of Lyons. This text is well known, but we find it appropriate to quote here:

Matthew published a Gospel while Peter and Paul were preaching and founding the Church at Rome; and after their departure (or deaths), Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also gave forth to us in writing the things which were preached by Peter. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his Gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.³

This text belongs to a man who set himself the task of expounding Church Tradition in opposition to the numerous heresies that appeared at that time. The text shows that already in the second century there was a stable tradition concerning how the four Gospels were created and the identity of their authors. If we add to this that Irenaeus of Lyons was a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of the Apostle John, then we receive evidence that practically connects us with apostolic times.

In the testimony of St. Irenaeus, we see four points that complement the evangelical testimony but that *are not derived from it*:

- 1) The author of the Gospel was one of the twelve apostles – Matthew;
- 2) The Gospel of Matthew was written first among all the canonical Gospels;
- 3) It was written by the time that Peter and Paul founded the Church in Rome, hence during the period between 45 and 65 CE;
- 4) It was written in the language of the Jews, that is, in Hebrew or Palestinian Aramaic.

As is well known, all these points are questioned in academic biblical studies of the modern period. Most contemporary scholars are inclined to believe that the Gospel of Matthew appeared after the Gospel of Mark and after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. Extremely influential was B. H. Streeter's hypothesis that the Gospel of Matthew was written ca. 85 CE in Antioch.⁴ The main argument in favor of such dating is that Jesus's words given by Matthew contain a clear indication of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (24:1–2). This argument suggests *a priori* that Jesus Christ did not have a prophetic gift.

³ Ириней Лионский. Против ересей 3.1.1 (SC 211, 22–24). (Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3.1.1)

⁴ Cf. B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1951).

In other words, it proceeds from a predetermined ideological premise, which actually replaces historical evidence.

But is it possible to deny the Church Tradition of historicity only on the grounds that it is a matter of faith? We are well aware that in the absence of evidence for the earliest history of the creation of the biblical text, scholars inevitably turn to tradition. For example, we do not have early evidence of writing prophetic texts of the Old Testament or the Torah that would have appeared outside the Jewish tradition itself. Even such grand discoveries as the unearthing of the Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts cannot shed light on such issues as the appearance of the books of Ezekiel or Micah. A similar situation occurs with many New Testament texts.

Under these conditions, scholars had to formulate criteria for the reliability of the evidence by which one or another testimony of the biblical text or tradition could be evaluated. These criteria can be reduced to one main point: Can we expect that behind any given testimony there is some theological concept? Is it possible to assert that this or that testimony promotes someone's interests? For example, even critics of Christianity recognize that the story of Peter's denial could not meet the interests of the early Christian communities, since it presented a negative portrait of the greatest preacher of Christianity, who was also considered the founder of the Roman Church. On the contrary, the thesis that Jesus Christ had twelve initial disciples has been questioned by many researchers, because the influence of a certain theological position is seen here: twelve apostles symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. It is for this reason that Joseph Klausner, the first Jewish historian who turned to New Testament studies, considered the evidence of the Talmud more reliable. It is said in the Talmud that Jesus had five disciples. According to Klausner, this number does not have a theological basis nor does it derive from someone's personal interest and therefore should be considered more reliable.⁵

Leaving aside the question of validity of such a judgment about the apostles. (Why could Jesus not select twelve disciples, consciously relating their number to the twelve tribes of Israel? Furthermore, from the Gospels we know that he himself made such a connection.) We will concentrate on this criterion – I will call it “the criterion of theological conditioning” – and try to apply it to the testimonies of the early Church regarding the origin of the Gospel of Matthew. We have identified four points in which the testimony transmitted through Ireneaeus of Lyons complements the Scripture. Can someone's interest stand behind at least one of them?

⁵ Cf. Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times and Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby (New York: Macmillan, 1921).

Let us turn to the first point – the authorship of Matthew. Recognition of the authorship of the apostle, an eyewitness of Jesus Christ, certainly gave the text a clear advantage as testimony written by an eyewitness of the gospel events. The Gospel of Mark did not have such an advantage, and one could assume that, for this reason, it has faded into insignificance. However, we see that the Gospel of Luke from this point of view is even more inferior to the Gospel of Mark; according to Church Tradition, Luke was strongly influenced by the Apostle Paul, who himself was not a disciple of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Luke's Gospel has always been very influential in the Church.

Furthermore, it is not clear why it was precisely Matthew who was given such great importance, if we consider his authorship to be only a legend. It is unclear what significance the personality of the former tax collector should have had for the Jewish community to which the Gospel of Matthew was addressed. Nothing is known about Matthew's life from ancient Christian sources except his former profession. We understand quite clearly how pseudepigraphs appear: as a rule, this or that work is attributed to the name of a famous author or legendary character, so that the work would have an authoritative status. In the case of the Gospel, signed by the name of Matthew, we see no reason to choose such an author. If the Gospel of Matthew was considered a text created for the Palestinian Jewish community, it would be much more natural to assign it the name of Jacob, the brother of the Lord (we know that this was exactly the case with the apocryphal text about Mary's childhood, known as "The Gospel of James"). It should be recognized that if we start from the criterion of theological conditioning, we do not find good reasons to question the authorship of Matthew.

My next point is the primacy of the Gospel of Matthew among other Gospels. In this case, it is also unclear what theological reasons could have induced the ancient Church to declare that the Gospel of Matthew was written first. The only possible basis is the legend that Matthew wrote for the Jewish community; since the Jerusalem Church was the center from which the worldwide preaching of the gospel began, the appearance of the first written Gospel had to be connected with this Church.

The third point focuses on the time when the Gospel of Matthew was created. According to the legend recorded by Irenaeus of Lyons, Matthew wrote his Gospel at a time when the apostles Peter and Paul preached in Rome. It seems that such a dating has a clear theological justification: as evidences of eyewitnesses, the Gospels had to be recorded early enough. However, a more detailed examination shows that the Church Tradition, expounded by Irenaeus, has deeper roots. An example of a purely theological approach to the dating of the Gospels is the preface of Theophylact of Ohrid in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. According to Theophylact, all Synoptic Gospels were written in a very short time and during the life of most of the apostles: Matthew

wrote his Gospel in the eighth year after Christ's ascension, Mark in the tenth, and Luke in the fifteenth.⁶

On the contrary, the testimony of Irenaeus of Lyons establishes an earlier date *before which the Gospels could not have been written*, namely, the preaching of the apostles Peter and Paul in Rome. In other words, during the first three missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, no Gospel was yet compiled. Indeed, *the authors of the Epistles almost never quote the Gospel as a literary source*, whereas the Old Testament is quoted in the epistles rather extensively. This could be due to the fact that the Gospels did not yet exist in a clearly recorded written form when the New Testament epistles first appeared, including the epistles of Paul, or that the Gospels did not receive universal circulation within the Church. We see that the tradition set forth by Irenaeus of Lyons is consistent with the text of the New Testament itself and cannot be explained by the criterion of theological conditioning.

However, if we turn to the words of Irenaeus of Lyons about the Gospel of Mark, we will see that it dates rather late – the time “after the departure” of Peter and Paul, that is, after 65 CE, very close to the time of the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem. We see that St. Irenaeus (unlike many modern biblical scholars, both secular and ecclesiastical) did not see the theological problem in the later dating of the Gospel of Mark. From the point of view of theological conditioning, St. Irenaeus should have dated both Gospels much earlier. And there were plenty of reasons for such conditioning in Irenaeus of Lyons, because he had the task of proving to the Gnostics the truth of the canonical Gospels, and St. Irenaeus is famous for his purely theological reasoning that there can be only four Gospels, and that their number has prototypes already in the Old Testament.

Finally, the last point in our list is the original language of the Gospel of Matthew. By asserting that the first Gospel was written in the language of the Jews, Irenaeus of Lyons put himself in a rather dangerous position. While proving to the Gnostics that only the canonical Gospels are authentic, Irenaeus also maintained that the members of the Church deal not with the original of the Gospel of Matthew, but with a translation. At the time of Irenaeus, there were still Gnostic Judeo-Christian communities that used the Hebrew text, which they believed to be the original version of the first Gospel.

Meanwhile, the testimony of Irenaeus of Lyons about the original language of the Gospel of Matthew is not the only thing that confirms its rootedness in the earliest tradition of the ancient Church. Eusebius of Caesarea cites the testimony of Papias of Hierapolis, which he also traces through the chain of successions to the times of the first apostles:

⁶ Феофилакт Болгарский. Толкование на Евангелие от Матфея. Предисловие. (Theophylact of Ohrid, Explanation of the Gospel of Matthew, Preface).

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