

The Date of Matthew's Gospel

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EDITORS' NOTE. Robert Gundry's **Matthew** (Eerdmans 1982, 599-609) contain an extended argument for a pre-70 date. With the author's permission, selected points of that argument are here repeated, with additional notes from the second edition of 1994, as a contribution to current discussion.

The Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70 forms a natural boundary between the possibilities of an early date and a late one for the writing of Matthew. For some, Matthew's describing the destruction of a city by a king's army (22:7, an insertion) reflects the destruction of Jerusalem and therefore requires a date after 70. Throughout the rest of the parable in which the description occurs, however, the king represents God. A reference back to the destruction of Jerusalem would imply an identification of the king with the Caesar in Rome, or at least a double image in which Caesar acts unwittingly in God's stead. But the association of Caesar with God requires so much daring, especially since it cannot extend to any other actions of the king in the parable, that we may begin to doubt it. If Matthew is alluding to past events in 70, his "then" at the start of 22:8-9 clearly implies that the mission to Gentiles, which is represented in those later verses, did not begin till 70 or shortly afterward.¹ But that disagrees with his theology of evangelism in 28:19-20, where Jesus sends out his disciples to make further disciples of Gentiles right after his resurrection. The burning of the city in 22:7 derives from Isa 5:24-25, not from the destruction of Jerusalem in 70.²

¹Luz (1/84) believes that Matthew arose out of a Jewish Christian community, Matthew's part of which interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 as God's judgement on Israel and made a controversial decision to evangelize the Gentiles, and that Matthew wrote to defend this decision. Surely a controversy over the Gentile mission is more likely to have arisen before 70, when that mission was starting. By 70, the mission was both well established and widespread. Luz's position leads him to relegate to pre-Matthean tradition the formula-quotations and other features of Matthew that display an appeal and continuing mission to Israel, whereas these features give every appearance of belonging to the final redaction of Matthew (as Luz himself recognizes with respect to the formulas of the formula-quotations).

²Davies and Allison (1/132) ask why Matthew felt drawn to Isa 5:24-25 if not because Jerusalem had recently been destroyed in accordance with that passage. But this question is overmatched by the question why, if Matthew writes after 70, he turns the crying out of the tumbled-down stones of Jerusalem (Luke 19:39-40) into children's crying out in praise of Jesus (Mt 21:14-16) and by the chronological problem created if he alludes to the Roman destruction as a past event, viz, an historically false and Mattheanly incompatible postponement of the Gentile mission to the period following 70.

But other arguments are put forward in favor of a late date. The rejection of the Jewish nation as indicated in 21:43 (so Matthew alone; cf 8:12, Lk 13:28); the distant and usually peculiar way the first evangelist writes about “their synagogues” (4:23, 9:35, 10:17, 12:9, 13:54, cf 23:34), the unique references to the “church” (16:18, 18:17 bis) and the other “nation” that will receive the Kingdom (21:43); Matthew’s special interest in the life of the church (see esp ch 18); the development of a high Christology up to the point of a distinctive Trinitarian formula (28:19); the use of $\rho\alpha\beta\beta\acute{\iota}$ in its late sense “Teacher” rather than its early sense “Sir” (23:7-8); the supposed legendary character of at least parts of the nativity story (chs 1-2), Peter’s walking on the water (14:28-31), the dream of Pilate’s wife (27:19), the resurrection of saints (27:51-53), and the story about the guard at the tomb (27:62-66, 28:11-25); and Matthew’s use of Mark – all of these are thought to support a late date, probably the 80s or 90s. More exactly, Matthew’s preoccupation with the Pharisees is thought to reflect their rise to dominance at Jamnia, their claim to represent the true Israel, and their reading Jewish Christians out of the synagogue with the Benediction against Heretics, which is usually dated to c85.³

The undisputed persecution of the church by Paul when he was a Pharisee and his anti-Pharisaical theology after becoming a Christian show, however, that the conflict between Pharisaism and Christianity need not point to a post-Jamnian date. Intense conflict of that sort marked the earliest history of the church (see Php 3:5-6, Gal 1:13). The Essenes isolated themselves, the Sadducees lived above the masses and centered in Jerusalem, but the Pharisees had long exercised widespread influence in Jewish society. Given that influence and their theological concerns, they became the Christians’ chief antagonists from the start. Josephus clearly states that in Judaism the Pharisees enjoyed dominance before 70 (War 2/8:14 §162; Ant 18/1:3 §15).

Against the other points raised in favor of a late date, divine rejection of the Jewish nation except for a remnant of grace appears already in Pauline literature (Rom 9-11). Furthermore, the unique statement in Mt 10:23 indicates that the mission to Israel must continue till the Son of Man comes. By the time Jerusalem was destroyed, the church had long since become a counterpart of the synagogue. Matthew’s emphasis on evangelizing Gentiles fits into this picture (see esp 28:19-20). The paucity of Rabbinic materials from that period deflates the argument that $\rho\alpha\beta\beta\acute{\iota}$ did not mean “Teacher” till shortly after 70. Furthermore, Matthew’s fusing the title with his portrait of Jesus as a teacher of the law (cf esp 5:2 with Lk 6:20) does not have to depend on semantic developments in Rabbinic circles. And whatever the character or origin of Matthew’s distinctive materials, nothing forestalls our dating them before 70.

We now turn to the other data, which look surprisingly ample and crop up in those very parts of Matthew that distinguish it from the other Gospels. Mark and Luke mention the Sadducees only once each, but Matthew both retains that reference (22:23) and inserts another half-dozen references to them (3:7, 16:1, 6, 11, 12, 22:34).

³To the extent that the Pharisees before 70 are not to be simply equated with the rabbis after 70, Matthew’s concentration on the Pharisees tends toward a date of writing before 70. For a balanced presentation, see Carson **Leaders** 163-167.

The Sadducees lost influence after 70; a large proportion of them perished in the destruction of Jerusalem. Matthew's special interest in them does not make good sense, then, outside the supposition of a date before 70. His failure to distinguish the Sadducees sharply from the Pharisees (but note that he does not pair them in the highly edited ch 23) has no bearing on the date of the Gospel, for he cares mainly for their shared opposition to Jesus (cf his lumping together "Herod the King . . . and all Jerusalem with him" against Jesus in 2:3). This concern, not ignorance of differences between them, suffices to explain the blurring of distinctions. And care for their shared opposition to Jesus could have characterized the evangelist's writing before 70 as easily as after 70. Afterward, he had no reason to mention Sadducees at all.⁴

And why should Mt 5:23-24, almost entirely peculiar to the first Gospel, speak of offering "a gift at the altar" if the altar was no longer standing at the time Matthew wrote? The verses bristle with Mattheanisms in the references to the altar, a gift, brother, in ἅν οὖν, the verbs for remembering, leaving, and going, and the words κάκει, ἐκεῖ, πρῶτον, τότε, and ἐλθών. The more Matthean the passage, the more incongruous a date of writing after 70.

Both Mark and Luke use past tenses in Jesus' charge that the Jews have made the Temple a den of robbers. But Matthew uses the present tense and even stresses it with a vivid historical present in λέγει "he says" (contrast 21:13 with Mk 11:17, Lk 19:46). Why does he make such revisions if the Temple is no longer standing and the traffic is no longer going on?

Again, why the completely unparalleled paragraph on swearing by the Temple and the items associated with it (23:16-22) if Matthew wrote after the destruction of the Temple? Who could swear by it, its gold, and its altar then? Only before 70 could inclusion of such material have a very sharp point. In fact, the passage is characterized by careful parallelism, an allusion to the OT, and an attack on the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees as too lax – all traits of Matthew's composition. Furthermore, we find his favorite vocabulary in the references to swearing, gold, the Temple, being obligated, fools, the blind, comparative greatness, the altar, a gift, sitting, holiness, and inhabiting, and in the words "for," "on," "therefore," and "all." Why the composition of such material after 70?

Matthew's concern to evangelize Jews as well as Gentiles tends toward an early date. For the longer the majority of Jews resisted the gospel, the more Christian evangelism shifted from the Jewish sphere. Of course Matthew stresses the conversion of Gentiles, but not at the expense of the mission to Jews. He himself appeals to Jews by tracing Jesus' genealogy to Abraham, often citing OT passages as fulfilled, portraying Jesus as the Davidic Messiah, emphasizing Jesus' affirmation and teaching of the law, and insisting that the Christian witness to Israel shall not end "before the Son of Man comes."

⁴Kingsbury **Reflections** 448-451 does list other attempts to square Matthew's mentioning the Sadducees with a date of writing after 70, but he also exposes the inconsistency of these attempts. His limitation of the Sadducees to "the world of Matthew's story" unsatisfactorily refuses to answer the question, Why did Matthew insert them into his story half a dozen times?

The Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees, come under heavy criticism in Matthew. They have passed the point of redemption. But the common people in Jewish society, the crowds, fare better because Matthew is trying to win them. His efforts to do so are patent. He alone says that Jesus was sent “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). The distinctive phrase “to this day” in the stories of Judas’s suicide (27:8) and the guard at Jesus’ tomb (28:15) shows that the Jewish mission is still going on at the time Matthew writes. In fact, the whole story of the guard at the tomb, which is unique to his Gospel, has the purpose of showing the Jewish common people that their leaders have deceived them (27:62-66, 28:11-15). So believe in Jesus, instead of falling under the spell of those hypocritical liars!

Furthermore, Matthew turns the dietary taboos of the OT into prohibitions in speech rather than follow the bald abrogation of dietary taboos in Mk 7:1-23. According to Lk 11:39-41, Jesus balanced his command to give the contents of one’s tableware as charity with an abrogation of the dietary laws, “and behold, all things are clean for you.” But again Matthew avoids a bald abrogation of the dietary taboos by turning them into a demand for a moral purity, portrayed in the figure of a cup: “in order that the outside of it may become clean” (22:25-26). Only cleansing the heart will produce an observable conduct that is truly pure because of consistency with the inward state (cf 5:21-30, 6:1-18, 7:17-18, 12:33-35, 15:7-9).

The distinctive passage 17:24-27 teaches that Jewish Christians should not contribute to their fellow Jews’ rejection of the Gospel by refusing to pay the Temple tax. This exhortation not only shows Matthew’s concern to win Jews. It specifically favors a date of writing before 70, for after the destruction of God’s Temple in Jerusalem the Romans shifted the tax to the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome,⁵ and m.Shequalim 8:8 says that the laws concerning “the Shekel dues . . . apply only such time as the Temple stands.” Surely Matthew did not include this passage to support upkeep of a pagan temple! Nor can we suppose that Matthew is urging Jewish Christians to support the school of Pharisaical rabbis that formed in Jamnia during the aftermath of the Jewish rebellion, for he excoriates the Pharisees throughout his Gospel. The argument from 17:24-27 for an early date gains further cogency from the evidence (diction, grammar, use of OT) that Matthew himself composed the passage.

Jewish terms such as “the tradition of the elders” (15:2), “phylacteries” (23:5), and “whitewashed tombs” (23:27) go unexplained. Matthew’s intended audience, being Jews, will understand them readily.

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⁵Josephus War 7:6 §218; Dio Cassius 65:7, Suetonius Dom 12).