

Example of teaching scripture: the infancy narratives from matthew essay

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The Gospel According to St. Matthew is the first book that appears in modern versions of the New Testament, but it is not the gospel that was written first. That title generally goes to the Gospel of Mark. Those who try to place Matthew into its literary context generally begin with the question of authorship. Obviously, the book does not name its author at any point. It was the Christian bishop Papias of Hierapolis, who wrote that “ Matthew collected the oracles in the Hebrew language and each one interpreted them as best he could” (Turner 15-16). This might make it sound as though Matthew was first written in Hebrew. However, scholars who have looked at the gospel agree that it has “ none of the telltale marks of a translation” (Bromiley 281). There are several possibilities as to Papias' theory: first, Matthew may have written an original version in Hebrew that is now lost; Papias may have meant that Matthew wrote in the Hebrew “ style” rather than language; the “ oracles” may be something other than that gospel (Turner 15-16).

Papias never identifies which Matthew he is discussing, but by 200 CE Matthew the tax collector was the commonly accepted author of this gospel. There are several reasons to question this authorship, not the least of which is that the book uses Mark as a source; as an eyewitness to the work of Jesus, it seems odd that Matthew would have to ask other people for information about the life of the Savior (Burkett). Scholars who object to Matthean authorship usually suggest that a well educated Jew who knew the technicalities of Jewish law wrote the book between 80 and 90 CE (Duling). The book appears to come from three main sources: a group of sayings that biblical scholars refer to as “ Q,” which Luke also used; the Gospel of Mark; and some information that only Matthew knew, referred to as “ M” (Burkett).

His audience was clearly a Jewish one, as he stresses over and over the importance of the Jewish law over time. He does not explain the customs of the Jewish people in the book. Also, while Luke traces the ancestry of Jesus' birth all the way back to Adam, Matthew only goes back to Abraham (Burkett). It is this ancestry that has caused some modern inquiry into the infancy narratives. After all, if Jesus' paternity is divine, how can he be the Messiah descended from David? While there has long been the assumption that this adoption was a Jewish custom, there is nothing in Jewish law from that time period mentioning such an institution. In contrast, adoption was well established in Roman law of the time period, particularly amongst the aristocracy. Such emperors as Augustus, whose fathers had been granted divine status after their deaths, received the title of *divifilius*, or “son of god” (Levin). This Roman concept quickly made its way into the gospels and may serve as a strong indicator of the Gentile background of many of the first evangelists.

The audience of Matthew appears to have originated in the land of Palestine; however, before the Jewish War from 66-70 CE, they likely had to leave Israel and live in Syria. Antioch is often named as the home of the Matthean community, but it could also have been located near Judea or Galilee (Saldarini). There are some scholars who suggest the book was written in response to events in the Jewish community after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE. This war left the Judean Pharisees as the new Jewish leaders, and without the Temple or its priests, or the sacrifice rituals, there was a need to find new ways to establish the unique identity of the Jewish people. The Pharisees' answer appears to have been a radical insistence on observing

the Torah, staying separate from Gentiles, and minimizing the promised coming of the Messiah, the hope of which had sparked the Jewish War in the first place. However, the Jewish Christians in Antioch decided not to preserve the Jewish roots of the faith. Instead, they chose to obey the law by following the commands of Jesus, who was the Messiah; as a result, Jew and Gentile were both to be combined into the new community of faith (Senior). If Matthew's aim was to keep the uniquely Jewish character of the faith, he ended up failing. Christianity ultimately became a religion for the Gentiles, and Jews and Christians came to see one another as opposites, rather than sharers of a spiritual revelation (Senior).

The infancy narrative in Matthew continues from his genealogy and includes King Herod's slaughter of all of the young boy babies in the land and the flight to Egypt ordered by the angel of God (France). There are several things that are important for religious educators to know when teaching this passage. One of these is that the author of Matthew was likely writing to a Jewish audience. This is important because of the later emphasis in the New Testament about the availability of salvation to the Gentiles. Matthew was trying to maintain the distinctive of the Jewish faith in the context of this new movement following Jesus, called "The Way." The implication is that it is easy to forget that different groups of people responded to the teachings of Jesus in a different way, based on their own cultural presuppositions. Another is the ways in which the early church incorporated Roman traditions, even including the title "Son of God." From the beginning, it was clear that the arrival of the Messiah was one that would affect all people, not just God's chosen.

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