

INVITATION TO MATTHEW

The book known as Matthew is an account of the life and teaching of Jesus. While tradition says the disciple Matthew wrote it, the author never identifies himself. But he may be giving us a clue to his identity when he includes, at a strategic place in the book, a saying of Jesus that isn't recorded anywhere else: every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old. This clue, and the character of the book itself, suggest that the author was actually someone highly trained in the Hebrew Scriptures, rather than a tax collector like Matthew. It's hard to tell exactly where and when this book was written. But much of what it says can be best understood by those who are familiar with Israel's Scriptures, so we can be reasonably sure it was written within a community of Jews who believed in Jesus as their Messiah. Its author was most likely, in other words, a teacher of the law who had been instructed about the kingdom of heaven that Jesus was now establishing on earth. He wrote to tell his fellow Jews how Jesus, the promised king, was creating a new community by bringing the ancient Jewish story to its climax. This book uses a combination of literary forms (an ancestor list; action sequences; collected teachings) to show that God is fulfilling his ancient promises to Israel through the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. To portray Jesus as the culmination of the work God began through Israel, the author starts the book with a list of Jesus' ancestors. The list highlights how Jesus was the son (descendant) of David, Israel's most famous king, and the son of Abraham, Israel's founding patriarch. In other words, Jesus is the true Israelite and the long-awaited Messiah. The list is arranged to show Jesus coming at the beginning of the seventh group of seven

generations since Abraham. The seventh seven was, for the Jews, a time of special celebration, so the message is that Jesus came to bring a special time of God's blessing to the world. After this opening ancestor list, the author tells the story of Jesus' life. He draws several parallels at the beginning of the story between Jesus and Moses. For example, like Moses, Jesus narrowly escapes death when a ruler attempts to kill all Hebrew baby boys. Just as Moses spent forty years in the desert, Jesus spends forty days in the desert before beginning his ministry. As these parallels develop, they show that just as Moses was the founder of the original nation of Israel, Jesus came as the founder of a renewed Israel. Jesus also embodies this renewed Israel himself. His experience echoes the themes of Israel's experience under Moses. But where Israel failed to follow God, Jesus obeys. Soon after God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and formed them into a nation, two key events happened. Right after a covenant-making ceremony in the desert, the people fell to the temptation of worshipping other gods. Later, Israel crossed the Jordan River and followed their leader Joshua into the land God had promised them. The book of Matthew shows how two corresponding events took place at the beginning of Jesus' own ministry. Jesus goes down to the Jordan River and is baptized, in a ceremony that demonstrates his loyalty to God's covenant with Israel. Then Jesus goes into the desert and is also tempted. But he resists the enticement to evil and triumphs over God's adversary. In all of this Matthew reveals Jesus as starting a movement to renew Israel, inviting the people to a new beginning with their God. But the author draws the most important parallel between Jesus and Moses by the way he organizes his work as a whole. Moses gave the people of Israel the Torah (or law) and it was traditionally divided into five books. In Matthew the teachings of Jesus are organized into five long speeches,

which are inserted into the story at intervals. Just as Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the law, Jesus goes up on a mountain to give his first speech. In these ways Jesus is revealed as the new Moses, and his teaching becomes the foundation of the multinational community that now constitutes the people of God. To show us how important these five speeches are, the author marks them all in the same way. Each one begins with the disciples coming to Jesus for teaching. Each one ends with a variation of the phrase, When Jesus had finished saying these things ... These five speeches express five different themes, and these themes run through the episodes in the story that lead up to them. And so the core of the book is divided into five thematic sections consisting of story plus teaching. These sections address five key aspects of the kingdom of heaven:

- : The first section reveals that this kingdom is based on a way of righteous living in which outward action expresses inward character (pp. 1700–1707).
- : The second section demonstrates how Jesus chose twelve disciples as a symbol of the renewed Israel and sent them out on a mission to announce the coming of the kingdom of heaven (pp. 1707–1712).
- : The third section explores the mystery of the kingdom: it's hard to recognize and easy to misunderstand, but it's nevertheless actively growing throughout the world (pp. 1712–1717).
- : The fourth section shows how the kingdom of heaven creates a new family, the community of Jesus' followers (pp. 1717–1723).
- : The fifth section shows that the destiny of this kingdom is for its citizens to be scattered throughout the world by their enemies, giving them the opportunity to tell people everywhere about Jesus (pp. 1723–1734).

After this new Torah has been given, the book concludes with the story of how Jesus performed a great new act of redemption for his people. In the ancient story of Israel's exodus, a Passover meal was celebrated and then the deliverance came. In this story, Jesus celebrates the Passover with

his disciples and then gives his life for the sake of the world. He is then raised from the dead, the dawn of a day of new creation. Jesus announces that he has been enthroned as king: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. At the beginning of Matthew, Jesus' birth was announced with the name Immanuel, which means "God with us." At the end of the book, Jesus sends his closest followers to go and make disciples of all nations, promising them, surely I am with you always.