

## Matthew's Occasion and Purpose

(Dan Wallace)

Before looking at Matthew's *specific* occasion for writing his gospel, it might be beneficial to survey why the gospels were written at all. Several reasons come to mind: (1) the delay of Christ's coming prompted the writing of the gospels, for otherwise how would second-generation Christians recognize the signs of his return? Thus, the Olivet Discourse would naturally figure prominently in a gospel, regardless of when it was penned. (2) The apostles and other eye-witnesses were aging. There was thus a need for the preservation of the material into a codified or catechetical form. (3) There was the need for a wide distribution of the material, since not every church had its own apostle. (4) There was a natural interest in the life of the historical Jesus on the part of new believers. (5) The new believers needed edification. When Peter says that they should "follow in his footsteps" (1 Peter 2:21) this would naturally presuppose that some knowledge of the life of the Lord should be known. (6) Christians who were suffering persecution needed to know the anchor of their souls better that they might be strong in stormy times. (7) There seem to have been apologetic purposes as well: to distinguish Christianity from Judaism, to correct misconceptions about Christ during the early and rapid influx of heresies, to evangelize and strengthen converts, etc.

Regarding the specific *occasion* for Matthew's Gospel, two possibilities exist. First, Matthew's congregation(s) already had the sayings of Jesus which Matthew had produced in Aramaic years earlier. His secondary audience had them, too, for they were translated into Greek relatively soon after their production. Once Mark's Gospel was published, however, there was a felt need among Matthew's congregations to have a framework for the dominical sayings. His audience wanted more than quotations; they wanted the life of Jesus of Nazareth, too. Since Mark's Gospel was at hand, it supplied a ready framework for the dominical material. Matthew, then, reshaped the dominical material into various topics and used Mark as the narrative framework. In other words, Matthew's Gospel may well have been produced because Mark's Gospel was the catalyst. It served, then, an *edifying* function for believers.

Second, Matthew's Gospel was, in all probability, produced because his Jewish-Christian audience was undergoing persecution by their Jewish neighbors. This is evident from the themes and motifs in this gospel: emphasis on blessing for the persecuted and hostility toward those who bring the gospel; condemnation of the religious leaders of the day for their blindness and hypocrisy; and, quite diplomatically, an apologetic for keeping the Law: keeping the Law *better* than the religious leaders did was the criterion for entrance into the kingdom (5:17-20). As we will see, this occasion melts into the purpose of the gospel quite naturally.

The *purposes* of this gospel are certainly manifold. Nevertheless, there do seem to be three main objectives. First, this gospel was written to demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah. This can be seen especially in the *genealogy* (which would have meaning for a Jewish audience that



required proof of Jesus' lineage), the *miracles* of Jesus (which would affirm Jesus' authority not only as a spokesman for God, but as one who was ushering in a new age), and the *OT quotations* (which, with their unique introductory formula, are designed to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the hope of Israel).

Second, the book was written to give an answer to the question, "If Jesus is the Messiah, why did he fail to establish his kingdom? The answer, in a nutshell, is that Jesus did not fail; the nation did. Yet, the kingdom has been *inaugurated* for those who fully embrace him as Messiah, and it will be *consummated* at the end of the age. Hence, in answering this question there is both an apologetic purpose and an evangelistic one: the Jewish Christians needed to have a defense before their Jewish non-believing neighbors and they also needed to understand the rationale for bringing the good news to Gentiles, viz., while the nation was in a state of rejecting God's Messiah, a new program had been instituted in which Gentiles were accepted into the fold. It is also possible to detect in this gospel perhaps a sense that not all of Matthew's audience had truly embraced Jesus as the Messiah. If so, then the apologetic purpose was directed toward them as well as to their neighbors. In other words, Matthew was writing to *professing* believers who were Jewish, though many of them had nagging doubts about the person of Christ and his program.

Third, the gospel was written to confirm the legitimacy of the Gentile mission. The culmination of the Gospel is the Great Commission in which the Gentile missionary endeavor is given its full support, in light of the failure of the nation to embrace Jesus as Messiah. Some have even argued, on the basis of the Great Commission, that the author was a Gentile! This, of course, is unnecessary and reductionistic, but it does illustrate the significance of the Great Commission as the crescendo of this Gospel.

In sum, Matthew first proves that Jesus was the Messiah. Second, he shows that Jesus did not fail to establish the kingdom (the failure was the nation's—and the kingdom was inaugurated, though not consummated in the coming of the Messiah). Finally, he wishes to show that because the nation failed to respond, the gospel was now open to Gentiles. But even in this final point Matthew walks a tightrope between giving his audience a rationale for the Gentile mission and making sure that they do not offend their Jewish neighbors by abandoning the Law. In this respect, 5:17-20 and 28:16-20 stand out as the theological cornerstones of this book, and they stand in some tension.