

# New Testament Book Backgrounds

## The Gospel of Matthew

### Audience and Date

Matthew was one of Jesus' 12 apostles. This Gospel is filled with Old Testament quotations and references because Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to try and persuade them to believe that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. This Gospel was probably finished sometime in the ad 60's.

### History

This Gospel was written to Jews who knew the whole story of the Old Testament very well. So to fully understand the Gospel of Matthew, we need to look back to the story of the Old Testament and see the many promises the Messiah was to fulfill. The story of redemption goes all the way back to the beginning of Genesis.

- In the beginning, God created everything. He made man in His image and placed him in a garden where He had a relationship with him. God told him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but man disobeyed God and so sin entered the world. God cursed man because of his sin, but as part of God's promise of redemption, He said that the Seed of the woman (Jesus) would crush the head of the serpent (Satan) in Genesis 3:15 (Rom. 16:20).
- After this, sin spread throughout the world. God destroyed the world by flood because of sin in Genesis 7 and only saved Noah's family because he was a righteous man. This shows us that God is serious about punishing those who rebel against Him in sin.
- God later called on a man named Abraham and said that He would give him a land and many descendants and would make his people into a nation. God also said that in his seed (Jesus) all the nations would be blessed (Gal. 3:16). Abraham believed God's promise and was credited as righteous by his faith (Gen. 15:6).
- Abraham had a son named Isaac who had a son named Jacob who was later renamed to Israel. Later, the Israelites (70 people) moved to Egypt through Joseph's provision to be saved from a famine.
- Around 400 years went by and the people grew in number to between two and three million. These Israelites were oppressed and enslaved by the Egyptians. God had compassion on His people and sent Moses as a prophet and leader to free the people from slavery by miraculous signs against Pharaoh. Moses told the people that God would one day send another Prophet like him that all of the people must listen to or else they would be cut off from God's people (Deut. 18:18, Acts 3:22-23)
- God then freed the Israelites from their slavery and parted the Red Sea to help them escape from the Egyptians. He then gave them an offer of a covenant relationship with Him through the Law. They agreed, but the people quickly rebelled and were punished. God eventually destroyed the whole generation of Israelites for their sin and rebellion against Him as they wandered in the desert for forty years (Num. 14).
- Their children were then allowed to inherit the land God promised to Abraham (Israel: The Promised Land). God made a covenant with the people and said that if they would obey Him, He would bless them, but if not, He would punish them severely (Deut. 28).
- After the people took the Promised Land, there was a cycle of sin, punishment, repentance and restoration for hundreds of years (Judges). Eventually the people asked for a King. Saul was the first king and then God replaced him with David because of Saul's sins. God promised to send another King (Jesus) in the line of David who would rule forever (Isa. 9:7, Luke 1:32-33).
- The people turned to horrible sins and idolatry after David's time and God sent prophets to warn the people to repent of their sins and turn back to fully following God. The prophets also told of a future Messiah who would save the people from their sins (Isa. 53:5-6).
- God sent chastisement and eventually rejected the people because of their sins. He banished them from the Promised Land, but He gave them hope and said that if they would repent and return to Him with their whole heart He would bring them back to the land. The people did eventually return to the land of Israel, and since that time, the people had been waiting for their promised Messiah who would save

them; the King in the line of David, the Prophet like Moses, the blessing of the Seed of Abraham and the Seed of Eve who would crush Satan.

### **Setting the Stage**

There had been over 400 years since the last prophet spoke. The Jewish people were now under the rule of the great Roman Empire. They were eagerly awaiting their prophesied King who would restore the Kingdom to Israel and rule over the nations. And now the stage is set for the Gospel of Matthew.

### **The Gospel of Mark**

This letter was probably written by John Mark, who worked with Paul and Peter in ministry. Tradition states that this Gospel was largely influenced by the Apostle Peter who was probably Mark's main source of information. Mark's purpose for writing is to share the Gospel of the Kingdom and to give a brief overview of Jesus' life, works and teachings. This book was probably intended for a Gentile audience as it does not have many Old Testament references like the Gospel of Matthew does. The date for writing may have been in the AD 60's.

### **The Gospel of Luke**

This letter was written around AD 60 by a Gentile physician named Luke who was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. His purpose for writing is mentioned in the first few verses where he says he is writing to tell us the truth about Jesus. He seems to write to a Gentile audience and includes many details in his gospel.

### **The Gospel of John**

The Apostle John, one of Jesus' closest disciples was the author of this Gospel. He clearly states his purpose for writing at the end; "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (20:31). He seems to be writing to Greeks more than Jews as he often uses the idea of light and darkness which is an idea that was common in the Greek world where light stood for good and darkness stood for evil. This book was probably written sometime between AD 50-90.

### **Acts**

This letter was probably written by Luke the physician, a traveling companion of Paul. He wrote sometime around AD 63. This letter shares the first 30 years of the history of the church (AD 33-63). It starts by teaching how the church started among the Jews. Luke then shares of Paul's missionary journeys and how he started churches in many Gentile cities. There is a strong emphasis in this book on the work of the Holy Spirit in the spread of the Gospel throughout the world and the power and signs He provides to believers to do the work of ministry.

### **Romans**

This letter was written around AD 57 by Paul to the church at Rome. This church had a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers who apparently were having some issues getting along together because of their different traditions and backgrounds (14:1-23). This church was probably originally started and led by Jews who became Christians. But then later the Jews were expelled from Rome for a time (Acts 18:2) and so the Gentile believers probably took over the leadership of the church. Then when the Jews returned, there seems to have been some considerable conflict as to who should lead and whose traditions should be followed in the church. Paul spends the first eleven chapters laying out theology about salvation in order to show the Jews that the Gentiles are just as much a part of God's plan of salvation through faith in Christ as they are. He does this to help them see why they should love one another and put other's needs above their own. Chapters 12-16 contain the practical teachings of how to love others even in the context of having different opinions and backgrounds.

### **1st Corinthians**

This letter was written around AD 55 by the apostle Paul to the Christians in the city of Corinth. This city was large and had a pagan temple that was known for having as many as 1,000 prostitutes. This area was known for its sexual immorality, which is why Paul addresses this particular sin several times (Chapters 4-5). The believers at Corinth had many different issues that they were struggling with. This letter contains a series of rebukes and

corrections to try and help set these people free from the lies of the enemy. This letter also contains several intense warnings about the seriousness of sin and the need for church discipline for those who are unwilling to repent (5:1-13, 6:9-10, 15:33-34). He also gives us the most detailed teaching on spiritual gifts and how our church gatherings should function (Chapters 11-14).

### **2nd Corinthians**

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter probably only a few months after he wrote 1 Corinthians in AD 55. He writes to defend his ministry against the attack of false teachers and to continue to teach this church to live a holy life and be separate from unbelievers in the world.

### **Galatians**

This letter was written by Paul sometime between AD 45-57. His purpose was to warn these Christians not to turn back to the Old Covenant as a means for salvation. He rebukes the false teachers who were trying to force the Gentile Christians to be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). He says that it is a false Gospel to say that you have to become a Jew and submit yourself under the Old Covenant Law through circumcision in order to be saved (5:1-4). We are saved by faith in Christ, not through circumcision (2:16, 3:8-9, 3:24). Paul also gives an important teaching on what it looks like to walk by the Spirit in chapter 5. He also teaches that those who turn back to living according to the flesh will not inherit the Kingdom (5:19-21, 6:7-8).

### **Ephesians**

Paul spent three years doing ministry in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). This was a large and important city because of its trade routes. Ephesus was also known for its temple devoted to the false god Artemis (Acts 19:26-28). Paul wrote this letter around AD 60 to a mostly Gentile audience to encourage them with the awesome truth that in Christ, the Gentiles have become one with God's people (Eph. 2:13-14). God has had a plan since before He created the world that in Christ, all people, both Jews and Gentiles, can come into a right relationship with Him through repentance and faith (Eph. 1:1-14). Paul spends the first three chapters teaching us these important truths about God's plan of salvation by His grace that is received through faith. Then in chapters 4-6 he teaches us how we should respond to God's grace. He says that we are to live in a manner worthy of the Lord (Eph. 4:1). Paul also gives us important insight into spiritual warfare and the weapons that God has given us to help us persevere and have victory in this war (Eph. 4:26-27, 6:10-18).

### **Philippians**

This letter was written to the church in Philippi by the Apostle Paul around AD 61, probably from prison (1:12). These believers were doing well at following the Lord (2:12), so most of the letter has an encouraging tone to it. However, there were false teachers who were trying to lead them astray, so Paul did give them warnings and exhortations to continue to remain faithful to Christ and not be pulled away by false teachings (1:9-11, 2:14-16, 3:2-3, 3:17-21). A major theme in this letter is rejoicing in the Lord. Joy in its various forms appears 16 times.

### **Colossians**

Paul probably wrote this letter from a Roman prison around AD 60. He writes to encourage the believers and to warn them against false teachers who were trying to lead these believers astray by teaching them to follow meaningless rules like abstaining from certain foods or observing special days (2:16-23). These false teachers were turning the people away from devotion to Christ, so Paul exalts Christ throughout this letter so that the reader will know that Christ is supreme over human traditions. Jesus is the image of God (1:15), the Creator (1:16) and in Him is all knowledge and wisdom (2:2-3). Paul also provides many practical instructions on how to live a godly life.

### **1st Thessalonians**

This letter was written by Paul, Silvanus and Timothy around AD 51. They wrote to encourage these believers by telling them of the hope we have in the end if we are in Christ as well as instructing them on godly living.

### **2nd Thessalonians**

This letter was written not long after 1 Thessalonians (around AD 52) and is mainly about the end times. It seems that someone told these believers that the day of the Lord had already come and they missed it. This disturbed

them so Paul is writing to comfort them (2:1-2) and to correct this false teaching. He also exhorts them to live holy lives and to be willing to work as some were waiting on the Lord's return and were unwilling to do any work.

### **1st Timothy**

This letter was written by Paul around AD 64 to Timothy who was someone Paul disciplined. Paul wrote to give Timothy instructions for church leadership; how to pick leaders, how leaders should be conducting themselves and the roles they should fulfill. He also wrote to warn about false teachers and other dangers that could lead people to fall away from the faith.

### **2nd Timothy**

This letter was written by Paul around AD 66 from a Roman prison cell. This was near to the end of Paul's life and his execution under Emperor Nero was coming soon. He writes to his friend and disciple Timothy to share some last words of encouragement and instructions for church leadership and to ask him to come and visit.

### **Titus**

This letter was written by Paul around AD 63 after he was released from his first Roman imprisonment. He wrote to provide instructions about church leadership, how to deal with false teachers and to instruct in godly living.

### **Philemon**

This letter was written around AD 61 to a slave owner named Philemon to try and persuade him to release one of his slaves who escaped and was now a friend of Paul.

### **Hebrews**

This letter was probably written in the late AD 60's during a time of great persecution against Christians under Emperor Nero. Under the reign of Nero, Christians were brutally tortured and murdered. There are stories that he would crucify Christians in his gardens and then light them on fire as torches to give light for his orgy parties. Church history also tells us that Nero would have Christians brought into the Coliseum and tied in animal skins and then they would let wild dogs loose to tear them to pieces as entertainment for the crowds. This brutal persecution is the backdrop behind the author's exhortation to stand firm in their faith, no matter what we may face for following Jesus.

This letter was written to Jewish Christians who knew that this type of persecution may soon come upon them. They were being faced with a terrible temptation to turn back to Judaism in order to escape this persecution that was happening to the Christians. The author gives a series of warnings to these believers to exhort them to never turn away from Christ under any circumstances. He tells them that if they turn back, there is no longer any sacrifice for sins, that they will not be saved and instead will be destroyed (Heb. 10:26-39, 3:12-4:2).

The logical argument that the author makes throughout this letter is that Christ is far superior to anything or anyone under the Old Covenant, including angels, Moses, the priesthood and the rituals. And not only is Christ greater than the Old Covenant, but He has also made the Old Covenant obsolete (Heb. 8:13, 10:9). So if these Jewish believers turn away from their faith in Christ and seek to find salvation under the Old Covenant, they will experience God's eternal wrath for their sins because they have rejected the only means of forgiveness that God now offers (Heb. 10:26-31).

This letter to the Hebrews is very applicable to us today because it teaches us of our desperate need to remain faithful to Christ, no matter what Satan tempts us with. In some places in the world, Christians are persecuted in much the same way that these believers were persecuted. This letter gives these persecuted believers a strong exhortation to remain faithful to Christ, just as He called His disciples to do, even if it costs us our life (Matt. 24:9-13, Luke 9:23-26). This letter also warns believers of the dangers of allowing sin to remain in our life as this sin can kill our faith and cause us to turn away from Christ (Heb. 3:12-19, 10:26-31, 10:35-39, 6:4-8). If we want to inherit God's eternal Kingdom in the end, we must remain faithful to Christ until the end (Heb. 3:14, 3:6, Col. 1:21-23, Matt. 10:22).

### **James**

This book was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus sometime in the 50's A.D. James says that he writes to "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" which seems to indicate that he is writing to Jewish people (v1). This

letter seems to address Christians in some parts, but it also seems to be rebuking those who claim to be Christians but who are not living out their faith in a lifestyle of obedience to God's ways. James teaches us that faith without works is dead (2:14-26) and that friendship with the world is hatred towards God and makes us His enemy (4:4). He also rebukes other sins and gives exhortations on how to live a holy life.

### **1st Peter**

This letter was written by the Apostle Peter around AD 64. At this time, Christians were being persecuted by the Roman government, sometimes in awful ways. Peter wrote to Christians who were scattered around the Empire encouraging them to persevere in their faith and obedience even if it required that they suffer for their faith. One of the main themes in this book is dealing with suffering. Peter tells us that Christ suffered for us and therefore we should be willing to suffer for Him and to also live a godly life as one of His people.

### **2nd Peter**

This letter was written around AD 66 by the Apostle Peter. He wrote to warn believers of false teachers and evildoers. He also encourages the believers to remain faithful to the Lord. He teaches us that the end is near where God will destroy the world with fire but He is being patient because He desires all to come to repentance (3:9).

### **1st John**

The Apostle John wrote this letter between AD 60-90 to combat several false teachings. These gnostic teachings (gnostic means focusing on special knowledge) taught that there was a complete separation between flesh and spirit, where the human body (flesh) is all evil and the spirit of a person is all good. They used this false teaching to try and convince Christians that it was ok to do evil in your flesh as long as you kept a pure spirit. So you could do things like sleep with prostitutes and get drunk, but as long as your spirit was pure, they would say that these things weren't wrong. Their logic was that the body is all evil anyways so it doesn't really matter what we do with our body. In fact, they seemed to be teaching that fleshly sins were not really even sin. That is why John taught:

- **1 John 1:8 (NASB95)** "8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us."
- **1 John 3:4 (NASB95)** "4 Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness."

In Christianity today, we have a similar problem because many in church think that sin is normal and unavoidable for Christians. They falsely believe that we are still enslaved to sin and can't live in freedom, so why try. This is a very dangerous lie because John teaches us that those who continue to love the world and live in sin will not have eternal life (1 John 2:15-17, 3:1-10). If we truly know God, we should now live a lifestyle of seeking to obey His commands and live as Jesus did (1 John 2:3-6). This is the evidence of faith and love for God.

These false gnostic teachings also led these people to distort who Jesus is. They concluded that because flesh is all evil, then Jesus couldn't have been the Son of God and a real human because if He were, then He would be evil because He was of flesh. So either He wasn't the Son of God or He wasn't a real human. So they questioned whether He was really a human who came in the physical flesh or if He was just a spirit being. This led John to write things like:

- **1 John 1:1 (NASB95)** "1 What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—"
  - In this verse, John is proving that Jesus was a real man by saying that he touched Him with his own hands.
- **1 John 4:2-3 (NASB95)** "2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world."
  - This passage shows how serious it is to deny that Jesus is the Christ or to say that He was not a real person who came in the flesh.

**2nd John**

The Apostle John wrote this letter between AD 60-90, shortly after his first letter. His purpose was to teach that loving one another is essential to Christianity and also to warn against false teachers who deny that Jesus is the Christ.

**3rd John**

This letter was written by the apostle John between AD 60-90 He writes to a church leader named Gaius to encourage him and to reprove a man named Diotrephes who was rebelling against John's leadership in the church.

**Jude**

This letter was probably written around AD 65, possibly by the brother of Jesus. His main theme is to rebuke the false teachers who were using the grace of God as a license to sin. This letter is a stern warning not to turn back into the way of sin because if we do we will be eternally condemned.

**Revelation**

The Apostle John was given this Revelation from Jesus Christ to the seven churches of Asia, around AD 95 (1:1-4). In chapters 2-3, Jesus tells the churches to repent and to follow Him with perseverance even though persecution may come. The rest of the letter tells of God's judgment that He will pour out on the earth as a punishment of sin in the end. The Revelation concludes by telling the saints of the good news of God's eternal Kingdom that will come at the end of time where all those who overcome in the faith will dwell with God forever (21:1-7).