

FOUR PORTRAITS OF THE ONE SAVIOR

Discovering Why the Bible
Has Four Gospels

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INTRODUCTION

No one knows what Jesus looked like. Was he handsome? Was he ugly? Nowhere does the Bible describe his height, his weight, the color of his skin, the color of his eyes, or the color or length of his hair.

But that hasn't prevented hundreds of artists over the centuries from painting portraits of him. A mural painting in the catacombs from the fourth century depicts Jesus as having long, dark hair and a full beard. In the fifth century in Ethiopia, Jesus was portrayed with black African features. Early traditions in Asia and elsewhere portrayed Jesus as one of the local population. By the Middle Ages, images of Jesus often depicted the prevailing theology. For example, an eleventh-century portrait of Jesus shows him as the *Pantocrator*, or universal ruler, with a halo in the form of a cross. A twelfth-century manuscript depicts Jesus in majesty with no beard. Another portrait depicts him as a medieval knight bearing a coat of arms.

During the Renaissance, paintings of Jesus continued to reflect the theology of the time. In his *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ*, the fifteenth-century artist Botticelli showed the gruesome reality of the death of Christ. The sixteenth-century Venetian artist Titian depicted the agony and suffering of Jesus on the cross. The famous Dutch artist Rembrandt (1606–1669) depicted the suffering Jesus as having long, dark hair; a dark beard; dark eyes; and fair skin.

Since then, most paintings, at least most Western paintings, have followed suit. Warner Sallman's (1892–1968) portrait of Christ is said to be the most popular picture of Jesus of all time. Warner too depicted Jesus' having long, but wavy hair, a full beard, a straight nose, and dark bronze skin. In more recent times, Richard Hook (1914–1975) again portrayed Jesus with dark hair (but not as long or as well-kempt), a full beard, dark eyes, and a hint of a smile. Probably most of us, when we picture Jesus in our minds, see something

like the Sallman or Hook portrait, even though we know Jesus may not have looked anything like that.

Recently, British scientists assisted by Israeli archaeologists—using methods similar to those police have developed to solve crimes—re-created a portrait of what they believe is the most accurate image of Jesus ever made. Jesus has dark hair and a beard, but otherwise it doesn't look anything like the portraits created by painters over the centuries.

Portraits are different from photographs. Usually photographs of a person look pretty much the same because cameras capture exactly what they see. Portraits, however, may have noticeable differences. One portrait may emphasize the shape and size of certain facial features in a slightly different way than another portrait. In one portrait there may be a slightly different curvature of the mouth. In another portrait the eyes may be a slightly different shape. You can tell it's the same person, but there are subtle differences.

It's much like that in the word portraits the four evangelists paint of the Savior. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each paint a portrait, but each has his own purpose for doing so. Each is writing to a different person or group of people with their own depth of knowledge, their own level of understanding, their own unique circumstances, and their own special needs. Each evangelist, therefore, emphasizes different features about Jesus—about who he is, about what he did, and about what he said. But as the reader carefully examines each portrait, it quickly becomes evident that each evangelist is describing the same Savior. Each is describing the Savior who was born of a virgin, who performed miracles, who proclaimed the message of the gospel, who lived a sinless life, who died on the cross of Calvary, and who rose again from the dead on the third day. Each evangelist is describing your Savior and mine.

Matthew is writing to Jewish people familiar with the Old Testament, so he emphasizes that Jesus is the promised Messiah, whom believers had expected for centuries. He refers to a number of messianic prophecies, particularly at the beginning and again at the end of his gospel, and shows how they have been fulfilled in Jesus.

Matthew also arranges topics in groups of three, five, seven, or ten, because he knows these numbers are significant and meaningful for his Jewish readers. He divides his account into five major parts to correspond to the five books of Moses and the five divisions of the Psalms. He groups the miracles that Jesus performed, parables he told, and woes he pronounced into units that would carry special significance for his readers. Matthew makes sharp contrasts between those who, like the Jews of his day, are trying to be saved by the law and those who put their trust in Jesus for salvation.

Matthew emphasizes that Jesus fulfilled the law and bore its curse. He emphasizes to people who were steeped in work-righteousness that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3). To those who were looking for a Messiah who would be a king like David or Solomon, Matthew insists that Jesus is a King, but that his kingdom is not of this world. He describes how Jesus called, trained, and sent out disciples to encourage those who had been followers of Judaism to become followers of Christ.

Because his readers are Jewish, Matthew traces Jesus' family tree back to Abraham. He chooses certain events, people, and customs that carry special significance for Jewish readers. He records specific miracles, parables, and discourses of Jesus that do the same.

Who Is Matthew?

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew

got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:9-13)

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (Matthew 10:2-4)

"Gift of God." That's what his name means. But people who had to deal with Matthew before he became a disciple could hardly think of Matthew as a "gift of God." Maybe a "curse from God," or a "child of the devil," but not a "gift of God." Matthew was a member of the despised class of publicans, or tax collectors. When Jesus was called a "friend of tax collectors and 'sinners'" (Luke 7:34), it was hardly a compliment. *Publicans* and *sinners* were considered synonymous terms. People in first-century Palestine hated these men because they collected taxes for the pagan Romans who had invaded their land. Ever since the Roman general Pompey had come to Palestine to settle a quarrel between two Jewish brothers, the Romans had taken over. They didn't rule directly. Rather, they appointed the Idumeans to rule on their behalf. But that was a double offense, because the Idumeans were descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother. Over the centuries the nations that came from these squabbling twins had often been at odds with each other.

Tax collectors were despised, not only because the huge amounts of money they collected were intended for the Romans but also because tax collectors like Matthew had the reputation of being extortionists and embezzlers. They would often use force, threats, or other methods to collect money. There was the strong suspicion, probably justified, that many of the tax collectors were skimming off for themselves large sums from the money they collected for the government.

Matthew worked as a tax collector in the town of Capernaum located near the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. His father's name was Alphaeus, but that's all we know of his origins and early life. We are first introduced to him when Jesus called him to be his disciple. As Matthew himself recounts the story, Jesus had just come from his hometown of Nazareth, where he had healed a paralyzed man. The people who witnessed this miracle "were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men" (Matthew 9:8). Shortly thereafter Jesus came to Capernaum and saw Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. Most people would have kept their distance from somebody like Matthew, but Jesus went up to him and said, "Follow me" (Matthew 9:9).

Matthew was not his real name. The gospels of Mark (2:14) and Luke (5:27) identify him as Levi. It seems that he changed his name to Matthew, "gift of God," in grateful memory of his call by Jesus. No sooner did Jesus call him than Matthew got up, left his tax collector's booth, and followed Jesus. Was there someone else there to take over the tax collecting work? We don't know. Possibly. Had Matthew heard Jesus speak before? Had he seen him perform a miracle? Was that why he was willing to follow him immediately? Perhaps the Savior's powerful call simply caused him to leave everything behind.

After Jesus called him, Matthew suddenly became a changed man. He was no longer concerned about raking in some of the tax money for himself. Instead, he arranged for a great banquet to be held at his house in Jesus' honor. Such a banquet must have cost him a great deal of money, but that didn't seem to concern him because now his heart was filled with love for and gratitude to Jesus. He wanted to do something to show it. Interestingly enough, it isn't Matthew who tells us he held a "great banquet" for Jesus; it's Luke. Matthew simply says that Jesus was having dinner at his house. Matthew must have had a good-sized house because a large number of people were invited to the banquet. Luke says that "a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them" (Luke 5:29). Luke also says that Matthew made a "great banquet" for all these people. Matthew is silent about that. He simply says that many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating at his house.

There seem to have been several purposes for this feast at Matthew's house. First, he wanted to show his gratitude to Jesus, who had just called him to be his disciple. Second, he wanted to introduce his fellow tax collectors and other "sinners" to the one whom he recognized as the promised Messiah. Third, he probably wanted to say good-bye to his former associates, since he was now leaving the tax collecting business to follow Jesus.

We will learn more about Matthew's nature and personality as we examine his style of writing, the way he organizes his materials, and the themes he highlights. But for now we can note that one of Matthew's themes is discipleship. Even as he himself had become a disciple, that is, a student and follower of Jesus, it is clear that he is passionate about wanting his Jewish readers and all people, for that matter, to become Jesus' disciples. Besides being passionate, Matthew seems also to have been humble. When he lists the names of the twelve disciples, he identifies himself as "the tax collector" (Matthew 10:3). Mark (3:14-19) and Luke (6:12-16) simply identify him as "Matthew," saying nothing about his shady past. By identifying his former profession, Matthew seems to be marveling at the grace of God that a person like him who had been a tax collector—and probably therefore an extortionist, an embezzler, and a thief—should be called by Jesus to be his disciple.

To Whom Did Matthew Write?

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" (Matthew 2:4-6)

The first clue as to Matthew's original audience is found in the first verse of his gospel: "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew begins his genealogy of Jesus with Abraham and David. Abraham was the father of

God's people, the Jews; David was the greatest king of the Jews. To both of these men God had given special promises that from their descendants the Messiah would come. The contrast to this is Luke's genealogy of Jesus in chapter 3 of his gospel. There Luke traces Jesus' genealogy all the way back to Adam (3:38) to emphasize that Jesus is the Savior of all people.

Another clue regarding Matthew's audience is the word *fulfilled*. In chapter 1, Matthew relates the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Joseph, who told him not to be afraid to take Mary home as his wife because what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit. And then Matthew says, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet" (1:22). In chapter 2 there are four references to fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is said to be the fulfillment of what the prophet Micah had written (Matthew 2:5,6). The flight of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to Egypt, and their remaining there until the death of King Herod, is said to be the fulfillment of what the prophet Hosea had written (Matthew 2:15). Herod's command that all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under were to be killed fulfills the words of Jeremiah (Matthew 2:17,18). And the decision to live in Nazareth in Galilee, rather than in Judea, fulfills the words of the prophets (Matthew 2:23). There are about 20 other references like this to the fulfillment of prophecy in Matthew's gospel. In addition, Matthew refers to Old Testament prophecies about 60 times and quotes from the Old Testament about 40 times. It becomes abundantly clear that Matthew's intended audience is the Jews.

This is also evident from the fact that Matthew emphasizes Jesus' mission to the Jews. When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples, he gave them the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (10:5,6). Once when Jesus was in the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman pleaded for him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. When the disciples begged Jesus to send her away, Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (15:24). Without question Jesus came to be the Savior of all people, but Matthew obviously emphasizes what he did for the sake of his Jewish readers.

Further evidence that Matthew is writing for Jewish people is his emphasis on the “kingdom.” The word *kingdom* occurs 50 times in his gospel, and the expression “kingdom of heaven” occurs 30 times. This emphasis on the kingdom would have been significant for Matthew’s first readers because they expected the Messiah to restore the grandeur and glory of the kingdoms of David and Solomon. They wanted a king who would free them from Roman occupation and make of them a great world power. That is why, throughout his gospel, Matthew seeks to help his readers understand the kind of King the Messiah actually came to be.

Consider the following examples: John the Baptist preached in the Desert of Judea: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (3:2). Jesus was not coming to be an earthly king but the King of salvation, who called on people to repent and believe in him. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (6:33). The context emphasizes that this is not a worldly but a spiritual kingdom. It is not about food and drink and clothing and other material things. It is a spiritual kingdom where righteousness reigns. Commenting on the faith of the centurion who had asked him to heal his servant, Jesus said: “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (8:11,12). The contrast between the heavenly kingdom of believers and the worldly kingdom of unbelievers emphasizes that Jesus’ kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. In his explanation of the parable of the sower, Jesus says, “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart” (13:19). The seed of the gospel is planted in a person’s heart. This is obviously not a worldly kingdom. In his explanation of the parable of the weeds, Jesus says, “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil” (13:41). Jesus’ kingdom consists of those who believe in him and live for him. All

these references to the kingdom emphasize that Jesus rules in people's hearts by faith, that many spiritual blessings result from being in this kingdom, and that citizens in this kingdom are united by faith in Jesus.

It's fascinating to realize how often Matthew refers to Jesus as King. When the wise men came to Jerusalem, they asked, "Where is the one who has been born *king* of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him" (2:2). When Jesus made preparations to enter Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday, Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah as saying, "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your *king* comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'" (21:5). In the parable of the wedding banquet, Jesus says, "When the *king* came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes" (22:11). Describing the scene on judgment day, Jesus says, "Then the *King* will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world'" (25:34). When Jesus stood before him on trial, Pontius Pilate asked, "'Are you the *king* of the Jews?' 'Yes, it is as you say,' Jesus replied" (27:11). Above Jesus' head on the cross were written the words, "THIS IS JESUS, THE *KING OF THE JEWS*" (27:37). While Jesus was hanging on the cross, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders mocked him, saying: "He saved others . . . but he can't save himself! He's the *King* of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him" (27:42). Matthew's references to Jesus as King seem intended to convince his Jewish readers that Jesus is the kingly Messiah of Jewish prophecy, but not the kind of king many of them had come to expect. He was not an earthly king who would revive the grandeur and glory of Solomon's kingdom. He is a lowly King, born in humble circumstances, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, put to death on a cross, and subjected to mockery and ridicule. But this is the King of their salvation. Matthew is determined that his readers might know and believe this.

When Did Matthew Write His Gospel?

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:1-3)

The first converts to Christianity were Jews, and most of the early preaching of the gospel took place in Jewish synagogues. It would make sense, therefore, that Matthew’s gospel was used in the early church to help convince Jewish people that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Early traditions state that Matthew was the first of the gospels written. One tradition says that Matthew was originally written in the Aramaic language, spoken by Jews in Jesus’ day, and soon thereafter translated into the Greek language. Evidence that Matthew’s gospel was written relatively soon after the events it records can be gleaned from Jesus’ words about the signs of the end of the age recorded in chapter 24. Jesus and his disciples were in the area of the temple in Jerusalem when he asked: “Do you see all these things? . . . I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (24:2). We know that the Romans under General Titus destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. If Matthew had written after that date, one would think he surely would have called attention to the fulfillment of that prophecy. Other evidence that Matthew’s gospel was written early can be cited from chapter 27. The chapter opens with the account of Judas’ suicide. Then it recounts how the 30 silver coins Judas had received for betraying Jesus, and which he had thrown into the temple, were used to buy the potter’s field as a burial place for foreigners. Concerning the potter’s field, Matthew says, “That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day” (27:8). If the city of Jerusalem had been totally destroyed, as it was in A.D. 70, it is unlikely that anyone would have been able to identify where the “Field of Blood” had been.