

A general discussion about Matthew the Author

Omar Abur-Robb

Library: omr-mhmd.yolasite.com

omar.robb@yahoo.com

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Matthew has supported his views with many verses from the Old Testament (OT) that were totally “out-of-context”. For example, Matt 1:22: {All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet 23 The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us}.

Matthew here is referring to Isaiah 7:14, and in the Jewish Bible (mechon-mamre.org): {Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: behold, the young woman [i.e. Alma] shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel}.

And there are many other verses in the OT that Matthew used “out-of-context”, and I think Matthew knew this very well, but it seems that he thought these interpretations were valid. I am assuming here that Matthew was applying the Midrashic style of interpretation that was established by many Rabbis/Pharisees at the period that is known as the Tannaim starting probably about 10AD. In the famous story of “the oven of akhnai” (Bava Metzia 59b) there were two fundamental concepts that were derived from two verses in the OT that were taken out-of-context:

The Torah is not in heaven which was taken from Deuteronomy 30:12. The meaning of the verse in its context is that the Torah is not difficult, but many of the Rabbis used this part of the verse to conclude that God has no say on the interpretation of the Torah.

Follow the Majority which was taken from Exodus 23:2 and the meaning of this verse in its context is very clear: Do not follow the majority in doing wrong. However, many of the Rabbis have used this verse to establish the obligation of following the majority.

My understanding for this style of interpretation is that if a sentence was divine then probably many Rabbis thought that this sentence can cover many contexts outside its original one. There is an interesting lecture in YouTube for “Nehemia Gordon” (Ref: Nehemia) discussing this matter. In my view, Nehemia is a qualified but probably a biased Scholar; I think he would highlight all the data supporting his view while ignoring the main data opposing it. He insisted that the Gospel of Matthew was written first in Hebrew then afterward was translated to Greek, and he highlighted the data supporting this view without acknowledging the opposing data. I did notice in other lectures that he introduced other views using this method of presentation, which I think is biased. But still, he does draw the attention to so many interesting data, which would make his lectures very useful.

So, I am assuming here that Matthew followed the same exact style of interpretation, therefore, he probably knew that he is taking the OT verses out-of-context, but it seems that he regarded this style to be valid.

Based on the above discussion, I would assume that Matthew was either a qualified Rabbi (that converted later to the Nazarenes) or a son to one.

However, Matthew couldn't be a qualified Rabbi because it is highly-likely that he couldn't speak Hebrew properly. This conclusion is based on a story that Matthew presented about Jesus riding both a donkey and a colt in entering Jerusalem (Matt 21:7). This is based on Zechariah 9:9. As explained by Bart Ehrman (Ref: Bart-1), this verse is a poem about a king riding only one animal, and this is exactly what Simon Bar-Kochba have done when he went in a showoff parade entering Jerusalem riding a donkey.

So, if Matthew was a qualified Rabbi then he would have understood this poem properly, but he didn't. So, my assumption here is that Matthew lived in a Greek city and his father was a qualified Rabbi. However, Matthew didn't learn the Hebrew language properly, but it seems that he understood the Midrashic style of interpretation.

Just to be more precise in the previous analysis: there are actually four possibilities for Matthew being aware of the Midrashic interpretation: Matthew was a qualified Rabbi, a son to one, a related to one, or not related at all. The first and last options were excluded, so we have either being a son or related, and I preferred him being a son.

Also, it seems that Matthew did hide things in plain sights. One of the interesting things he presented in the genealogy of Jesus was the mention of 4 women (other than Mary). This was unusual, and the persisting question is: Why?! James Tabor had discussed this subject in his book "The Jesus Dynasty", and he also presented a post about this subject in the blog (Ref: James). Also, Bart Ehrman have discussed this subject in one of his posts (Ref: Bart-2). These 4 women were not highly ethical individuals (according to the OT), and there were many interpretations for explaining Matthew's intentions:

The interpretation of James Tabor in his book was that "Matthew was trying to put Jesus' own potentially scandalous birth into the context of his forefathers and foremothers".

But I don't think that this interpretation fit properly with the apparent theologies of Matthew.

Bart Ehrman has highlighted an interpretation that these 4 woman were gentiles, which indicate that Matthew was referring to the universal message of Jesus.

But as I have discussed in a previous platinum post [A discussion about the authenticity of Matthew 28:19], it seems that Matthew wasn't just a Jew for Jesus, but he probably believed that "Jesus should only be for the Jews".

I can present another interpretation in which Matthew had two objectives in mind:

1# To prove that Jesus is the rightful heir to the throne of David, and this objective was accomplished by the notion that Jesus is the adopted son of Joseph who is a descendant of David.

2# To show the need for the miraculous birth as Jesus blood need to be totally pure, therefore, he cannot be a descendant of those 4 women, therefore, he was born without a human father.

However, Matthew probably couldn't discuss this matter in the open, therefore, he just hinted it, probably leaving the discussion about it in his own private gatherings.

So, regardless of the true intentions of Matthew, we could conclude that he probably enjoyed hiding things in plain sights, and the question here would be: what other things he hid in his Gospel?

Now ... All the 4 Gospels are without the authors name, and the persisting question is: Why?! Many have thought the reason might be the fear from the Romans. But let us discuss this: The Gospel of Mark was written about 70AD and before any real oppression from the Romans, therefore, Mark shouldn't have been fearing the Romans. So, why didn't he put his name in the Gospel?

I like to imagine Mark as an ascetic peaceful Christian monk who preached from a village to another. If this was acceptable idea, then I can say that the Gospel of Mark was just a notebook; something that Mark wrote to help him in his preaching,, and he didn't have a problem giving these notes to others to copy. The copying of these notes would be very quick as it only contains about 11k words (equal to about 23 A4 pages). This could explain the strange abrupt ending of his Gospel (as the oldest manuscript of Mark ends in verse 16:8, while the newer ones ends in 16:20) in which Mark wrote his Gospel in a scroll and the space ended and he didn't want to write in the margin. The proposed idea here is that Mark didn't write his Gospel to be a circulated book, but to be as a preaching notebook. The drive for this idea is that Mark couldn't have been fearing the Romans in about 70AD.

The Gospels of Luke and John would have been written between 90 to 125AD. So, there is the possibility that Luke and John were fearing the oppression of the Romans, therefore, they preferred to keep their Gospels anonymous.

However, the oppression of the Romans for Christians is really a puzzle: It is almost certain that this oppression wasn't a "mass inquisition" (at least not in the first and second centuries), but also, it is clear that there was an oppression against them. So, the question would be: what was the criteria for the Romans to execute one Christian and leave the other?!

Also, is it really true that the Roman exempted the Jews form the religious persecutions (that the Christians were facing) because they were an ancient religion? What are the ancient texts that have mentioned this exemption and this explanation in relation to the first and second centuries?

I can propose here an alternative assumption regarding the oppression of the Romans for Christians in the first and second centuries: At the start of the Christian faith, there were many ascetic fearless confrontational preachers who probably slandered the Roman gods and the Roman rulers, probably with words that might look like this: {Jupiter is the not the father, it is just a filthy piece of rock. The only father is Our Father the mighty God. Caesar is not the son of God, he is not worthy to be the son of anyone, the only son of God is our Jesus the one who loves you, the one who sacrificed his blood for you}.

If this kind of rhetoric really happened in public (or even in private gatherings) then I think the Romans would respond aggressively.

But we have a problem in this assumption: No one have mentioned such encounters between the Christians and the Romans. No one: not a Pagan, not a Greek, not a Roman, not a Christian No one.

But still the logic here is clear: Would the ascetic fearless confrontational Christian monks insult the Roman gods and the Roman rulers in public and private gatherings Or not?

I do think the answer is “Yes” as the Christian faith at that time was at its start and there were so many fearless confrontational preachers that were much more fearless than today.

So, this assumption has one strong support (the logic) and one strong opposition (there should be related data but there is none).

However, the persecutions started about the end of the first century, therefore, we can assume that Luke and John preferred to exclude their names from the Gospels for safety reasons.

But what about Matthew?

It is very probable that Matthew was a Jew (as discussed in the previous mentioned post), and not just a Jew, but one who thought that Jesus should only be for the Jews. So, I do assume that Matthew shouldn't have been fearing the Romans as there are no available data that indicate that the “Jews for Jesus” (i.e. the Nazarenes) were facing an oppression from the Romans.

So, why Matthew didn't put his name in the Gospel?

I am assuming here that Matthew wasn't fearing the Romans but he was fearing the criticisms from his own people (i.e. the Nazarenes): I think most of them would totally reject the virgin birth narrative as it wasn't known during the time of Jesus, James, Paul, or even Mark. I would also assume that the Nazarenes would not appreciate the Midrashic style of interpretation.

But we highlighted that Matthew might have enjoyed hiding things in plain sights. So, I just wonder if he managed to hide his name in the Gospel, perhaps in an acrostic sentence where each initial letter in each word represents his name.

This is actually a wild guess, but I think it is easy “now” to verify: We are in the “AI” era, and the ChatGPT is just the beginning. So, we can program something like ChatGPT to analyze the Gospel of Matthew, and if there were hidden messages in it, then they will be highlighted in just few minutes.

The References:

Bart-1 (2105): <https://ehrmanblog.org/matthews-fulfillment-of-scripture-citations/>

Bart-2 (2017): <https://ehrmanblog.org/the-women-in-matthews-genealogy-answer-to-a-reader/>

James Tabor (2023): <https://ehrmanblog.org/36902-2/>

Nehemia Gordon (2011): The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tddCNY6U77Y>