

Some Keys to Understand Matthew

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These pages are excerpted from my correspondence course on Matthew. That course also includes such other helps as “Keys to Understand the Sermon on the Mount” and an “Explanatory Outline of Matthew.” Look up all Bible references as you read.

The Gospel of Matthew is a mountain of gold, ready to be mined. It is fitting for it to be first. There is evidence that it was designed as a catechism (handbook of basic teachings) to instruct early believers. Of the four Gospels Matthew gives the most complete view of Jesus the Messiah. And it most clearly shows how the Old Testament story is continued and completed in the New. Matthew has at least 129 quotations of the Old Testament or allusions to it. Even the first verse of Matthew shows at least five links to the Old Testament. Some of these will be considered below, for such links are keys to understanding this Gospel. Permeating all else are the themes of the King and His kingdom.

1. Use of the title *Christ* and other titles. One link between the testaments is the title *Christ*, emphasized throughout Matthew chapters 1 and 2 (see 1:1, 16, 17, 18; 2:4 plus equivalents in 2:2, 6). It is also emphasized at high points such as the Great Confession (16:16, 20), the Royal Entry (21:5), the final struggle with Israel’s leaders (22:42), the Prophetic Discourse (24:5), and Jesus’ trial and crucifixion (26:63–64, 68; 27:17, 22).

Why is this title a link between the testaments? Because it is used often in each testament referring to the same office. In each testament the word used for this office literally means “anointed” and is equivalent to “given God’s Holy Spirit.” The Hebrew (Old Testament) word is *Mashiac*, and from its Aramaic equivalent we get the synonym *Messiah*. The Greek word with the same meaning is *Cristos* (Christ). This word is used in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) to translate *Mashiac*, and throughout the New Testament as a title for Jesus. Thus, a Bible written wholly in Hebrew has *Mashiac* in both testaments while a Bible wholly in Greek has *Cristos* in both. This powerful link disappears in most English versions, however, because of an inconsistent procedure: the Old Testament Hebrew word is translated (as “anointed [one]”), but the New Testament Greek word is simply transferred to English (as “Christ”). See the following chart.

What office does this title refer to? Those familiar with Old Testament prophecies, as the first readers of Matthew were, know the answer: *Mashiac/Cristos* refers to the promised King of Israel (Psa. 2:2; Dan. 9:25, 26), the Messiah. Only He has the absolute fullness of God’s Spirit (Isa. 11:1–2). He is to be the successor to David. David also was called “the LORD’s *Mashiac*”¹ (1 Sam. 16:6, 13; 2 Sam. 22:51). Matthew 2:2, 4 shows that a title equivalent to *Christ* is *King*. Jesus accepted the title *King* in Matthew 21:5; 25:34, 40; 27:11 and was given the same title—though in mockery—in 27:29, 37, 42.

¹ When you see “the LORD” with LORD in all-capital letters, it stands for God’s Old Testament name Yahweh.

The Words for the Title “Anointed” in Hebrew, Greek, and English Bibles		
Language	Old Testament	New Testament
Hebrew (& Aramaic)	<i>Mashiac (& Messiah)</i>	<i>Mashiac (& Messiah)</i>
Greek	<i>Cristos</i>	<i>Cristos</i>
English	<i>Anointed [One]</i>	<i>Christ</i>

To remind yourself of this meaning of *Christ*, it would be helpful to read “Messiah” every time you see it in Matthew or elsewhere. We will follow that procedure here. For example: “The genealogy in Matthew 1 traces Messiah’s ancestry to David and Abraham.”

Other titles for Jesus in Matthew are more or less equivalent to *Messiah*. For example, (1) “Son of David” (1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15) is used in the Messianic sense. This descendant of David’s is heir to the LORD’s covenant with David. (2) “Son of...God” is also equivalent to *Messiah* at 16:16, as we will show later. In 22:42, however, it is clear that as “Son of God” the Messiah must be more than just the Son of David.

(3) In speaking about Himself, Jesus normally used a different title: *Son of Man*. Originating in Daniel 7, this title, like *Messiah*, also referred to the One who will rule over the everlasting kingdom. But *Son of Man* (a) was a safer term to use, since it did not suggest an immediate patriotic war for the Jews, as *Messiah* might, and (b) had other important connotations.

2. Early emphasis on kingship. As usual in a Gospel, the first chapters set the course for the entire book. And that course has to do with kingship. Consider, for example, some of the brief selections about Jesus’ birth and childhood in Matthew 1–2:

- Joseph, the descendant of David (1:16, 20), accepts God’s Son into his family by taking Mary and naming Jesus. He thereby gives Jesus the legal right to the throne of David.
- The wise men (Magi) look for the King of the Jews (2:2), same as the Messiah (2:4).
- Two other kings play their part in chapter 2: King Herod, who tries to kill the Messiah, and King Archelaus, whose presence is the human reason Jesus is taken to Nazareth.

In fact, as stated before, these themes of king and kingship dominate this Gospel. This will become clear in the outline.

3. “The kingdom has come near.” Two verses in Matthew begin with the following words: “From that time on Jesus began” (4:17; 16:21). Each of these verses gives a message that Jesus repeated often and that characterized His ministry recorded in the following chapters. The first—Jesus’ constant message during the first part of His ministry—was identical to what John the Baptist had preached: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Greek, 3:2; 4:17). Notice that He told His disciples to preach the same message (10:7).

In the New Testament only Matthew uses this term *kingdom of heaven*, more than thirty times. What does it mean? Since the term is never defined, we must assume the basic Jewish meaning

for it. It was their common name for the kingdom promised through the prophets. The term came from the description in Daniel 2 of a “rock” that will become a “huge mountain [filling] **the whole earth**” (vv. 34–35, emphasis added). The rock will strike the kings represented by the toes on the statue Nebuchadnezzar dreamed about (v. 42). Then “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed” (v. 44). Thus, the “kingdom of heaven” will come from heaven but will exist forever on earth. It will not be “spiritual” in the sense of non-material or non-political. Rather, it will have all the features the prophets foresaw.

Other New Testament books—even when recording the same stories as Matthew—do not use this term. They substitute equivalent terms easier for Gentiles to understand (and sometimes used in Matthew): *kingdom* or *kingdom of God*.

So Jesus kept on saying to repent because the kingdom had come near. This meant that they should get right with God because the kingdom promised through the prophets might begin at any time. This was His principal message. Other messages were subordinate to this one, were in harmony with it, and need not be interpreted in a way that contradicts it. For example, consider Matthew 12:28, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (NIV). Does this mean that the kingdom, which was still being announced as near, had fully arrived and been inaugurated? That is an unnecessary conclusion. Rather, it had arrived only in the King Himself and His power.

4. “He must go to Jerusalem and suffer.” The high point in Jesus’ early ministry was the disciples’ Great Confession: “You are the Christ [Messiah]” (16:16). Immediately after they confessed this, Jesus began to stress a different message, first recorded in 16:21. This was a private message for His disciples—that He must die and rise again. Matthew 16:21 introduces the second part of His ministry, which reaches to His death/resurrection and the Great Commission.

Not that the kingdom subject is dropped. Consider the fact, seen earlier in Matthew, that the judgment and the kingdom were clearly future (7:21–23; 8:11–12; 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36, 41, 42; and especially 13:39–43). This fact is given even greater emphasis in the second part of Jesus’ ministry. Note especially His references to His future glory at His Second Coming (16:27–28; 19:28; 24:30; 25:31–46). In fact, entering the future kingdom is the same as entering or inheriting eternal life (18:3, 8, 9; 19:16, 17, 23, 24, 29; 25:34, 46).

In this second part of His ministry, the King teaches disciples who will soon have to operate without His physical presence. But in every subject treated—such as, forgiveness, divorce, serving others, the resurrection—He shows that the coming kingdom is the determining consideration. In other words, everything should be done with the kingdom in mind.

To summarize, after the introductory chapters (1–4) Matthew has two main divisions of Jesus’ ministry, each characterized by a dominant message. The first division is indicated by the public message at 4:17; the second, by the private message (for His disciples) at 16:21. In both divisions the King and His coming kingdom are the main theme.

5. Shorter sections. Is there any indication of major subdivisions in this Gospel? Yes, in a pattern that is repeated several times:

- a. A series of brief episodes, which is climaxed by
- b. A relatively long discourse, which is terminated by
- c. A refrain.

Consider an example of this pattern:

- a. Chapters 8–9 give nine miraculous episodes in groups of three; then
- b. Chapter 10 is a relatively long discourse, in which the Lord sends out His disciples with the same miraculous powers. At the end of this section we read,
- c. “And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished...” (11:1, Greek).

In the outline we suggest, you can see that Matthew has followed this same pattern several times, ending each section with the same refrain just quoted (at 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Each section has a special emphasis.

6. Israel and the True Israel. The many Old Testament passages quoted in Matthew show that the story of Jesus is the continuation of salvation history. Israel is still God’s key people through most of the book. Only Matthew stresses the fact that Jesus limited His own ministry to Israel (10:5–6; 15:24). And Israel’s response is carefully traced in such passages as chapters 11–13; 21:33–46; and the unique parable in 22:1–14.

A fruitful and interesting observation is that Jesus fulfills the mission of Israel; He is the true Israel. As such, He recapitulates (briefly repeats) parts of Israel’s history: in His miraculous birth, in being brought out of Egypt, tempted in the desert, etc. Thus, even Israel’s history—not just prophecy—is “fulfilled” by Him (see 2:15, which quotes history from Hosea). This is made quite clear when the Servant Song of Isaiah 42:1–4 is quoted in Matthew 12:17–21. In the Isaiah context (see 41:8–9) the nation had been called God’s Servant. But in Matthew we see that the true Israel, who fulfills the whole Servant concept, is Jesus the Messiah.

Now mine your own treasures from the mountain of gold!