

In his second-century treatise *Against Heresies* Irenaeus writes concerning the origin of the first Gospel, “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the church.”¹ Two centuries later the church historian Eusebius quotes an even earlier source, Papias of Hieropolis, as saying, “Matthew collected the oracles [sayings of or about Jesus] in the Hebrew language and each one interpreted them as best he could.”²

The claim that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew connects it with the Jewish people, at least with Jewish Christians. Insofar as Jews are derived from Judah, this would identify Matthew with one of the symbols of the tetramorph—the lion. The difficulty is that the earliest known manuscripts of Matthew’s Gospel are all in Greek, not Hebrew.

Might there have been an original Hebrew-language Matthew, now lost, that was translated into Greek? When an ancient text was translated the rhythm and syntax of the original language left behind traces in the resulting work. Most scholars find Matthew’s Gospel to read like a composition in Greek rather than a translation. In addition, the evidence is strong that Matthew was written sometime after the Gospel of Mark and incorporated most of Mark’s material, which itself is Greek.³

The New Testament books of Hebrews, James, and Jude, are proof that strongly Jewish-oriented material could be written in Greek, so for a Gospel reflecting Jewish concerns to have been composed in that language is not surprising. Nevertheless, the majority of the Jewish community in Judea and Galilee spoke the Semitic languages of Aramaic and Hebrew. The book of Acts says that Jerusalem contained both Semitic- and Greek-speaking disciples and that the two groups were part of a single Christian community (Acts 6:1-6). A popular Greek Gospel directed toward Jews could be expected to appear in a Semitic translation quickly, and the Semitic version or versions might afterward be assumed to have come first.

According to Irenaeus, who wrote in the middle of the second century, Matthew was the only Gospel accepted by the Ebionites, a heretical Jewish-Christian sect.⁴ The same claim is made by the fourth-century church father Jerome, who is famous for producing the first scholarly Bible translation in Latin. Jerome also says that the allegedly original Hebrew version of Matthew was described to him by members of another Jewish-Christian sect called the Nazarenes. As Jerome tells it, he eventually saw this Hebrew Gospel of Matthew and even translated it into Greek.⁵

Despite Jerome’s initial impression that the Semitic version of Matthew was original, he declined to use it when he began working on his Latin translation of the New Testament. Some passages appearing in Semitic Matthew, as quoted by Jerome and a few other church fathers, are clearly foreign to the canonical version preserved in Greek. Understandably, Jerome chose to rely on the earliest and best Greek manuscripts of Matthew for his Latin Vulgate Bible, tacitly admitting that the Semitic Gospel was too corrupted to be relied upon. Even the comment of Papias that each believer interpreted or translated

1 *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

2 *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39

3 For a summary of the evidence for Marcan priority, see Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

4 *Against Heresies* 1.26.2.

5 Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 3; *Dialogue Against Pelagius* 3.2. Jerome says that this version of Matthew was also called the Gospel according to the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Apostles. Patristic literature of the first several centuries contains references to various related books known as the Jewish-Christian Gospels, which include the Gospel of the Hebrews, Gospel of the Ebionites, and Gospel of the Nazarenes.

Semitic Matthew “as best he could” suggests that a degree of confusion been caused early on by variant versions being translated back into Greek.

To summarize, historical sources repeatedly associate Matthew with Jewish Christians. Matthew “issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews” according to Irenaeus, while Jerome says that Matthew’s Gospel “was first published in Judea . . . for the sake of those of the circumcision who believed.”⁶ The Gospel’s popularity among Jewish Christians of many kinds would naturally have led to an early Semitic-language translation, to which sectarian additions and changes were at some point made.

Before we explore to the internal characteristics of Matthew to cement its Jewish connection, there are two more items of external evidence to consider.

⁶ *Against Hereses* 3.1.1; *Lives of Illustrious Men* 3.