

Who is the Apostle Matthias?

Who is the Apostle Matthias and why must we know and understand his contribution to early Christianity? Matthias was the one of the quiet followers committed to Jesus from the beginning, first as one of the 70 disciples and, then after his election as the 13th Apostle immediately after the Ascension. From his election, he spread the “Good News” for more than thirty years. He is the author of and/or contributor to a Gospel bearing his name and a document called the Traditions of Matthias.

Matthias' name is mentioned exactly twice in the New Testament both times in the story of his election through the efforts of Peter to take Judas Iscariot's place. His election was in Jerusalem shortly after the Ascension of Jesus Christ. His name Matthias comes from the Hebrew, Mattithiah, meaning the "gift of Yahweh." He was, like most of the Apostles, born and educated in Judea. Clement of Alexander, in the only document, *The Traditions of Matthias*, containing writings of the Apostle, said he was also called Zaccheus and was the chief tax collector. If this is true, it must have been early in life since other traditions about Matthias would make it seem unlikely. (See Stomata 4.6.35.2 later in this article) He is the patron saint of alcoholics carpenters, reformed alcoholics, smallpox, and tailors

St. John Chrysostom, (left) one of four great Doctors of the Church (347-407c.e.), whose prayer ends Morning and Evening Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*, said of Matthias's election in one of his many sermons. “In those days, Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples and said...’ As the fiery spirit to whom the flock was entrusted by Christ and as the leader in the band of the apostles, Peter always took the initiative in speaking: ‘My brothers, we must choose from among our number.’ He left the decision to the whole body, at once augmenting the honor of those elected and avoiding any suspicion of partiality.

Did not Peter then have the right to make the choice himself? Certainly he had the right, but he did not want to give the appearance of showing special favor to anyone. ‘And they nominated two,’ we read, ‘Joseph, who was called Barsabbas and surnamed Justus, and Matthias.’ He himself did not nominate them; all present did. But it was he who brought the issue forward, pointing out that it was not his own idea but had been suggested to him by a scriptural prophecy.

And they all prayed together, saying: ‘You, Lord, know the hearts of men; make your choice known to us. You, not we.’ Appropriately they said that he knew the hearts of men, because the choice was to be made by him, not by others.

They spoke with such confidence, because someone had to be appointed. They did not say *choose* but ‘make known to us’ the chosen one; ‘the one you choose,’ they said, fully aware that everything was being preordained by God.”

1. Reading: Acts: 1:21 -26

²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” ²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.”

2. The Death of the saint

The facts about his life are vague at best and contradictory, because of the different church “traditions” concerning Matthias life. Saint Nicephorus, (who lived around 1320 and is called the “last of the Greek ecclesiastical historian,”) eighteen volume *Historia Ecclesiastica* puts Matthias first preaching the Gospel in Judea then in Ethiopia and places Matthias’ death by crucifixion in Colchis, the modern day Mingrelia District on the central coast of the Black Sea in the Republic of Georgia.

Another tradition from *The Synopsis of Dorotheus* (5th Century) puts Matthias spreading of the Gospel in the interior of Ethiopia. The Synopsis says he died in Sebastopolis and buried near the Temple of the Sun, most likely in the modern day Sudan. One apocryphal story about Matthias’ ministry in Ethiopia is that he went among the cannibals and was thrown into prison and eventually freed by the Apostle Andrew.

A third tradition has the Israelites stoning Matthias in Jerusalem and then beheading him. Some have placed his death as late as 80a.d., which seems highly unlikely. The approximate date of 63a.d. seems more likely considering that he was with Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry.

Concerning Matthias death and his remains, it has been reported that St. Helena brought his relics in the early third century to Rome. That has led to some confusion, because most likely she brought the relics of Saint Matthias, who was a Bishop of Jerusalem in about the year 120 and not the Apostle.

Ancient and medieval writings record Matthias’ activity in Ethiopia and Turkey, but nothing in his home country of Judea. All of these contradictory

sources as to the exact locale of his ministry inevitably lead to the conclusion that Matthias was spreading the “good news” over a wide swath of the ancient world. Based on the rare mention of him even in Christian apocrypha, his long years in Ethiopia are probably why we know so little of him. The center of the Church moved westward quickly. It was in the west where many of the early Christian writings, both canonical and apocryphal, were written.

3. THE GOSPEL OF MATTHIAS

Any discussion of the *Gospel of Matthias*, as with the *Gospel of Thomas* and other non-canonical Gospels, must be paired with some discussion of the struggle between orthodox or sometimes called by scholars "literalist" Christianity and Gnostic Christianity, in which much of the essence of Jesus is considered spiritual rather than real. [Gerald Massey](#), (left) (1828-1907) a 19th century Anglican scholar and one of England's Christian Socialists, and a firm believer in Gnostic Christianity, describes the belief as this, “Whether considered as the God made human, or as man made divine, this character never existed as a person. That pre-historic ideal Christ of the Gnosis had always personated the divine in human form, the Immortal incarnated, the Majesty within superior to all the physical conditions without, with power to bear and serve, to serenely suffer the ills of flesh, become a sacrifice and glory in the Cross of its earthly suffering.” Gnostic, which comes from the Greek word Gnosis, means, “to know,” and it is the emphasis of knowledge that marks this early faction of Christianity.

The Gospel of Matthias bearing his name has yet to have been found and/or identified. However, it intrigued the early Christian fathers. Its popularity was equal to the canonical gospels as a popular teaching tool. It also appears in two lists: the 6th century South Gallic list known as the Decretum Gelasianum, and the 7th-century Byzantine list known as The Catalogue of the Sixty Canonical Books. St. Clement of Alexandria, one the earliest church teachers and Gnostic (died 215a.d.) quoted from The Traditions of Matthias, another writing attributed to the 13th Apostle, in his *Stromata*.^[2]

4. The Traditions of Matthias by St. Clement of Alexandria Matthias' Words are in Quotes

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.9.45.4

But the beginning of this is to marvel at things, as Plato says in the *Theatetus* and as Matthias says in the *Traditions* when he urges, "Marvel at what is present," laying this down as the first step toward the knowledge of things beyond.

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.4.26.3

They say that Matthias also taught this: "To fight with the flesh and misuse it, without yielding to it through undisciplined pleasure, so to increase the soul through faith and knowledge."

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.6.35.2

So Zaccheus whom they call Matthias, the chief tax collector, when he had heard that the Lord had esteemed him highly enough to be with him, said, "Behold, half of my present possessions I give as alms, and Lord, if I ever extorted money from anyone in any way, I return it fourfold." At this the savior said, "When the son of man came today, he found that which was lost."

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.13.82.1

They say that Matthias the apostle in the *Traditions* says at every opportunity, "If the neighbor of an elect person sins, the elect person sins. For if he had led himself as the word dictates, the neighbor would have been in awe of his life so that he did not sin."

If the Traditions of Matthias are any indication of the Apostle's thinking Matthias was indeed a Gnostic Christian. Therefore, it is natural to assume that his belief system would be included in his own account of the Gospel. However, there is one problem with assuming that Matthias was a Gnostic in every sense, Matthias was with a human person called Jesus Christ for all of his three year ministry. Gnostics explain his physical presence this way. The being Jesus Christ was not real but a spiritual essence sometimes in the form of a human body called an Aeon^[3], who "came down from the Lord of Light" to spread the word of God.

According to Rice University Scholar David Ross, "the Gospel of Matthias was, at one time, almost as popular as the Gospel of Thomas as witnessed by its use by Saints Origen, Eusebius, Ambrose, Jerome, and the Venerable Bede. All of these Saints were distinctly not of the Gnostic school. So perhaps this Gospel is less inclined to have that tone." Ross further argues that the early church "viewed Thomas and Matthias as a twin (Gnostic) threat, and the great churchmen Jerome and Ambrose still felt the need to debunk Matthias up to the sixth century. The Gospel of Matthias has understandably not received nearly as much press as has Thomas, however, because Thomas has been found and Matthias is still missing."

5. 18th Century Italian Gospel Book

Ross further contends, "More accurately, Matthias has not yet been *identified*. I have noted a number of parallels between Matthias as the Church fathers described it, and a gospel fragment long known from excavations last century. The fragment I have in mind is Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 840, which British archaeologists discovered in Upper Egypt" in 1898. [Click here for David Ross's complete paper.](#)

The early Church fathers knew they were setting up a conundrum when they decided the teachings of wisdom Gospels were to be suppressed. They were adapting a orthodox form of Christianity in which Jesus Christ is both divine and human. Fortunately, throughout the ages many of these early writings have

been preserved. Finding the Gospel of Matthias intact would fill another void in early Church history, much as the Gospel of Thomas has done since its discovery in Nag Hammadi Egypt in 1947.

Gnostics go so far to dismiss the physical death and resurrection. You can see the Roman fathers of Church stewing in that pot when considering writings for today's canonical Bible. They built a religion around a real person, who had a real life and was a man with real feelings. Many Christians today, both liberal and fundamentalist, having a Christ who is *only of the spirit* may not provide a firm foundation from which, when one is troubled, one could ask for help. We, as real people in a real world, are not inclined to put our trust in spirits.

However, Gnosticism, or the wisdom teaching, is enjoying revival today and many of its teachings can easily be adapted to our form of Jesus Christ. It is especially so in our Anglican traditions, which rely on the "underlying meaning of Scripture" rather than surface meaning.

Many Gnostics believe that the concept of Jesus Christ came from the Essenes, (Authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls left). Gerald Massey took the Essene thinking apart in a lecture given in 1898, "The Essenes as Gnostics held that every man must be his own Christ. Their Christ came within -- the Christ that could not become historical without. In the minds of those who knew, *historic* Christianity was repudiated beforehand; and it was as impossible after the facts were forged, the falsehood established, and the dogma was founded, as it was before; consequently those Gnostics who had been Ante-Christians beforehand were of necessity Anti-Christians afterwards."

Massey, as well as many contemporary Gnostics, trace the concept of Christ back to what they believe is its source, Ancient Egypt, by drawing parallels with the only Son of the God Osiris, Horus. (below) Massey goes even further by claiming that the ancient Egyptians sent "missionaries" to spread the word and influenced not only Christian and Jewish thought but Buddhist and Hindu thought also. The Horus parallels somewhat fall apart when examining the ancient Egyptian cannon because there are several gods named Horus. This whole discussion as to the sources of our beliefs leads to one intriguing thought that that perhaps God interconnected the entire universe in both thinking and material reality. This, like so much scholarly speculation, all comes down to faith and what one person or another wants to believe.

Unfortunately, by the third century, the Church suppressed Christian Gnosticism and even some of the early Gnostic Saints such as Clement of Alexander, were remade as Christian literalists. Until we discover the Gospel of Matthias we cannot get a complete picture of Matthias's view of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

In a discussion of the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 840 David Ross persuades us that it contain fragments of the Gospel of Matthias, "Many orthodox heresiologists took aim at Gnostic texts written in Matthias's name; but none tell us more than the text's pseudepigraphical title. It is an open question whether these men had actually read the texts in question.

There is one possible exception. According to Hippolytus, anti-pope of Rome (200-235 CE), the Basilidean Gnostics in Egypt were asserting that they had secret teachings from Matthias:

Basilides, therefore, and Isidorus, the true son and disciple of Basilides, say that Matthias communicated to them secret discourses, which, I being specially instructed, he heard from the Savior."