



Matthew Wade Ferguson <mwfergus@uci.edu>

A Question Relating to "Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine"

7 messages

Matthew Wade Ferguson <mwfergus@uci.edu>

Mon, Mar 31, 2014 at 9:05 AM

To: ch12@soas.ac.uk

Greetings Dr. Hezser,

I am a Ph.D. student in Classics at UC Irvine. If you have the time, could you answer a couple questions for me relating to your book "Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine"?

I am currently working on a conference paper in which I will evaluate the necessary level of literacy needed to author the Gospel of Matthew, and question whether a τελώνης ("tax collector"), as Matthew is described in Mt. 10:3, would have likely had the necessary literary training to author the Gospel attributed to him.

The reason I am researching this question is because scholars doubt the traditional authors of many of the NT books, in part, based on the fact that some of the figures to whom they are attributed would not have likely had a sufficient level of literacy to author the books in their name. For example, John the son of Zebedee was a Galilean fisherman, who is even described as ἀγράμματος ("illiterate") in Acts 4:13. Scholars doubt that John authored in the fourth gospel, in addition to other reasons, based on the fact that an individual in his position would not have likely received the necessary education to author such a work.

However, in the case of Matthew the tax collector, the situation is less clear. Ordinary tax collectors would have needed to have training in accounting and a certain degree of functional literacy for records keeping. However, I am skeptical that an ordinary tax collector would have been able to author a complex work like the Gospel of Matthew, which is a text deeply familiar with Jewish Law, the Septuagint, and also made use of previous sources, such as Mark and possibly Q.

So, I have a couple questions:

1. What would be the approximate level of literacy and education for a τελώνης working in Galilee (Matthew is said to be working in Capernaum) under the tetrarch Herod Antipas? From your book, you seem to suggest that the education level would be fairly low:

"Local Jewish villagers, who knew the prospective properties, seem to have functioned as middle men in the collection of taxes, which were then transferred to the cities and the provincial authorities." (pgs. 155-156)

Based on how Matthew is described, would he have been such a middle man?

2. What would likely be the primary language that the tax bureaucracy used in Galilee? Galilee was not a Roman province and was under a local Jewish government. Would the primary language used by tax collectors be Aramaic? Would a τελώνης in Galilee need to know Greek? If so, to what degree would they need to be fluent in Greek?

I ask since the Gospel of Matthew is a work of advanced Greek composition. Even if a Galilean τελώνης may have known some Greek, I am skeptical that one could have authored a complex work like the Gospel of Matthew. However, for this conference paper, I need to know: how much Greek would a Galilean τελώνης have likely known?

3. An additional question I have is: to what degree were Levites educated in 1st century Palestine, and would an educated Levite have likely become a Galilean tax collector?

I ask because of an argument I read from Albright and Mann (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 1964: CLXXVIII), which claimed that Matthew may have been a Levite, based on the alternative name "Levi" given to him in Mk 2:14 and Lk 5:27-29:

"Levi is not (as usually held) a personal name, but the tribal designation of the man who was called by Jesus from his tax collecting ... Everything which we to be characteristic of this gospel – its conservatism, its interest in the traditional oral law, in lawyers and Pharisees, its traditional eschatology – all this fits admirably into the background of an author who was a Levite ... A Levite of the time of Jesus would normally have been a Pharisee, educated, and from an orthodox (i.e., non sectarian) background. With lower status than the Jerusalem-centered priesthood, more numerous than the temple cult could readily absorb, most Levites would be compelled to seek a livelihood apart from the worship of the temple. If Matthew the Levite found a living as a tax collector for the political authorities – and his education would certainly fit him for such a responsibility – then his rejection by his fellow Pharisees would follow inevitably. So too would inevitably follow carefully collected reminiscences of Jesus' attitude to the Law and to those who made their living by oral interpretation of that Law."

Do you agree with the analysis above? Would an ordinary Levite living in Roman Palestine in the 1st century have likely had the necessary level of Greek literacy to author a work like the Gospel of Matthew?

I am suspicious of this argument, in part, because the probable location in which the Gospel of Matthew was composed is Antioch in Syria, and I am more inclined to think that the author was a Diasporic Jew whose primary language was Greek and who only had a limited knowledge of Hebrew/Aramaic (based on the fact that the author was dependent on the Septuagint).

4. Finally, assuming that Matthew was a Levite (which I think is speculative), would an educated Levite have likely served as a τελώνης in Galilee? From the description in your book, it would seem to be a lower-level position that an educated person would not likely perform.

Matthew is said in Mt. 9:9 to be working at a τελώνιον ("tax booth"). Were Greek records kept at such locations, and would an educated person need to manage such a booth?

Could a Levite have served as a higher-level manager or overseer of the middlemen tax collectors? If so, is it plausible that Matthew was an educated Levite, who was not a lower-level tax collector, but instead an educated manager who oversaw tax collection in the region? And, if so, would he have likely had the level of education needed to author the Gospel of Matthew?

I realize that these are somewhat speculative questions, and there may not be concrete answers. However, are you able to provide any proximal answers to these questions?

In the conference paper, I am going to discuss how we cannot be fully certain about the answers to these questions. However, I think that based on our understanding of Jewish literacy in Roman Palestine and tax collection practices in 1st century Galilee, we can at least provide informed estimates.

If you have the time, I would be very interested in your feedback about these issues.

Thank you very much,

Matthew Ferguson

mwfergus@uci.edu

Department of Classics

University of California, Irvine

Catherine Hezser <ch12@soas.ac.uk>
To: Matthew Wade Ferguson <mwfergus@uci.edu>

Tue, Apr 1, 2014 at 1:25 AM

Dear Mr. Ferguson:

The question of the authorship of the gospels, and Matthew in particular, is interesting and complex. I fully agree with you that it would seem unlikely that a Galilean tax collector would have authored Matthew. It is also important to note, though, that composing a work does not necessarily require someone to be able to actually write the text. Usually "authors" and writers (professional scribes) would have been different individuals. Greek and Roman (upper class) authors would employ scribes (or use their educated slaves) to write down what they dictated to them. With regard to the gospels I think that the term "editor" would be more suitable than "author" and that one may reckon with more than one individual who would have collected oral and written traditions and perhaps used Mark and Q as sources and prototypes and reshuffled everything into a new whole for whatever reasons. One may even think that a scribe or a group of scribes might have done such work. Or, as you say, a Hellenized Jewish Christian from Antioch. What one needs to consider is the type of Greek represented by the gospel text. As far as I know, Luke's Greek is more polished than Matthew's which some scholars assume may be based on a Hebrew/Aramaic prototype. Does the Greek reflect the Greek that would have been used by upper-class Hellenized Jews such as Philo, who lived in a Greek-speaking environment? Does it reflect Greek paideia, i.e. a provincial who aspired to participate in Greek literary culture? As far as I remember, it is koine-Greek, i.e. a more popular simplified version of Greek: which strata of the population would have used/spoken such Greek?

Does this language reflect an oral tradition that was put into writing (e.g. by a scribe) without too many changes?

Another issue to consider would be: who would have had easy access to oral traditions as well as written sources to put a gospel such as Matthew together? This person/group should have also been respected, i.e. a leadership figure or group who could extract and collect traditions and claim some sort of authority for the later product he/they created. This would be unlikely for a tax collector whom people would have despised, I assume.

Here are some short answers to your questions:

1. Difficult to say: a tax collector would have needed to record names and numbers, i.e. have rudimentary writing skills. But as mentioned, an author or editor did not need to be a scribe if he had professional scribes available.
2. It depends on the time period we are talking about. If the gospel was composed in the early 2nd century, the administrative language would probably have been Greek; intermediaries probably needed to be bi-lingual. In the first century under a local Jewish government it was probably Hebrew/Aramaic.
- 3-4. Since Levites were linked to the Temple and did some services there, it would be unlikely that a first century Levite would have been a tax collector in Galilee. It is also unlikely that he would have been educated in Greek, but again it depends on the time period we are talking about. At the end of the first and in the 2nd c. the situation would have been different (I don't think any of the gospels were written pre-70 C.E.).

Hope this is helpful, although it may make the issues even more complex.

All the best for your paper.

Best regards,
Catherine Hezser

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Prof. Dr. Dr. Catherine Hezser
Professor of Jewish Studies
Dept. of the Study of Religions
School of Oriental and African Studies
10, Thornhaugh Street
Russell Square
London WC1H 0XG
United Kingdom

phone: [+44-20-78984633](tel:+442078984633)

fax: [+44-20-78984699](tel:+442078984699)

Follow my research at <https://soas.academia.edu/ProfCatherineHezser>

Webpage: <http://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff31101.php>

Matthew Wade Ferguson <mwfergus@uci.edu>

Wed, Apr 2, 2014 at 9:29 AM

To: Catherine Hezser <ch12@soas.ac.uk>

Dear Dr. Hezser,

Thank you very much for your reply, and it is indeed very helpful for this paper! If you do not mind, I have a couple more questions in regard to your response:

1. On the issue of scribes, I am curious about how we can distinguish between the different levels of scribal involvement.

Scribes were generally used to write down dictation and to make copies of works. I have no problem with the idea that scribes were used in this way by the early church, as Paul even alludes to such scribes (Rom. 16:22; Gal. 6:11). In this situation, scribes are not "authoring" any piece of a text, as they are merely writing down what a literate person is dictating to them.

However, it is not clear to me how someone who is perhaps illiterate in Greek (or only partially literate) could dictate to scribes an advanced work of Greek composition, like the Gospel of Matthew, even serving in the role of an editor.

Let's say for the composition of the Gospel of Matthew we assume at a minimum that the author/editor employed a scribe and used the Gospel of Mark and the Q Gospel as sources. How much was the scribe versus the editor involved?

For example, would it be the scribe or the tax collector who made subtle redactions about Jewish teachings in Mark? The scribe or the tax collector who wove in sayings in the Q Gospel elegantly into the narrative and combined them with the previous Markan material? The scribe or the tax collector who made ample and familiar quotations of the Septuagint? The scribe or the tax collector who performed mimesis of OT episodes, such as modeling Jesus after Moses?

I suppose what I am getting at is that I am skeptical that a tax collector, who, based on our previous discussion, would probably not have sufficient education and literacy to author such a Greek work, could overcome this barrier by simply employing a scribe. It would seem that, rather, a scribe who would have been so involved in the composition, and who would be responsible for so much of the creative organization of the text, would be the actual author of the work.

I know that Bart Ehrman is skeptical that scribes were used in this way to author a work for another person, stating (*Forged*, pg. 77):

"Where in the ancient world do we have anything at all analogous to this hypothetical situation of someone writing a letter-essay for someone else and putting the other person's name on it – the name of the person who did *not* write it – rather than his own name? So far as I know, there is not a single instance of any such procedure attested from antiquity or any discussion, in any ancient source, of this being a legitimate practice. Or even an illegitimate one. Such a thing is never discussed."

What do you think of Ehrman's assessment?

It is interesting to think of multiple scribes compiling the sources and material for the Gospel of Matthew;

however, to my understanding, most scholars view the Gospel of Matthew as a unified work, with one author being responsible for the final composition and style of the text. So, even if many scribes were employed for gathering material, the final organization of that material and composition of the Gospel is generally agreed to go back to a single person, who, even if he employed scribes for writing the text, would still have had to be literate in Greek and educated in Jewish Law. That's why I think it is unlikely that a tax collector would even be the editor of the work.

(Though, I can perhaps see the tax collector a source whom the author consulted. This may explain the κατά "according to" construction that the Gospels use in their titles. However, this structure would not have been used consistently, since Mark allegedly used Peter as a source and Luke allegedly used Paul, but neither Gospel was attributed to Peter or Paul, rather than to Mark and Luke who were believed to be the authors of the works. In that case, Matthew the tax collector would not be understood as a source for the Gospel, at least not consistently, rather than author of the work, which is what is being doubted.)

2. You asked:

"Does the Greek reflect the Greek that would have been used by upper-class Hellenized Jews such as Philo, who lived in a Greek-speaking environment? Does it reflect Greek paideia, i.e. a provincial who aspired to participate in Greek literary culture? As far as I remember, it is koine-Greek, i.e. a more popular simplified version of Greek: which strata of the population would have used/spoken such Greek? Does this language reflect an oral tradition that was put into writing (e.g. by a scribe) without too many changes?"

Indeed, the Gospel of Matthew is written in Koine Greek that is less polished than Luke's, but is also agreed to be more polished than Mark's. Raymond Brown (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, pg. 210) states:

"The vast majority of scholars ... contend that the Gospel we know as Matt was composed originally in Greek and is not a translation of a Semitic original."

That said, the language of Matthew, I think, mimics most closely the Septuagint (rather than the writing of an upper class Jew like Philo). In fact, Matthew's similarities to the OT are one of the main reasons that the Gospel was included first in the NT, even though modern scholars agree that Mark was written first. Such Greek, I think, would have been written by a Diasporic Jew, who would have had extensive training the Septuagint, but, as someone probably educated outside of Palestine, would have had used Greek as his primary language and whose understanding of the OT would be based on Greek translations (for example, Matthew interprets Isaiah 7:14 using the Greek παρθένος to mean "virgin," rather than using the Hebrew original נעלמה to mean "young woman," which suggests a dependence on the Septuagint).

The fact that Matthew used previous sources, such as Mark and Q, but than organized them into a new narrative suggests that the author did not simply put oral traditions into writing (Mark's Gospel, which is more roughly written, may have more likely been written in this way). As such, I think the author had an advanced understanding of Greek, even if this understanding was more of a Semitic Greek, used by Disaporic Jews, rather than a refined and highly Hellenized Greek.

Do you think that my analysis above addresses the questions you asked?

I am planning to expand on such analysis further in my conference paper, so I want to make sure that I am on the right track with my ideas on this.

3. Finally, I have one more question about the possibility of Matthew as a Levite. Albright and Mann suggest that there were too many Levites in the Second Temple period for the Temple to absorb. As such, they claim that many Levites would have had to seek employment elsewhere, which could have perhaps led to Matthew (who one may speculate to be Levite) becoming a tax collector.

Is it true that Levites in this period often sought outside work like this? And, if so, would a tax collector be a likely occupation for a Levite?

Based on the fact that tax collectors working under Herod Antipas in Galilee in the early first century would have belonged to a lower-class occupation, this would seem unlikely.

You stated that Levites were linked to the Temple and had to do services there. Was this true for all (most) Levites? Would Levites almost always live in around Jerusalem? Or would Levites commonly (or occasionally) live and work in Galilee?

I realize that this may be an impossible question to answer, but I am just curious at the plausibility of Albright and Mann's suggestion that Matthew was a Levite.

Sorry for these very long questions, and please only reply if you have the time! The issue is, indeed, complex, and I really wanted to pick the mind of someone who knows more about these issues.

Thank you so much for your help!

-Matthew Ferguson

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Catherine Hezser <ch12@soas.ac.uk>
To: Matthew Wade Ferguson <mwfergus@uci.edu>

Thu, Apr 3, 2014 at 5:51 AM

Hi,

I shall answer your email on Sunday.

Best regards,
Catherine Hezser

[Quoted text hidden]

Matthew Wade Ferguson <mwfergus@uci.edu>
To: Catherine Hezser <ch12@soas.ac.uk>

Thu, Apr 3, 2014 at 3:17 PM

Thank you, Dr. Hezser! I greatly appreciate your feedback! -MWF

[Quoted text hidden]

Catherine Hezser <ch12@soas.ac.uk>
To: Matthew Wade Ferguson <mwfergus@uci.edu>

Sun, Apr 6, 2014 at 4:11 AM

Dear Mr. Ferguson:

Q. 1: Greek reading skills would be necessary to compose a work that is based on partly written (Mk and Q) and partly oral sources (transmitted in Aramaic and translated into Greek orally?). The "author" or rather "editor" would have to collect the traditions from various sources, have oral traditions written down by scribes and arrange everything, then dictate the composition to a scribe or have a scribe use his scrapbook. The composition of the gospels and the transition from oral to written texts has been dealt with esp. by Werner H. Kelber in books and articles.

It is also possible that a Greek-speaking scribe was the composer/author, since some scribes may have been learned and enterprising beyond the technical skills of writing. There is no way to tell, because the boundaries between editors and scribes seem to have been blurred in antiquity (this has also been argued for rabbinic documents and manuscripts).

I agree with you that a scribe with both scribal and Greek learning would have been more likely than a tax collector to compose a work such as Mt., or otherwise an educated (and probably wealthy) Greek-speaking Jew. Wealthy because he would have to afford the hiring of one or more scribes or own educated slaves and be able to get hold of copies of Mk and Q.

Re Ehrman: I agree - the scribe would not have composed a work for someone else, so either the scribe is the author himself or he worked for an educated Greek-speaking author. It seems that Mt. was later pseudepigraphically ascribed to someone who was not the "real" author to enhance its authority.

Q 2: With regard to the Koine Greek it is also imaginable that a bilingual Jew whose mother tongue was Aramaic and who also knew Greek, such as Josephus, for example, could have composed the gospel. Josephus says that he needed help with writing Greek, so similarly an Aramaic speaking Jew with Greek reading skills could have employed a scribe to write a composition in Koine Greek. Philo, on the other hand, was a native Greek speaker who lived in a Greek-speaking environment. Therefore his Greek would have been more sophisticated.

Q 3: If we are talking about pre-70 times, could the "tax" collected have been the Temple tax, perhaps? In such a case one could well imagine a Levite linked to the Temple collecting such a tax. If it was for the Roman government, the tax collector would have been an employee of Rome. After 70 CE Levites who had no Temple-related occupation anymore may have sought other kinds of jobs.

Hope this helps.

Best regards,
Catherine Hezser

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Matthew Wade Ferguson <mwfergus@uci.edu>

Sun, Apr 6, 2014 at 8:57 AM

5/8/2016

University of California, Irvine Mail - A Question Relating to "Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine"

To: Catherine Hezser <ch12@soas.ac.uk>

Thank you very much, Dr. Hezser! Have a good weekend. I am presenting the paper next week, so I greatly appreciate this feedback!

Kind Regards,

Matthew Ferguson

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