Matthew’s Use of Mark

Matthew preserves about 90 percent of the stories and passages that are found in Mark’s Gospel, but he edits this material in accord with certain principles.

Organization

Some Markan material is moved about.

Examples:
- Five miracle stories moved to Matthew 8–9, where other miracle stories occur.
- The mission charge to the disciples is related immediately after they are selected (Matt. 10:1–42; cf. Mark 3:14–19; 6:7–13).

Abbreviation

Details or characters that are not immediately relevant are pruned away.

Examples:
- the demoniac’s chains and behavior (Matt. 8:28; cf. Mark 5:2–5)
- unroofing the tiles for the paralytic (Matt. 9:2; cf. Mark 2:2–5)
- the crowd and the disciples in story of woman’s healing (Matt. 9:20–22; Mark 5:24b–34)

Sophistication

Casual or colloquial expressions are rewritten in the more polished Greek of the educated class.

Examples:
- Many instances of “historical present” tense are changed (130 out of 151).
- Mark’s repetitious use of words such as and and immediately is reduced.
- Clear antecedents are provided to pronouns that lack them.

Accuracy

Instances of questionable accuracy are corrected.

Examples:
- “King Herod” (Mark 6:14) becomes “Herod the tetrarch” (Matt. 14:1).
- Reference to Abiathar as high priest in Mark 2:26 is omitted (Matt. 12:4 [cf. 1 Sam. 21:1–6]).

Contextual Relevance

Some changes make things more relevant to Matthew’s community.

Examples:
- Matthew omits Mark’s explanation of Jewish customs (Matt. 15:1–2; cf. Mark 7:3–4) because he is writing for Christians who are either ethnically Jewish or well-acquainted with matters of Jewish tradition.
- Matthew often replaces the phrase “kingdom of God” with “kingdom of heaven” (e.g., Matt. 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15) because some Jews tried to avoid saying “God” out of respect for the sanctity of God’s name.
- Where Mark uses the word village (kômē), Matthew frequently uses the word city (polis) because he is writing for an urban community removed from rural settings.
- Matthew adds “silver” and “gold” to Jesus’ injunction for the disciples to take no “copper” with them on their travels (Matt. 10:9; cf. Mark 6:8) because he is writing for a more prosperous community for which renunciation of “copper” might seem insignificant.

Character Portrayal

Matthew changes the way major characters are portrayed in the Gospel story, including Jesus, his disciples, and the religious leaders of Israel.

Jesus

- Questions that might imply a lack of knowledge on Jesus’ part are omitted (Mark 5:9, 30; 6:38; 8:23; 9:12, 16, 21, 33; 10:3; 14:14).
- Statements that might imply a lack of ability or authority on Jesus’ part are modified (cf. Matt. 13:58 with Mark 6:5).
There is another way to determine what is distinctive about Matthew: by noticing how Matthew uses material that he takes from his Markan source. When the Gospels of Matthew and Mark are set side by side, it becomes evident that Matthew did not just copy sections of Mark’s Gospel word for word; rather, he made changes in what Mark had written, and these changes reveal what is distinctive about Matthew’s version of the Gospel story. Many of the changes are simply stylistic, but still they serve to point up Matthew’s priorities and approach to storytelling. For example, it is often said that Matthew takes more of a “just the facts” approach to narrative than Mark does; he is less concerned with telling stories in a lively or colorful manner than he is in simplifying material and organizing its presentation in a way that will establish certain key points. Other changes that Matthew makes may reflect the audience that he envisions for his Gospel: he makes numerous changes that would make his Gospel more appealing to Jewish (or Jewish-Christian) readers or meaningful to readers who live in a fairly prosperous urban environment. The most interesting changes that Matthew makes in Mark, however, may be those that affect the way main characters in the story are presented. Jesus exhibits less human frailty in Matthew’s Gospel than he does in Mark—for example, statements that might imply a lack of knowledge or ability on his part are dropped or changed (cf. Mark 6:5 with Matt. 13:58). Likewise, the disciples of Jesus exhibit more potential for growth and leadership. Matthew’s portrayal of the religious leaders of Israel, however, exhibits the opposite tendency: inevitably they come off even worse in Matthew than they do in Mark.