Jesus, as we meet him in Matthew's gospel, is The Teacher. He is, of course, other things as well: healer; debater; battler against evil powers; ultimately the victim and the victor. Most of all, in Matthew he teaches, and not just in his words, but in his actions. The very narrative itself is instruction.

Like the other gospels, the first one is anonymous. Some years after it was written and circulated, the gospel acquired the name it now carries. A good way to get to know Matthew is to make an outline or two of the gospel. These will vary, for the narrative is complex. But unmistakably, each outline will identify five long teaching passages, which catch the attention of the careful reader. These are:

Chapters 5-7  The sermon on the mount
Chapter 10  Missionary instruction to the disciples
Chapter 13  Parables of the Kingdom
Chapter 18  The life of righteousness in the community
Chapters 24-25  Expectations of the end
At or near the end of each of these passages, the gospel writer switches the scene, mentions that Jesus has finished teaching for the time being, or gives some clue so the reader will note the end, for now, of formal teaching. For an early Jewish-Christian community, which Matthew’s certainly was, the association with the first five books of the Old Testament—the books of Moses—was inevitable. Matthew’s Jesus is not the Messiah who breaks sharply with Israel’s tradition, as he is elsewhere in the New Testament. He is the Messiah-Teacher according to Israel’s great model, Moses.

In the tradition of Moses, reiterating Moses’ teaching and leadership given to Israel, Jesus gives his listeners—and now the reader with Matthew’s Gospel—even more: the final, authoritative interpretation of God’s redemptive plan for his people. That is, Jesus is the Messiah of God.

Jesus is also the legitimate heir of David’s throne, as most expectations of the Messiah believed. (See 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22, 21:9, 15 and elsewhere, where the people affirm Jesus’ identity over against the leaders of the community.) Expectations for a Messiah were very diverse
among Jews at that time. Some did not expect a leader at all. The Dead Sea Scrolls show that some expected not one but three messianic figures (prophet, priest and king). There was no clear definition of an expected Messiah to which everyone agreed and with which to measure the church's claim that Jesus is Israel's Messiah.

Matthew, however, speaks with great clarity: the true Messiah is indeed the son of David and fulfills the expectations of those who dreamed of a warrior-king figure. But he is much more of a Messiah, because he is the legitimate successor to Moses, the one great leader of the Israelites, through whom God gave the law to Israel; that is, God taught Israel how to live. Or to put it differently, Jesus, as the final, authoritative interpreter of the law is the true Messiah because he is like Moses.

Matthew had diverse materials with which to create his gospel. He and his community knew a number of stories and traditions about Jesus and the early disciples, probably unconnected to a long narrative and probably in oral form. People in the early church told and re-told
individual stories of incidents in the life of Jesus which were passed down in the church, but not at first written down anywhere. People were accustomed to sharing news, stories and all kinds of information by word of mouth. (Since the tradition of oral teaching was common and was especially disciplined among Jews, this material was reliable and did not vary much from one teller to the next. Oral transmission does not imply carelessness or inaccuracy.) The traditions about Jesus circulated among Christians in oral form well into the third century A.D., long after the gospels were written.

Nonetheless, Matthew and his community also had some written material. First and foremost, they had the Gospel of Mark. This must have been a most treasured resource in the community, as it was a connected narrative, with the extra power which that brings. In addition to Mark, they also had a written account of Jesus' activities, mostly his teachings. The evidence of this is that there is a great deal of material in the gospels of both Matthew and Luke which is very similar and is unknown to us from any other source. It may be that this was a
written document, as it is long and has a great diversity of incidents and teachings in it. (One can imagine preachers and teachers wanting such a resource as the century drew to a close and the church moved further away in time from its beginnings.)

This supposed source, called Q (for "Quelle," the German word for 'source') was not regarded in that time as in any way "sacred text" (nor was Mark), since both Matthew and Luke use these materials with a great deal of freedom. (For an example of Q as used by each author, compare Matthew 5 and Luke 6.)

Why would Matthew bother to write another gospel, if his community already had Mark's, plus quite a number of other materials about Jesus and the earliest disciples? The probable answer is that the earlier materials were directed to a situation which Matthew and his church no longer faced. Both Mark and Q (as well as we can reconstruct it) were much oriented to an expectation of the climactic return—and soon—of Jesus as Lord, with hopes of a new age. Matthew, writing at the end of the first century, stands at a point where the church begins to realize that the much
hoped-for event may not soon happen, and the Christian community must learn what its call from God is, if the world as we know it is to continue for an indefinite time.

Given the fact Jesus had not returned in some 60 to 70 years, what does God want of us? It was to answer that question that Matthew wrote. He took the diverse material at his disposal and created a new gospel. Using Mark’s gospel as an outline, he created a very different picture of Jesus, his words and works, his mission and identity. Matthew, in effect, says to his audience, “If we read the story of Jesus in this way, does it help us to hear God’s call to us in our time and for our situation?” Not only Matthew’s immediate church community, but the wider church since, has agreed that this work is indeed important nourishment for the church and for her children.

For modern readers, this gospel is unsettling in two ways. One is what might be called Matthew’s stern judgmental stance. The author, who gives us a gentle and supportive Jesus in, for example, Matthew 5:25-34 and 11:28-30, shows us more often one who threatens eternal
damnation. The saying that people will weep and gnash their teeth in outer darkness comes from Q. It appears once in Luke 13:28. But Matthew has used it repeatedly in his gospel (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). Similar expressions are also found in 25:41, 46. One does not have to be a sentimentalist to be unsettled by such “hell-fire and damnation.” Among other things, we know perfectly well that it is not always easy to know what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad.’ Why does Matthew’s Jesus emphasize so much the eternal punishment of those who are “bad?”

The gospel of Matthew is also unsettling to modern readers because of what sounds to our ears like anti-Semitism. An obvious example, but not the only one, is Matthew 23:1-36. In this chapter, Matthew repeatedly excoriates “scribes and Pharisees” for various offenses and gives ‘counter-instruction’ to his Jewish-Christian readers. This material is found only in Matthew, which suggests that it comes from the author himself, not from his sources about Jesus. There is anti-Jewish material scattered throughout the New Testament, so the problem is not only
with Matthew, but he is one of the most emphatic. Why would Matthew’s Jesus condemn his fellow Jews so strongly?

The key to both of the unsettling things is to be found in Matthew’s situation when he composed his gospel. There are many clues to this setting in the gospel itself. But to summarize: at the end of the first century A.D., Judaism was beginning to emerge from its long period of disorganization and demoralization following the Roman-Jewish war of 66-70. Prior to that event, Jews had understood themselves for some centuries as a people of the land, the law and the temple. After the Roman victory, the “land and the temple” were gone. Judaism emerged from this crisis as the People of the Law. In the process of reconstituting Israel, the leaders (the Pharisees) created a much more orderly people. There were no longer many sects and diverse views of things among Jews, as there has been prior to the war. Specifically, Christians were not included in the renewed people.

For Matthew and his Jewish-Christian community, this was a major challenge. Matthew’s gospel claims that the true Jews are the ones who follow the true
Messiah, Jesus. It was a case of both sides of a struggle drawing the dividing line as sharply as possible. Ultimately, Matthew and his view were defeated, of course. Jews and Christians became two distinct peoples.

Matthew makes his case by affirming the teachings of Jewish law, as interpreted by the Pharisees, Matthew 5:17-19, 23:2-3. Jesus, in Matthew, does not stand over against Jewish law observance, as he does elsewhere in the gospel tradition. Clearly, it is especially important that no Christian believe that righteous living is not absolutely central to Jesus' program. That is why Matthew's Jesus speaks so strongly of punishment of those who take the law lightly [see Matthew 5:20]. The Christian is to exceed everyone else in righteousness. The Messiah could take no other position from Matthew's Jewish Christian view.

At the same time, conflict with the scribes and Pharisees (those groups which brought Judaism out of the disaster of the war and made her a People of the Law) was especially fierce and also peculiar. It was fierce because it was about Israel's future. For the Pharisaic party, the future
was to become the people of the law, interpreted by the emerging group of rabbis, whose job it was to lead the people in a radically changed situation (no land or temple). For Matthew and his community, the future was to follow the Messiah, who stood firmly in the tradition of Moses, but was now leading Israel in a new way (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34). Jesus the Messiah affirms the way of Moses and stands firmly within the Jewish people and is leading the Jews in a new (and for Jews, a peculiar) way.

One part of that new way was the greater righteousness required of Christians. The other is the openness to Gentiles. In Matthew’s birth stories, unknown to us from any other source, Jesus’ lineage is traced back to Abraham (Matthew 1). At the same time that non-Jewish wise men seek the newborn king, Herod orders the death of Jewish babies, and the Messiah comes out of Egypt, just as the Israelites had done (Matthew 2-3). At the very beginning of the gospel, the complicated threads of the story emerge: Jesus is a Jew of Jews and the successor to Moses. He is also the innovator who will include Gentiles among the chosen
people. The end of the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20) makes this explicit. Jesus’ followers are to obey his teachings and go to all the world making disciples.

In an extremely difficult situation of pressure from other Jews, Matthew has taken the various stories known in his church about Jesus, and fashioned a powerful resource for his beleaguered community. In the process, he has given the whole church universal a gospel not without problems, but one that has been teaching Christians since it was written.

B. Barbara Hall is Professor Emerita of New Testament, Virginia Theological Seminary.