

“FROM MATTHEW’S POINT OF VIEW”

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

SESSION THREE – THE GENEALOGY AND BIRTH OF JESUS

Matthew’s opening words (“Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham”) had special importance to a Jewish audience, which traced its ancestry through the covenants God made with Israel. The heading, with Jesus’ names and his ancestry, is packed with meaning.

Jesus’ name is Yeshua in Hebrew, meaning “Yahweh saves,” which is a shortened form of Yehoshua “Yahweh is salvation” (Ex. 24:13); as the angel declares (1:21-“Because he will save his people from their sins”).

“Christ” is a title, the Greek translation of the Hebrew “messiah” (“anointed”), that harks back to David as the anointed king of Israel. God had promised David through Nathan the prophet that his house and throne would be established forever (2 Sam. 7:11b-16), a promise now seen as having been fulfilled in Jesus as the Messiah.

“Son of David” is an important expression in Matthew’s Gospel (9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; 22:42, 45). Matthew uses the name of this great king seventeen times, more than any other book of the New Testament. King David was the revered, conquering warrior of Israel’s history. The wording “son of David” expresses a promised figure who would perpetuate David’s throne, thereby pointing to the Messiah’s lineage and royal expectation (2 Sam. 7:11b-16; The prophet Nathan declares the Word of the Lord to David):

“The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

But it also evoked images of a Messiah who would come conquering — a mighty warrior like David who would destroy Israel’s enemies and re-establish the throne in

Jerusalem and the kingdom of Israel as in the golden days of David. His caused some understandable confusion for those who wondered if Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

Jesus is also “the son of Abraham.” In tracing the ancestry not only to David but also to Abraham, Matthew holds a light of hope to the entire world. The covenant God made with Abraham established Israel as a chosen people, but it was also a promise that his line would be a blessing to all the nations (Gen. 12:1–3; 22:18):

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Jesus’ ministry brought fulfillment of God’s covenant to the particular people of Israel (e.g., 10:6; 15:24), but it also brought fulfillment of God’s promise to bring universal hope to all the nations (21:43; 28:19). This latter theme becomes increasingly pronounced in the Gospel and rises to a climax in the concluding commission (28:19-“Go and make disciples of all nations”).

The Genealogy (1:2-17)

Genealogies were important in the ancient world and played an especially significant role for the Jews. According to the Old Testament (e.g., 1 Chron. 1-9), God’s people kept extensive genealogies, which served as a record of a family’s descendants but were also used for practical and legal purposes to establish a person’s heritage, inheritance, legitimacy, and rights. Knowledge of one’s descent was especially necessary, if a dispute occurred, to ensure that property went to the right person.

Matthew most likely draws on some of the genealogies found in the Old Testament and uses similar wording. For the list of individuals after Zerubbabel, when the Old Testament ceases, Matthew probably uses other records that have since been lost.

Matthew omits several names that are found in the genealogy of Luke, most likely for the purpose of literary symmetry for memorization. The verb *gennao* (“give birth to, father - begat”) is used in each link of Matthew’s genealogy and is often used to indicate a more remote ancestor (e.g., grandfather or great-grandfather).

It is often assumed that Matthew gives Jesus’ line through his father Joseph while Luke gives Jesus’ line through his mother Mary. What is certain is that Matthew and Luke focus on Joseph in both genealogies but for different purposes. Matthew intends to

demonstrate Jesus' *legal claim* to the throne of David: that David's "greater Son," the anticipated Davidic messianic king, has arrived with the birth of Jesus. *Matthew is concerned with the legal line, not the complete biological line.*

Jesus' ancestor is not just David, but "King David" (Matt. 1:6), an explicit emphasis on royalty in the genealogy of Jesus. From here Matthew maintains an emphasis on kingship, using the word "king" twenty-two times, more than any other book in the New Testament. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew maintains a focus on Jesus as "the King of the Jews."

Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy through David's son Solomon (whereas Luke's genealogy does so through David's son Nathan). That lineage culminates in the birth of Jesus as the ruling royal pedigree. The striking characteristic of this section is the alternating series of godly and wicked kings that ruled Israel. The genuineness, and unlikeliness, of this genealogy must have stunned Matthew's readers. Jesus' ancestors were humans with all of the foibles, yet potentials, of everyday people. God worked through them to bring about his salvation.

There is, in other words, no pattern of righteousness in the lineage of Jesus. Adulterers, prostitutes, heroes, and Gentiles are all found in the genealogy from Abraham to David. We see that wicked kings fathered good kings, and good kings fathered wicked kings.

Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus

Matthew displays intentional precision in his account of Jesus' earthly life and ministry in order to accentuate truths that are important for devotion and doctrine. In the genealogy, he writes, "... and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ" (1:16).

The wording points specifically to Mary as the one from whom Jesus Christ was born. This genealogy has regularly emphasized the male who fathers a child, but here Matthew delivers a precise statement of the relationship of Jesus Christ to Joseph and Mary. While the genealogy establishes *Joseph as the legal father* of Jesus, Matthew emphasizes that *Mary is the biological parent* "of whom" Jesus was born, preparing the reader for the virgin birth by shifting attention from Joseph to Mary.

Later Matthew will clarify that the conception is miraculous, brought about by the Spirit of God coming upon her (1:18-25). Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (1:1), but he is also the Son of God, Immanuel, "God with us" (1:23). This is no ordinary king in the line of David.

Genealogies were often organized for ease of memorization. Matthew structures the genealogy to count fourteen generations from the covenant made with Abraham to the covenant made with David, fourteen generations from the end of David's reign to the deportation to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the Babylonian deportation down to Jesus. The importance of the number fourteen is even represented in the Grotto of the Nativity, where the birthplace of Jesus is marked by a fourteen-pointed star.

Why three groups of fourteen? Even that number ties Jesus to David, because the numerical value of the Hebrew consonants of his name is fourteen ($d w d = 4+6+4$). The Jewish practice of counting the numerical value for letters is called gematria. Alluding to the number of the consonants for David's name would have been significant for an audience that was intimately familiar with this Hebrew background and practice.

Gematria is still widely practiced today; the best example is the number 18, which corresponds to the 18th letter Chai. Chai is a word which means "Life", and is often used as a blessing (as in the toast, "L'Chaim!"). To this day, when you give a gift of money, you do so in multiples of 18.

The genealogy accomplishes the following:

- 1) It ties Jesus into the entire history of God's involvement with his people
- 2) It establishes Jesus as a Jew, a descendent of Abraham
- 3) It establishes Jesus as the fulfillment of the Davidic royal prophecies, even invoking the "David number" of 14 as a mnemonic device
- 4) It establishes women as an important component of salvation history
- 5) The carefully chosen names of the women and their backstories demonstrates that Gentiles are part of salvation history, and are welcome into the new covenant of faith
- 6) The backstories of the women, and the juxtaposition of faithful and unfaithful kings, demonstrates that even the most unworthy can participate in the life of Jesus
- 7) It clearly states that whole Jesus' ancestral authority is traced tribally through Joseph, the birth of Jesus was of a different nature from those which came before.
- 8) While not a complete genealogy, skipping various generations, it is a representative genealogy, tying Jesus into the history the Hebrew people and the Abrahamic promise to be a blessing to all nations, and into the royal lineage and messianic promises of the Davidic royal line.

The Nativity in Matthew

Matthew's account is not quite like traditional Christmas pageants. The tension created between a husband and wife when Joseph suspects Mary of adultery; the brutal political

intrigue of King Herod many months after Jesus' birth; the necessary deception of the magi; and the forced flight of the first family to Egypt (a kind of reverse exodus) make Matthew's story more like a modern murder mystery than a Christmas-card portrait. Nevertheless, Matthew's major emphasis remains: in Jesus Christ, God is with us, and the world is changed because he came.

For Matthew the miracle is a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy, the first of many that will be seen throughout his Gospel (look at 2:6, 18; 4:4, 6, 15, etc for other examples). For the early Christians, when it could be demonstrated that an event had been previously envisioned by a prophet, it was clear to them that it was truly happening according to God's will. In the case of Jesus' birth, Matthew sees a parallel in Isaiah 7:14 in the account of a young woman who is to bear a child as a sign of God's grace and power (*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel*).

While this particular prophecy is in connection with the military threat facing King Ahaz from Assyria, some 700 years before the birth of Jesus, prophecy was (and still often is) regarded as having several "time layers" of impact. There is the immediate situation at hand; and there is a future application. The immediate situation for this prophecy is the 700 BC threat of invasion; Matthew, confronted with the facts surrounding Jesus' birth, recalls this prophecy from Isaiah, as its future application.

While some scholars would say that both Matthew and Luke overlay the "virgin birth" aspect of the Nativity onto the actual events in order to make the Isaiah prophecy fit, this seems deeply unlikely. Luke doesn't make any mention of the Isaiah prophecy, but still makes a strong case for Mary's virginity; Matthew focusses more on the "Immanuel" aspect of the prophecy, rather than the virgin aspect. Additionally, Isaiah Chapter 8 establishes quite clearly that the "Immanuel" child is the product of an uncomfortably witnessed union (Isaiah 8:3 – "Then I made love to the prophetess and she gave birth to a son"). "Virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 is "young woman;" Virgin in Matthew and Luke is "young woman who has not had sex."

The Star and the Magi (2:1-12)

When the encounter between the magi and Jesus is described as taking place in a "house" (Matt. 2:11), it is clear that considerable time has passed since his birth and that Jesus is probably a toddler by this time (Mat 2:10 – "On coming to the house, they saw the child ("paidon" in Greek, a term usually employed for children from 2-7 yrs old) and his mother Mary"). What is more, the fact that King Herod orders all boys under two years old to be murdered demonstrates that he knew that Jesus was no longer an infant (Matt. 2: 16).

The magi were scholars, earned in ancient religious and philosophical texts, who were also astronomers and astrologers, most likely from the Mesopotamian region around modern Iraq. The fact that they are not Jews but Gentiles points once more to the fact that Jesus has come to save all the nations of the world. The plural term magi could refer to two, three, or more. Matthew says that they followed a star to the place of Jesus' birth. Scientists speculate that this is perhaps referring to a conjunction of planets, the explosion of a supernova, a comet, or some other astronomical event. There are several candidates for this event!

The description of their encounter with King Herod shows some ignorance on the Magi's part of the power structure in Israel at this time. Herod was not of royal Hebrew descent, but appointed by the Romans. Any Davidic threat is a threat to Herod's legitimacy, and he reacts with typical violence. What happens to the two-year-olds in Bethlehem foreshadows what Jesus will endure in Jerusalem thirty or more years later – and what Jerusalem itself will suffer in 70 AD, with the Roman destruction of the city and Temple.

The gifts the Magi presented – gold, frankincense and myrrh – tell who they thought Jesus actually was. These same three items were apparently among the gifts, recorded in ancient inscriptions, which King Seleucus II Callinicus offered to the god Apollo at the temple in Miletus in Greece in 243 B.C.E. So, over 200 years before Jesus was born, gold, frankincense and myrrh were offered as tribute not to a King, but to a God. Did the Magi know the baby was more than simply the King of the Jews? Their gifts say so.

Jesus: Refugee and Immigrant (2:13-18)

Once more, the messenger from God, the angel of the Lord, appears to Joseph in a dream, this time warning him of Herod's nefarious plot. Matthew sees the journey as the fulfillment of the prediction from Exodus 4:22 cited in verse 15 (“Out of Egypt I have called my son”) and a second scripture in Jeremiah 31:15-17 (see Matt. 2:18) about the suffering that will precede the return of Israel to her homeland and the coming of a Messiah.

The New Exodus (2:19-23)

In the final verses of chapter 2 Matthew introduces a kind of second exodus. Just as the Jews left Palestine when Joseph's brothers fled to Egypt because of a famine (Gen. 42-49) and Israel eventually returned to the promised land after a forty-year sojourn in the desert, being led by Moses and Joshua (Exod. 12:37-40:38; Josh. 1-4), so Jesus and his parents represent the new Israel as they flee to Egypt and return after Herod dies – Matthew often evokes Jesus as the New Moses, the new Giver of the Law, the one who miraculously feeds the people, a leads them to deliverance – this time, from their sins.