

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 2

Matthew – Part Two The Incarnation

I. BACKGROUND

As discussed last week, Matthew's gospel was written to Jews to encourage persecuted Christian Jews in their faith, to refute non-believing Jews, and to show that Jesus was a fulfillment of the Old Testament's prophecies rather than a contradiction. With those themes constantly before us as a context for understanding Matthew, we look in more detail this week at the first two chapters of Matthew that set forth the genealogy and birth of Jesus.

II. GENEALOGY (Mt. 1:1-17)

Matthew begins with the two Greek words *biblos geneseos*, which the NIV translates as "a record of the genealogy." Others translate the phrase as "a record of the history." While "genealogy" is certainly appropriate for the genealogy that is to follow, it misses a nuance that is contained in Matthew's phrase. Matthew did not make up the phrase; it is found twice in the Septuagint.¹ The phrase is used both times in Genesis (Gen. 2:4 and 5:1). In Genesis 2:4, the words start the story of the creation of man. In an echo of the creation of Adam, Matthew begins the incarnation of Jesus with the genealogy that sets up Jesus as Messiah.

Matthew continues beyond "a record of the genealogy" (or history) adding the words "of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham." Each of these names/titles is important and worth discussion:

A. *Jesus*

The Greek for "Jesus" in English letters is *Iesous*. It is the Greek form for the Hebrew name we have Anglicized into "Joshua." There were two Hebrew forms of the name, a long form and a short one.

¹ The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. We know that Matthew was familiar with it because Matthew will often use the Septuagint for his Old Testament quotations.

The long form was *y'hoshua* meaning, “Yahweh (abbreviated y’) is salvation.” The short form was *yeshua* meaning “Yahweh saves.”

B. Christ

“Christ” from the Greek *christos* means “anointed.” The Hebrew for “anointed” gives us our word “messiah.” “Messiah” was the term Jews used in contemplation of the coming king and prophet who would bring the promises of the prophets to fruition. First century Jews were highly anticipating the coming messiah(s).²

C. Son of David

“Son of David” is an important phrase Matthew uses over and over again with Jesus. It hearkens back to multiple Old Testament passages about the coming Messiah. Messiah as King was to come from David because of God’s promises that David’s throne would endure forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). Isaiah had also prophesied that the coming Messiah would reign on David’s throne (Isaiah 9:6-7). Matthew’s use of this phrase not only emphasizes the Old Testament prophecies, but also draws attention to the other non-biblical writings well known at the time. For example, a pseudepigraphal³ writing called the Psalms of Solomon uses the phrase “son of David” to reference the coming Messiah (Pss Sol 17:21).

D. Son of Abraham

Of course, by being a son of David, Jesus must have been a son of Abraham; still, Matthew gives the title and reference. Reasons must include that the promises of redemption made to Abraham come through Jesus. It was Abraham who received the prophetic promise that “all nations” (Gentile and Jew) would be blessed through his seed. Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. Another current pseudepigraphal writing called “The Testament of Levi” seems to

² Some Jews at the time believed there would be two+ Messiahs, prophet and king, or prophet, priest and king. All three were typically “anointed” to their offices in the Old Testament. Matthew will show how Jesus was the one Messiah, prophet, priest, and king all at once.

³“Pseudepigraphal writings” are a collection of books/scrolls written from intertestamental times through New Testament times where the true authors are unknown. The books are ascribed to famous individuals that usually long predeceased the titled author. Many of these writings are still extant and can be read in a collection entitled “The Pseudepigrapha.”

indicate that “Son of Abraham” was another title being used by Jews for the coming Messiah (T Lev 8:15).

Matthew then sets out groups of fourteen progenitors to Jesus, tracing his lineage back to Abraham. Scholars differ on the symbolism of Matthew using 14’s for his heritage tracing. It is clear that Matthew does not trace each ancestor, but chooses those for inclusion.

III. THE BIRTH AND INFANCY OF JESUS (Mt. 1:18 – 2:12)

As Matthew recounts the birth of Jesus, we readily see several things of note. First, consistent with his overall theme, Matthew shows that Jesus’ birth fulfills multiple promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. Second, we see the basis for many of our Christmas legends and traditions that do not fit exactly with what we are told in scripture!

A. *Multiple Prophecies*

As related by Matthew, the birth of Christ fulfills several Old Testament prophecies. The virgin birth (more properly, the virgin conception) is seen to fulfill Isaiah 7:14. In Isaiah, the prophet is conversing with King Ahaz about the future of Israel. The king is told that a sign of God’s promise will come when “the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” As Matthew writes the prophesy out, he translates Immanuel for his readers as “God with us.” Matthew sets out this prophesy after explaining that Mary’s pregnancy was a result of the Holy Spirit as opposed to relations with Joseph or any other. Joseph hears from God through a messenger (angel) that Mary has not been unfaithful and is not to be divorced (put away).

Magi come to visit Jesus as an infant. Matthew notes that the Magi have followed a star, using language that alludes to Numbers 24:17, “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” The Magi follow this star to find Jesus.

In the process of seeking out Jesus, the Magi come to Jerusalem and asked around, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Word of this gets to Herod whom history tells us is in the last few years of his life. History also relates Herod as a paranoid soul who has recently killed his favorite wife and two of his sons.

Needless to say, Herod does not respond well to the news of a king's birth. Herod calls the priests and teachers in to ask where the Messiah is to be born. The answer given is from Micah 5:2, "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." In addition to this prophesy, we should also remember that Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David as well.

Herod sends the Magi on to Bethlehem with the information from Micah. Herod also instructs the Magi to find the Christ child and report back to Herod so that Herod could "worship" him. Of course, as the story bears out, Herod has no intention to worship Jesus nor do the priest or teachers. We see here that formal knowledge of scripture does not translate, in itself, into knowledge of Jesus the Savior.

Herod's sole motive in dealing with the Magi was to kill Jesus. Matthew shows in this early part of the book, that Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah was wrong from a scriptural perspective. Nonetheless, many establishment Jews (as opposed to Mary and Joseph) rejected Jesus from the beginning while Gentiles (the Magi) came to Jesus in worship.

The Magi find Jesus and bring him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Some have seen in these gifts great symbols of the life of Christ. Gold was a gift worthy of kings, frankincense was an incense that was symbolic of the divine, and myrrh was used to embalm and prepare people for burial. Regardless of the symbolism, these were three valuable gifts laid before Jesus, Joseph, and Mary.

After their time of worship and giving of gifts, the Magi leave and avoid returning to Herod (God had warned them of Herod's duplicity in a dream). God also came to Joseph in a dream and told him to go to Egypt immediately. Joseph obeys God and leaves in the middle of the night for Egypt. Joseph had to cover 75 miles to get to the Egyptian border.

Meanwhile, Herod realizes he was duped by the Magi and decides on a course reminiscent of Pharaoh in the Old Testament. Herod sets out to have all the male children under the age of two in and

around Bethlehem slaughtered. Bethlehem was only 5 miles from Jerusalem, so the time between the order and its execution could have been rather brief.

Matthew records the resultant slaughter as a prophetic fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

Jesus’ time in Egypt is seen as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 where the prophet said, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Hosea was referencing the Exodus. Matthew sees it as prophetic for Jesus as the full son of God (as opposed to the nation of Israel as a figurative son of God) who would be called out of Egypt into a wilderness of testing and a ministry for God.

Eventually, Herod dies and Joseph takes the child Jesus and family back to Nazareth in Galilee. Nazareth was a despised town which history and the Bible indicate was derided by many (“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”). Matthew says that Jesus being from Nazareth was fulfillment of “what was said by the prophets.” Matthew’s phrase here does not reference a specific prophecy. Indeed, there is no Old Testament Prophecy that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. What Matthew is most likely referencing are the repeated Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah would be despised, something inherent in one from Nazareth.

B. Misconceptions

We should use this narrative to clear up a few traditions that accompany many of our Christmas celebrations that are not biblical. First, the Magi are NOT kings, or at least, most likely not kings. The song “We Three Kings” is based on Matthew but goes beyond the scripture. History tells us “Magi” was a label used for a number of different people that were astrologers and men who sought to unravel mystic meanings in dreams, stars, and magic. Magi as kings go back to non-biblical sources, albeit old. Tertullian records the Magi as kings, but this was two hundred years after the events, not decades later like Matthew.

Second, nowhere does Matthew relate that there were THREE Magi. The “three” for the song is derived from the number of gifts brought to Jesus – three gifts, three magi.

Finally, let's discuss one last misconception. The events Matthew described can be reasonably dated to around 8 - 4 B.C. The idea that Jesus was born on a turnkey date of 0 is neither scriptural nor historical. It reflects the work of Dionysius Exiguus ("Dennis the Short"), a monk who lived in the 500's. Dionysius was working at a time that was called "753 A.U.C." The "A.U.C." stood for *ab urbe condita*, the Roman dating from the establishment of Rome. Dionysius was trying to establish a precise date for Easter for Pope St John I. Dionysius's efforts to work back to the time of Jesus' birth fell a little short!

IV. POINTS FOR HOME

- A. Jesus is Messiah, son of David, Son of Abraham.
- B. Messiah has come in miraculous glory fulfilling God's promises of the ages.
- C. Knowledge of scripture does not equal knowledge of the Holy One.
- D. Traditions are nice, but they are still traditions.
- E. Watch what this Messiah has to say in the coming weeks.