

## **Matthew's Story of Jesus' Birth and Childhood - Matthew 1:1 – 2:23**

### Jesus's royal pedigree – Matthew 1:1 – 17

Matthew's genealogy (list of ancestors) of Jesus begins with Abraham and recounts fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon and fourteen from the exile to Jesus (Matt 1:17). Why fourteen? Because of the symbolic significance that ancient Jewish writers attached to numbers. Hebrew letters had numeric value and the three consonants that make up the name "DaViD" add up to fourteen. The point is to establish Jesus' ancestry as the promised ruler from the family of David (2 Sam 7:16).

The early Christians believed that even though the political dynasty of David no longer ruled from Jerusalem, God's promise that there would always be a descendant of David ruling over God's people was fulfilled in Jesus. Matthew's titles for Jesus: son of David, king of the Jews and Messiah/Christ all reinforce this claim. "Messiah" (Hebrew) and "Christ" (Greek) mean "the one God has anointed to reign over the Kingdom of God."<sup>1</sup>

The ancestry of Joseph, Jesus' foster father, is traced through the male ancestors, but Matthew adds four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (called "the wife of Uriah"). These four women have in common that they are Gentiles. Matthew stresses that it is God's faithfulness, not the purity of ancestral bloodlines, that qualifies Jesus to rule over the "kingdom of heaven." The inclusion of Gentiles in the genealogy also foreshadows the inclusion of Gentiles in the racially inclusive people of God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew's term "kingdom of heaven" is the equivalent of what Mark and Luke call the "kingdom of God." Using the word "heaven" instead of the sacred name "God" is one of Matthew's many concessions to Jewish sensibility. When you see "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew's story, it never means "heaven" in the sense of the destiny of the Christian dead. It always means that state of things that will prevail when the second petition of "the Lord's prayer" is fulfilled and "our Father in heaven" has brought in God's uncontested reign with the result that God's will for Creation will be "done on earth as it is in heaven."

<sup>2</sup> It is sometimes pointed out that each of the four women was involved in some sort of sexual immorality. This is true from our point of view, but only Rahab (a prostitute) is in that category from the point of view of the biblical writers. Ruth's approach to Boaz (Ruth 3:7-9) is given no negative evaluation in the text. Tamar is pronounced "righteous" for her actions (Gen 38:26). Bathsheba was a victim of David's adulterous impulses, not the seductress that artists have imagined (2 Sam 11:4).

**When in your experience has God used unlikely people to fulfill God's promises and demonstrate God's faithfulness?**

Joseph's dilemma – Matt 1:18-25

Having established Jesus's royal pedigree through Joseph, Matthew focuses on Joseph in the first act of his drama. Like his namesake from the Old Testament, Joseph is a "righteous" person (Matt 1:19), who finds himself in a difficult situation and receives information from a dream (Matt 1:20). Apparently his fiancée has been unfaithful and has become pregnant. Rather than expose Mary to humiliation (or worse), Joseph is planning to cancel the marriage contract "quietly." But God's messenger informs Joseph through a dream that not only is Mary's pregnancy the work of the Holy Spirit, but also her child should be named Jesus (= Joshua) because he will save his people, not from the idolatrous Canaanites, but from their own idolatries.

Despite all the discussion about the original meaning of Isaiah 7:14, there can be no doubt that Matthew, who read "virgin" in his Greek Bible, rather than "young woman" which appears in the Hebrew text, sees the miraculous conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of Scripture. And Matthew wants to make another point, so he extends the quotation to include the symbolic name "Emmanuel," which he translates for his Greek-speaking audience: "God with us."

In case we weren't paying attention, Matthew has reminded his audience that just as *God was with* Joseph in his slavery and imprisonment and just as *God was with* David as he faced the giant Goliath, so in the person of Jesus, God is still "*with us*." This good news at the beginning of Matthew's gospel is repeated at the end when the risen Jesus assures his followers, "Look, *I myself will be with you* every day until the end of this present age" (Matt 28:20, Common English Bible).

**What do you do to remind yourself that God is with you even when you don't really experience God's presence? When you feel alone, is there someone in your class or small group that you can call who will remind you that God is with you?**

### The first Gentiles to recognize Jesus – Matt 2:1-12

The word “magi” is the plural of “magus”---astrologer or magician. The plural indicates more than one, but the text does not specify the number as three. They are “from the east” and they refer to the “king of the Jews” so they are not themselves Jews.<sup>3</sup> The star is the heavenly portent that signals the birth of one who will change history.

Herod<sup>4</sup> responds with fear. What do these strangers mean by asking “where is the newborn king of the Jews?” he wonders. “You’re looking at him! I’m king of the Jews and nobody around here has had any babies lately.” Somehow he suspects that they are talking about the promised Messiah, so he checks with the scholars to see where the Messiah is supposed to be born. They quote him Micah 5:2, which mentions Bethlehem, David’s hometown. But Matthew adds in 2 Sam 5:2 in order to introduce an allusion to David as the “shepherd of the people,” just as Moses had been. Following this advice, the astrologers find Jesus and deliver their gifts, “gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”<sup>5</sup>

The importance of divinely inspired dreams appears again as they are warned “in a dream” not to betray the child’s location to Herod. They exit the story, having fulfilled their function as the first Gentiles to honor Jesus as the anointed Davidic ruler.

**The ancients believed in dreams as a means of hearing from a god, but they also recognized the danger of deceitful dreams. Can you think of a time when God spoke to you through a dream? How can you tell whether a dream is from God or not? What would be a good response to a dream that you thought might be from God?**

### Escape to Egypt – Matt 2:13-15

Joseph has another dream in which he is told to take Mary and Jesus into Egypt to save their lives. In the Old Testament people went to Egypt

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<sup>3</sup> The translation “we have seen his star in the east” is a little misleading, because if they have followed the star “from the east” then it probably did not appear to them in the east. Perhaps we are to understand them to be saying, “in the east we have seen his star.” These astrologers are never identified as kings by the text.

<sup>4</sup> Herod “the Great” was an Idumean (Edomite) who had persuaded the Roman Senate to put him in charge of the fractious people known since the return from exile as “Jews” from their location in “Judea.” He was given the title “King of the Jews” in 40 B.C. but it took him until 37 B.C to kill enough people to establish his rule.

<sup>5</sup> The three gifts are probably the origin of the notion that there were three givers.

during times of drought in Palestine---most notably, the family of Jacob whom the earlier Joseph saved from death. Matthew alludes to the story of the exodus by quoting Hosea 11:1: "I have called my son (Israel) out of Egypt." But before God's latest son is called out of Egypt, Matthew returns to the story of Herod's murderous paranoia.

#### Murder of the Bethlehem children – Matt 2:16-18

Finding that he cannot identify the one child he wants to eliminate, Herod determines to kill every male child within the age range indicated by the astrologers. Apparently two years elapsed between the time when they first saw the star and when they arrived in Jerusalem.

There is no historical record of this event outside of Matthew's gospel. Josephus, the Jewish historian, does portray Herod as paranoid and murderously protective of his power. He had numerous relatives killed, including at least one of his sons, allegedly causing Augustus to remark, "it is better to be Herod's hog than his son."

The "Holy Innocents" of Bethlehem are considered martyrs by the Roman Catholic Church because they died for Christ. They are commemorated on December 28.

**Children are still dying because of people who value their own power more than the lives of children. Your mission team to the Democratic Republic of the Congo saw first-hand how, in a country full of natural resources, children suffer because greedy politicians line their own pockets at the expense of the people they are supposed to be leading. Pray for the children in the DRC, in the US, and elsewhere who suffer because of the greed and indifference of others.**

#### Return from Egypt – Matt 2:19-23

The way that Matthew has told the story so far has echoed the story of Moses: The life of the child who will be the shepherd of his people is threatened by an evil ruler, but saved from death by the ingenuity of his family. The parallel is made explicit when Matthew alludes to Exodus 4:19 ("Go back to Egypt because everyone there who wanted to kill you has died.") when he writes that in yet another dream, Joseph is told, "Get up and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead" (Matt 2:20). Joseph heads back for Bethlehem, which Matthew seems to regard as Joseph and Mary's home.

But he is again warned in a dream not to settle in Judea, but to move to Galilee, where the family settles in Nazareth.

### Summary

Matthew has set the stage for the rest of his Gospel. Jesus, the one who comes to shepherd God's people, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, is seen as a more successful Moses. In chapter 4 he will resist temptation in the wilderness and in chapters 5-7 he will go up on a mountain to interpret God's Torah in new and surprising ways. By his death and resurrection he makes the promise of God's forgiveness and presence a reality for the church.

### Thoughts on Christian maturity

There is a little bit of Herod in all of us. When we sense that someone may be moving in on our privileges or trying to take credit for something we helped with or in some way threatening our status or stuff, we get defensive. Things would have been very different for the families of Bethlehem if Herod had just given a little thought to the situation: "I don't like this. It makes me angry and frightened. But God, are you doing something I should cooperate with?"

If each of us could learn to keep on expecting God to do something strange and unheard-of, maybe we would not be so angry when God actually does it.