

Matthew 1.1–4.16

Notes largely based on Augustine Stock, OSB, *The Method and Message of Matthew* (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 1994).

0 INTRODUCTION

What we're interested in here is the story that Matthew tells concerning Jesus. His book has a background and a development that scholars have been able to discern to some extent, but generally we aren't interested in that. We want to know about the text in front of us. We want to see the threads that hold it together. We want to see how individual passages contribute to the whole. And we want to get some idea of how Matthew's book would have struck his first audience, which lived in circumstances considerably different from our own.

It's traditional in biblical commentaries to talk about the author of the book and the date and circumstances of its writing. This is something of a problem because, as here, biblical authors, including Matthew, tended not to identify themselves anywhere in the text. Nor do the manuscripts have titles like, 'Gospel According to Matthew'. Only Church tradition tells us that the writer of the book was 'Matthew', the 'tax collector' of Mt 9.9.

The fathers of the church tended to think of Mark as an 'abbreviation' of Matthew, and that's probably why they wrote few commentaries on Mark. In the last century and a half, though, scholars have come to realize that Mark actually wrote his gospel first— just before or after the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in 70 AD— and that Matthew actually based *his* work on Mark's, some 10 or 15 years later, with Luke writing some time after that.^{*} Since that's true, Matthew the tax collector's direct

authorship is unlikely, because even if there were no other reasons to question it (and there are), a tax collector who had been, say, 20 or 25 when he joined Jesus' faction, would be 75 or 80 in 85 AD— in an era when life expectancy was around 40.

When we read any text— the Bible, a novel, the newspaper— we can ask, What world does this text presuppose? Because all of the earliest mentions of Matthew's gospel come from writers active in and around Antioch in Syria, a city known to have a significant Christian population from very early times (it's mentioned 19 times in Acts; 'the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch', Ac 11.26), most scholars think the gospel was written in Antioch. This also would explain the addition of 'and throughout Syria' to Mark's list of places where Jesus' fame spread (4.24; cp Mk 1.28,39), which is somewhat at odds with the emphasis on Galilee in Mt 4.12-15,23,25. But what kind of a world was 'Matthew's' Antioch?

Antioch was a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred, where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters (roughly 205 persons per acre, compared to 183 in modern Bombay or 122 in Calcutta); where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent, if not both, before reaching maturity. Intense ethnic antagonisms were exacerbated by a constant stream of destitute strangers who came to the city looking to survive any way they could. The city was so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents often prompted mob violence and rioting. Crime flourished and streets were dangerous, especially at night. And on top of everything, Antioch was

^{*} Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (rev. edn., London: SCM, 1999), p. 159.

repeatedly smashed by earthquakes, fires, floods, famine, and war. A resident could count on being homeless from time to time, even if s/he managed to survive. Such was the world of Matthew's first audience. Such was the world in which some people felt they had been called by a crucified Messiah to establish a new community.

We can also ask, What issue(s) caused this text to be written? We start to understand that as we come to understand how the mid-80s were an important moment in Church history. Peter, Paul, James, and many others, had died in 64; the Temple had been gone since 70. Fifteen to twenty years is a whole generation. The absence of the Temple had by now become a fact of life, not a recent or impending catastrophe, as it had been for Mark. Mark himself had been no Jehovah's Witness, predicting the end of the world, but it was all the more clear by the 80s that the end of the world wasn't quite yet. Matthew assumes and even emphasizes that even more strongly! Was he responding to apocalyptic currents, to people getting feverish about a 'second coming'?

The 80s were a time when Church and Synagogue were definitely separating. Matthew's deep engagement with the Old Testament strongly suggests that his community was concerned about the meaning of Israel's Scriptures. It was likely that a majority of them were Jews. And this would explain Matthew's polemical sharpness towards the Pharisees, suggesting bitter disappointment in the way things were going with the Jewish nation, now that Temple and priesthood were no more, and the Pharisees, with their interpretations of events, were emerging as Israel's new leaders.

How are such issues resolved in the text? Do we find the resolutions satisfactory? Whose point of view is recognized, and whose ignored?

We also want to know how a document written thousands of years ago might speak to us, today. It's interesting to know what the text meant way back then. But what does it mean for *me*? It's my firm conviction that we can answer that, but only by first looking at what Matthew was saying to his own audience in context. Then we can consider how it applies to us. But whether we're interested in moral questions or mystical ones, we have to do that work first. Otherwise we're reading a gospel that only reflects our own feelings and ideas.

We can, and must, assess *Matthew's* work to some extent by distinguishing what's his from what he got from Mark and what he shares with Luke. Even within the material that we find only in Matthew, we need to distinguish what's 'redactional'— that is, from the author's own hand as he wrote his book— and what's 'traditional', that is, which shows evidence of having been incorporated from

elsewhere. Of course, Matthew shaped *all* of his material— original or not— to his own purposes, so the questions can get complicated, and we're not even going to attempt most of that here. But from time to time we'll find that comparing and contrasting the gospels brings Matthew's story into better light.

About all we can say concerning the gospel's origin, though, is that sometime around the mid-80s AD, an author now unknown to us who probably lived in Antioch in Syria, took Mark's gospel and at least one other source (which would later be used by Luke as well), added material of his own, and wrote a gospel with strong focus on what was happening in Judaism ever since Jerusalem's destruction— and that at least in the second century, this gospel came to be attributed for reasons unknown to Matthew the tax-collector.

0.A.1 The Structure of Matthew's Gospel

Understanding the way an author organizes his book is very helpful for understanding the book. This proved to be true in spades in Mark's gospel. But alas, the structure of Matthew isn't so easy to see. Ancient books didn't have chapter headings, punctuation or even spaces between words. Maurice Sendak provides a children's riddle that neatly sums up the problem:

Infir taris,
Inoak noneis
Inmud eelsare,
Inclay noneare,
Mareseat oats,
Goatseativy.[†]

It was up to the reader to master his text, usually by reading it out loud enough times to get a feel for it, and often by reading it with a teacher. That meant reading was largely an oral/aural event, and oral cues such as repetition or chiasm (A-B-A structures) gave clue and shape to the story— especially since only about 3% of Matthew's audience was likely to have been literate.

A hundred years ago, a professor named BW Bacon proposed that Matthew is comprised of five 'books', each containing an 'extended discourse' followed by accounts of miracles, etc:

Mt 5–7	Sermon on the Mount,
Mt 10	Missionary Discourse,
Mt 13	Parabolic Discourse,
Mt 18	Discourse on the Church
Mt 23–25	Discourse on End Times

[†] I&P Opie, illus. by M Sendak, *I Saw Esau: The Schoolchild's Pocket Book* (Candlewick Press, Cambridge MA: 1992), no 91.

Bacon saw in this fivefold structure a reflection of the Torah. The five books are supplemented before and after by the birth narratives (Mt 1-2) and the passion and resurrection accounts (Mt 26-28).

There's something to be said for this way of looking at Matthew. Each of his five 'extended discourses' concludes with the distinctive formula: 'and it happened when Jesus finished...' (7.28; 11.1; 13.53; 19.1; 26.1). But there are other large blocks of discourse such as Mt 11, that don't conclude that way; what's more, Mt 18 (Bacon's fourth great discourse) doesn't actually seem to be a single, unified 'discourse' at all; and Mt 23 doesn't really belong with Mt 24-25 and can't be considered a single discourse with them. Above all, it just seems odd to relegate the birth of Christ—let alone his passion/resurrection—to the status of prologue and epilogue! Yet from convenience and from lack of compelling alternatives, this 'five books' approach has remained a popular way of looking at Matthew. But does it really help us to see the *story* in Matthew?

More recent critics think not. But JD Kingsbury found that if we read the gospel as a *narrative*, and not just as a compilation of stories and sayings, we find this outline:

1. The Arrival of Heaven's Regime: Presenting Jesus, Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham, son of God (1.1-4.16);
2. Jesus, God's son, ministers to Israel, and Israel repudiates him (4.17-16.20);
3. Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, suffers, and is vindicated as God's true son (16.21-28.20).

Looking at Matthew this way, we discover that the book as a whole is about the arrival of heaven's regime 'on earth as it is in heaven' (6.10), and about Jesus' role in this, and about what kind of regime it is.

The first line of the book functions as a title for Part 1 (1.1-4.16), as is natural, and perhaps in some way a title for the book as a whole. We also find that to signal the beginnings of Parts 2 and 3, Matthew employs a second recognizable formula:

- 4.17 *From that time Jesus began to proclaim, saying, Repent, for the regime of the skies is at hand.*
- 16.21 *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...'*

Also, we find that each of the three parts ends with a *climax* in which Jesus is shown to be *God's son*:

- Part 1 At Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, God himself declares that Jesus is his 'beloved son' (3.13-17).

Part 2 At Caesarea Philippi, Peter declares that Jesus is 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God' (16.16-20).

Part 3 At Jerusalem, Jesus affirms at his trial that he is indeed 'the Messiah, the son of God' (26.63); then the centurion and those with him declare, 'This one really was God's son' (27.54), and finally, the exalted Jesus, on a mountain in Galilee, refers to himself simply as 'the Son'—'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (28.19).

Not because I am fully satisfied with this structure, but because it seems to work plot-wise, I will work with it, at least to begin to get an idea of what Matthew is doing with his story.

1 THE ARRIVAL OF HEAVEN'S REGIME 1.1-4.16

Part 1 (1.1-4.16) of Matthew's story breaks into two parts, the birth and infancy narrative (1.2-2.23), and the baptism and temptation narrative (3.1-4.16). In detail, it goes like this:

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| A. Title: The Genesis of Jesus Messiah | 1.1 |
| B. Son of David, Son of Abraham, (and Son of God) | 1.2-2.23 |
| 1. Jesus' Lineage as Son of David | 1.2-17 |
| 2. Conceived of a Virgin by the Spirit, yet Son of David | 1.18-25 |
| 3. The Nations Pay Homage to Israel's King | 2.1-12 |
| 4. Israel's King Forced into Exodus/Exile, and Redeemed | 2.13-18 |
| 5. Divine Guidance to Israel, to Galilee, to Nazareth | 2.19-23 |
| C. The Arrival of Heaven's Regime | 3.1-4.16 |
| 1. John the Baptist and His Proclamation | 3.1-12 |
| 2. Jesus Acclaimed Son of God Before the Powers | 3.13-17 |
| 3. A People Who Sat in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light | 4.12-16 |

1.A Title: The Genesis of Jesus Messiah 1.1

Matthew begins by announcing, with a strong allusion to Genesis, that his is a book of 'beginnings'. He refers to Gn 5.1 in particular— 'This is the *book of the generations of Adam*' (or: '*book of the genesis of men*', LXX)— which is followed by a genealogy. Matthew's book is about 'the genesis of Jesus, Messiah, Son of David, Son of Abraham' (1.1).

In these first eight Greek words, Matthew alludes to three key Old Testament events: 'genesis', the promise to Abraham, and the election of David. Matthew also names his subject (Jesus), and tells who he is in terms of Jewish expectation regarding those promises (he is 'Messiah'), and gives us a hint as to the plot of the book.

It's interesting that all four gospels begin with an allusion to the Book of Genesis. For Mark, Luke, and John, it's a reference to the 'beginning' (cf Gn 1.1, 'In the beginning...'). Matthew chooses to echo the 'second beginning' of the Book of Genesis, the title of the 'Book of Generations' (Gn 5.1), which heads the first extended genealogy of the Bible (descendants of Adam).

Matthew first refers to Jesus, as in Mk 1.1, as 'Jesus, Messiah'. Meaning 'anointed one', the word 'messiah' was applied to different people in the OT, but particularly to kings, priests, and prophets. Contrary to what we might often hear or suppose, there was no standard expectation of a messiah at the time of Jesus, nor did every Jew look for a special 'anointed one' to come and resolve the problems of history. Thus to call Jesus 'Messiah' did not evoke a fixed checklist of what a 'messiah' was to do. Rather, the term raised a question: For what special task or role has God anointed or designated Jesus? Matthew gives his answer in a preliminary way in the next two terms, 'son of David' and 'son of Abraham', and in fact in the rest of Part 1 (1.1–41.6), as we'll see. The initial titles provide an interpretive framework and invite the audience to view the rest of the narrative in these terms.

God created Adam, blessed him, and told him to take care of his Garden. Adam fell, and lost the blessing. God then chose Abraham to restore the blessing Adam lost. Named at the head of Matthew's genealogy, then, is Abraham, to whom God promised blessing for all the nations of the earth (Gn 12.1-3). 'Blessing' means a just and abundant life— abundant fertility, food, health, prosperity, and freedom from imperial powers (cf Dt 28–29). It means life in a universe that ran as God intended.

Mention of David brings to mind God's promise of a reign that will last forever (2Sm 7). It is to be marked by righteousness and justice, with no oppression and exploitation (Ps 72). It is to fulfill the blessing of Abraham.

So with both Abraham and David, God started something, but obviously, it has not yet come to completion. Yet God has been faithful to his plan all along. The first verse of Matthew and the genealogy that follows it suggest that Jesus has been anointed to bring God's promises to David and Abraham to completion.

1.B The Son of David and Son of Abraham Is the Son of God 1.2–2.25

1.B.1 Jesus' Lineage as Son of David 1.2-17

Matthew begins to tell us who Jesus is by means of a genealogy. The genealogy's primary interest is in Jesus' lineage as the 'Son of David', but of course the opening verse has also stated that Jesus is 'Son of Abraham' and so the genealogy starts with Abraham. By contrast, Luke's genealogy works backward and makes Jesus the 'son of Adam, son of God' (Lk 3.38).

Matthew's genealogy focuses on Abraham-themes when it mentions women. Apart from Mary, there are four. Three are foreigners— Rahab, Ruth, and 'Uriah's wife' (ie, Bathsheba) (1.3,5-6). As foreigners, they belong with the Magi from the east (2.1-12) and Jesus' settlement in 'Galilee of the nations' (4.12-16). God promised to bless 'all the nations' through Abraham's 'seed'— ie, through Israel and her representative, the Messiah (cf Gn 12.1-3; 22.18). An element of scandal is present in connection with all four, as well: Tamar conceived Phares and Zara by her father-in-law, not her husband (gn 38.12-30); Rahab was a prostitute (Js 2.1); Ruth slept with Boaz before they were married (Rt 3.4ff); and David committed adultery with Bathsheba (2Sm 11).

We should have the irregularities involving Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and 'Uriah's wife' in mind at 1.21, when the angel tells Joseph, 'You will call his name JESUS, for he will save his people from their sins'. But scandal is not the whole story of these women. The sequence is actually Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and *Mary*— Matthew chooses these women because all of them exemplify both scandal and *divine intervention*. In Mary's case, her pregnancy was a scandal the eyes of men, since she had not lived with her husband (1.18)— Joseph was even going to divorce her (1.19). But the child was actually begotten through God's Holy Spirit, and God intervened to bring the Promise to fulfillment.

Luke puts Jesus' genealogy in the context of his baptism (3.23-38). Matthew puts it at the beginning, before his narrative gets underway. They serve different purposes. But the genealogies themselves are seriously different. Eusebius(?) cleverly tried to show how the genealogy in Matthew is Joseph's, whereas that in Luke is Mary's; this has become popular in Orthodoxy, but it doesn't really

work. We don't need such explanations, though, once we recognize that ancient Semitic genealogies were rarely about mere biology. That doesn't make them 'inaccurate', since their purpose was not to provide a DNA pedigree, like for a kennel; an individual might be adopted into a family, and thus acquire its genealogy. S/he might even have different genealogies for different roles in society. Genealogies could be modified if roles or relationships changed. In the OT, both the government and the Temple were organized 'genealogically', and the king could, and did, sometimes modify them. The Bible also uses genealogies, as here, to structure history into epochs. And the recitation of genealogies could be trimmed, as here, or expanded, to achieve a certain number of generations, in view of a literary or theological point.

A genealogy always has a punchline, either at the top or at the bottom. Luke makes his point by going all the way back to 'son of Adam, son of God' (Lk 3.38). Matthew starts with Abraham and emphasizes David because God made important promises to both Abraham and David—to Abraham, of a 'seed' who would be a universal king (Gn 12.3; 17.4-5; 22.18); and to David, of a royal son who would rule from an everlasting throne (2Sm 7.12,16 etc). Both had many descendants, as the genealogy itself shows, but none fulfilled the Promise. Still, God is faithful: fourteen generations at each sequence (1.17) show that those promises made long ago have been in operation all along, so that the result is a Seed and Heir—namely, in 'Jesus, who is called Messiah'.

For Matthew, *christos* always means 'Messiah', not 'Christ'. These words theoretically mean the same thing of course, but for us, 'Messiah' brings to mind Matthew's first-century OT/Jewish point of view, whereas 'Christ' brings to mind the much later Christian doctrines about the Trinity and the two natures of the incarnate Word. If we want to take the Bible seriously, we can and we must affirm all that the fathers taught about Jesus Christ—but none of the fathers were yet on Matthew's first-century horizon. So we also need to learn to think about Jesus Messiah as Matthew saw him. Then, in fact, we'll be in a better position to work our way up to what the Seven Councils said, and beyond.

In fact, right here in 1.1, Matthew interprets *christos* precisely as 'Son of David' and 'son of Abraham', not as 'second Person of the Trinity' or 'perfect God and perfect Man'. He will also present Jesus Messiah as 'Immanuel', the 'Coming One', the 'King of Israel', the 'son of God'. The 'Messiah' is God's Anointed, David's son, and Israel's Shepherd King (2.2,4,6; 9.36; 25.32; 26.31; 25.34,40; 27.11,29,37,42). The 'Messiah' is the fulfillment of the whole plan of God, announced in the Old Testament.

Matthew has no word for 'Second Person of the Holy Trinity', even though he gives us, at the end of his book, the very phrase, 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' (28.19).

The vision of the genealogy is quite radically different than that of Rome.

God, not Jupiter or the 'divine' Augustus, or 'Luck' (the goddess to whom Antioch was dedicated), blesses the earth. He blesses *all nations*, not just Rome, and *all people*, not just the elite.

From David to Jeconiah, 15 kings are named. Only two, Hezekiah and Josiah, are considered in the books of Kings and Chronicles to be *good* kings. Six (David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jotham, Uzziah) receive *mixed* evaluations; the remaining seven were *evil*. They failed to represent God reign. Despite their failures, God was faithful by means of them and through them.

The Babylonian exile (1.11) was God's punishment on Israel and particularly on her kings for their failure to represent God's justice and will. They did not worship God and they exploited the people (2K 24.16, 1Chr 5.22, Ez 12.11). Babylon was the agent of God's judgment (1K 9.6-9), but Babylon itself was judged and punished (Isa 44.28-45.1), and God saved his people from Babylon's rule (Isa 44.21-24, 45.15b). Matthew's first audience would have been keenly aware that, like Babylon, God has used Rome to punish his people in 66-70 AD (cf Mt 21.12-13,18-19,41; 22.7; 27.25). But God will save them again in Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and *parousia* (royal presence). Imperial power is evil, but it is always subject to God's power.

And God chooses nobodies, sometimes for generations, to bring about his will. Ancient genealogies would never list the nobodies that populate the last third of Matthew's list (1.12-16), but God's choice shows his sovereignty and his faithfulness, even when people can't see it.

1.17: Like most ancient writers, Matthew likes numerical arrangements, with a special fondness for threes and sevens: seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer (6.9-13), seven parables in Mt 13, seven woes in Mt 23. Seven indicates divine completeness. But there's more: Since the Jews used letters for numbers, the numeric value of David's name in Hebrew, *dvd*, would be $4+6+4 = 14$. Viewed as a scheme of thrice fourteen generations, Matthew says, history itself is Davidic, and it is Messianic. And the total can also be seen a six sets of seven, which would make Jesus the seventh of the sevens, and the beginning of a new Age. In composing a numerical genealogy, he is following the 'Book of Generations' that starts at Gn 5.1; the latter develops primarily in two series of ten (see Gn 5 and 10).

The genealogy ends with a broken link. As it turns out, it is really that of 'Joseph, son of David' (1.20), and he is 'the husband of Mary'. Of Mary 'was born Jesus, who is called Messiah' (1.16). But it doesn't say, as we might expect, 'Jacob begot Joseph, and Joseph begot Jesus.'

1.B.2 Conceived of a Virgin by the Spirit, yet Son of David 1.18-25

Matthew now shows why the genealogy ended with a broken link: Jesus' mother was actually 'found to be with child' not from Joseph, but 'from the Holy Spirit before they came together' (1.18). Joseph, 'David's son' (1.20), is not Jesus' father. How then can Jesus be 'David's son'? And what was the point of providing the genealogy?

Joseph, Matthew informs us, was a 'righteous' man, who aimed to honor God's Torah by putting his wife away, but also to honor God's mercy by doing so privately. *Righteousness* or *justice*, a term Matthew uses seven times (3.15, 5.6,10,20, 6.1,33, 21.32), denotes God's will or saving reign exercised in human affairs. If we align with that, we are 'righteous'.

God commands Joseph to accept the child as his own and to name him. To accept a child into the home and to name it is to adopt it. Joseph demonstrated his righteousness when he 'did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him', adopting the child and thus making him, as he himself was, a 'son of David' (1.18-25; note 1.20).

This adoption, then, is the first reason why Matthew can use the title 'Son of David' for Jesus twice as often as all the other evangelists combined. John never uses it; Mark uses it three times and Luke twice, but Matthew uses it a total of nine times, counting the title (1.1) and 1.20. Yet 1.20 is the only time in the entire New Testament where the title is applied to someone other than Jesus. Its purpose is purely to secure the title to Jesus. Jesus' Davidic descent is legitimate and legal, then, even if Mary's pregnancy is through the Holy Spirit. Davidic descent is transferred through legal adoption, not natural paternity.

Genealogy and narrative fit together smoothly. Matthew's two ways of telling us about the *genesis* of Jesus, by a numerically structured genealogy and a narrative, is comparable to the two accounts in Gn 1 and Gn 2: the first, a numerically structured creation in seven days, and the second, a narrative account.

Matthew says Mary was 'betrothed' to Joseph. A girl usually got betrothed between twelve and thirteen years of age, and this was considered a legally ratified marriage. The girl was from then on the man's wife (cf *gynē*, 1.20,24), and any infringement on his marital rights could be punished as adultery. But the wife would continue to

live at her own father's house for about a year, until the husband formally took her to his family home, and assumed her support.

Matthew says 'betrothed', and avoids the usual verbs for marrying as well as the related noun (*gamos*) as this might imply a physical union. What is more, Matthew's audience usually learns of God's action only when God or his angel addresses the visionary. But Matthew tells us ahead of time that Mary's pregnancy is 'of the Holy Spirit' (1.18). He will not allow us to misunderstand Mary's situation the way Joseph does in 1.19. We already know that the child is begotten of the Holy Spirit when Joseph learns about it from the angel.

But what of Jesus' divine paternity? The Holy Spirit is not the male element in a union with Mary, supplying the husband's role in begetting. 'Spirit' is not masculine but feminine in Hebrew, and neuter in Greek. The Holy Spirit is the agent of God's power, but not the 'male principle' in a marriage between a deity and woman. A new outpouring of the Spirit was expected when God began to fulfill his promises. The Spirit brings Jesus into the world, and the Spirit will rest upon him at his baptism.

Joseph is the one who gives Jesus his name (1.21,25), but he does so on instructions from the angel of the Lord. By addressing Joseph as 'Son of David' and commanding him to give Jesus his name and to adopt him, the angel affirms what Matthew has told us already, that Jesus is 'the Son of David' by adoption. Moreover, the angel declares that Jesus has been conceived by the Holy Spirit (1.20), a claim also already made by the narrator in 1.18. We perceive the angel as a reliable character, since his testimony agrees with what the 'omniscient' narrator has already said.

The angel instructs Joseph to accept the woman as his wife and to 'call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (1.21). Because this is not the expected course of action for a woman who had become pregnant before they lived together, this will expose the couple, but especially Joseph, to considerable shame. That's why the angel says, 'Don't be afraid to take her' (1.20)

Matthew's 'birth narrative' actually doesn't pay much attention to Jesus' *birth*. It is really a *naming* narrative. Jesus is born, as Jn 1.13 puts it, 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God'. But the *naming* is much more important because, as we have seen, it indicates Jesus' legal title to the lineage— and in recounting the naming, Matthew takes further opportunity to disclose Jesus' identity, by a further series of meaningful names.

'Jesus' (1.21) is the Greek form of *Yeshu`a*, a shortening of the biblical *Yehoshu`a*, 'Joshua', the prophet who completed the Exodus. Originally it meant 'The LORD helps', but by the first century AD its popular explanation was 'The LORD saves'. The angel makes a pun on the popular meaning by declaring that Jesus will 'save his people from their sins' (cf Ps 130.8). By naming the child, Joseph will adopt Jesus; the name itself signifies his commission as 'Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham' (1.1). And of course, naming him after the prophet who completed the Exodus suggests that the messianic child will be the one who completes the rest of God's promise.

Who are the people he will save? Ps 130.8, in wording similar to the angel's explanation of the child's name ('And he shall redeem Israel from all his lawlessnesses'), seems to suggest that the answer is Israel. Moreover, 2.6 says, 'my people Israel'. From what sins do they need saving? The gospel is written after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, an event that Matthew regards as God's punishment for the religious elite's rejection of Jesus (21.12-13, 18-19, 41; 22.7; 27.25). Rejection of Jesus, God's commissioned agent, is the elite's typical response to God's messengers (21.34-39, 45; 22.2-7; 23.29-39). While the gospel is concerned with any and all sins (cf 5.21-48; 19.18-19), the sin of rejecting God's messengers and its consequences of neglecting God's will in its social, economic, political, and personal dimensions seems to be paramount. The leaders who will not be led by God cannot lead the people (9.36), except to lead them astray in persuading the Jerusalem crowds to call for Jesus' crucifixion (27.20).

Yet while the religious elite and the people misled by them have sinned, God has not ended the covenant relationship. After the wilderness, the promised land (Nm 14.20-35); after exile in Babylon, the return (1K 9.6-9; 2K 25.27-30; Isa 40.1-11; 48.14-22), after punishment by Antiochus Epiphanes (2Mc 6.12-17); after the destruction of Jerusalem and the occupation of Israel by Pompey, salvation must follow (*Ps Sol* 2, 17). After the rejection of Jesus, through the proclamation of the disciples, Israel may find salvation in following Jesus, who has been raised from the dead and will return to complete God's purposes (cf 24.27-31). The gospel even seems to suggest that Israel will one day finally welcome Jesus as the Messiah (cf 23.39).

But Matthew's concerns are wider still. A world under Rome's rule does not embody God's purposes anywhere. Rome also rejected God's anointed. Herod, Rome's ally and puppet, murderously fails to welcome God's purposes. His tyranny prefigures that of rulers like the 'governors and kings' who persecute disciples (10.18). Herod Antipas beheads John (14.1-12), and Pilate crucifies Jesus

(27.11-37). The world needs saving from an oppressive world empire.

In fact God's purposes never involved just Israel, as the references to Abraham (1.1-2) and the women (1.3-5) indicate. Israel is a light to the nations (Isa 49.6) that will cause the nations to worship God (Isa 2, Mi 4.1-4, Mt 2.6, 5.14). Israel's salvation will mean the nations' salvation too.

Thus the people— 'his people'— whom he will save from their sins is comprised of Israel and 'all nations' (Gn 12.3 etc)— but they will be saved only insofar as they are 'his people'.

We should avoid taking this as a statement about individual forgiveness. Jesus ('The LORD saves') removes the distance separating God from his *people* and makes good the promise of his throne-name, Emmanuel— 'God-With-Us'— enabling his people to be at last what they were meant to be— a light to the nations (5.14)— fulfilling the promise to Abraham. In the context of the 80s, when Jerusalem's punishment was still very much on every Jew's mind, 'The Lord will save his people from their sins' suggested that Jesus is the one *through whom* God will rescue his people from their setback.

1.23-24: 'This is to fulfill... Behold, a virgin (*parthenos*) shall conceive'. This is the first of a series of 'fulfillment citations' (1.23-24, 2.5-6[?], 15, 17-18, 23; 4.14-16; 8.17; 12.17-21; 13.35; 21.4-5; 26.54; 27.9-10) in which events in Jesus' life are shown to be not just 'predicted by' the Scriptures, but as actually bringing about what God's long-term strategies were. That is why the context of the cited passage is so important for understanding it, as we'll see. The present citation is from Isa 7.14.

—> [See material on Isa 7-9]

To invoke a prophet can be dangerous in an imperial context. Prophets declare and keep alive hopes and visions that challenge the claims made by the powerful. Isaiah challenged the Israelite and Judean elite. He continues to do so for Herod and the Jewish leaders, and for those who ruled over Matthew's audience— and ours— as well.

A *parthenos* was a female person beyond puberty but not yet married; normally a virgin, although in some contexts virginity was not a focal component of meaning. In this citation of Isaiah 7.14, Matthew reworks the original text to underline eschatological fulfillment in Messiah. Isaiah spoke of a young woman (*almah*) who would conceive; Matthew adopts the standard Greek translation, 'a virgin shall conceive' although in other respects and in general he seems to translate from a Hebrew original.

'Shall be called Emmanuel... God with us'. The rest of Matthew's gospel will show that 'God with us' is a central, fundamental point of Matthew's gospel. Formally, in fact, 'God with us' forms an 'inclusion' or envelope-structure: 'God is *with us*' here, and '*I am with you* always' at the end (28.20); with 18.20 ('where two or three are gathered together... *I am in the midst of them*') as a kind of midpoint.

1.25: 'Until she had borne a son'. In Greek and Semitic languages, 'until' (*heōs*) often has no implication at all about what happened after the limit 'until' which was reached—the expression does not exclude continuation beyond the time indicated. Matthew is concerned, however, only to indicate virginal conception.

'He called his name Jesus'— Joseph, the 'son of David' (1.20), has accepted Jesus as his son and therefore made Jesus a legitimate 'son of David'.

Through 'the prophet' (Isaiah, not named), God himself says of this Jesus that he will be called 'Emmanuel' (1.23), a name that attests, at the very least, his origin is in God— and even more, that in him, God himself dwells with his people.

This is Jesus' genesis in the promises, purposes, and effective word of God, performed by the Holy Spirit and made known through the angel and the Scriptures. In the context of imperial threat and national apostasy, God acts. There is continuity with the past, but he has put something decisive in motion for the present and future in Jesus, who is commissioned to manifest God's saving presence to all his people (1.21,23). In obeying God's will, Joseph and Mary live in tension with significant cultural norms, a fundamental aspect of Matthew's vision of his community's existence at the margin of empire.

If we compare the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, we find that they are factually different, and that they describe very different events. None of the scenes related by Matthew are found in Luke, and vice versa. Luke, for the most part, narrates in a friendly tone; in Matthew, Jesus is the persecuted Messiah not received by the leaders of Israel even as a child. Even the magi, who come to worship him, serve as background for negative events that contrast sharply with their faith.

Excursus on the titles, 'son of David', 'son of God', and 'Son of Man'

Chapter 1 has 25 verses. Of these, 16 are genealogical, consisting of little more than names (1.2-17). The remaining 9 verses (1.1,18-25) mention, assign, or explain names or titles to Jesus 9 times (and once to Joseph)—

Jesus (1.1b),
Messiah (1.1c),
Son of David (1.1d),
Son of Abraham (1.1e),
Jesus, called Messiah (1.16),
Jesus Messiah (1.18),
Joseph, son of David (1.20),
call his name Jesus, for he shall save... (1.21),
call his name Immanuel... God with us (1.23),
called his name Jesus (1.25),

It's striking, in a chapter so preoccupied with names and titles, so deeply concerned with Jesus' paternity and hence with who he is, so focused in particular on how he is in fact David's son— and in a chapter that effectively says that Jesus has God for his father (1.18,20)— that Matthew only implies, but never actually states, that Jesus is, in fact, 'God's son'. How this unspoken title comes to speech is going to provide much of Matthew's plot.

But before we go on with that plot we need to take a little detour and discuss in somewhat more detail what the three key titles, 'Son of David', 'son of God', and 'Son of Man' might mean, *as Matthew uses them*:

- *son/Son of David*

'son/Son of David' is the easiest title for us to understand because it has never meant much more in the Church than it does in the Bible. Any male descendant of King David (~1000 BC) would be a 'son of David', as Joseph is in 1.20. On the other hand, '*the son of David*' was the heir of David's throne— the *anointed king*. And among these, David's promised heir, '*the Son of David*' would be the expected Messiah.

Given his genealogy (1.2-17), Joseph is certainly *a* son of David (1.20). That is the basis on which Matthew first establishes the fact that Jesus *legally* (which means *really*) owns the attribution, 'son of David'. And Matthew is careful to show that this is not simply because Joseph, a nice guy, decided on his own to adopt Jesus. He adopted him by *divine command*. But whether Jesus is '*the* (messianic) son of David', of course, we will have to see.

If Matthew uses the 'son of David' title almost twice as often as the other evangelists combined, we nevertheless discover that the title doesn't actually capture the mystery of who Jesus is. In fact in the rest of the story, outsiders will call Jesus 'son of David' when they recognize him as Messiah because of his miracles, but Jesus himself and his close disciples never use the title. It never signifies an intimate insight into his identity. 'Son of David' is a correct title for Jesus, but it is inadequate. The adequate answer to the question, 'What do you think of the Messiah— whose son is he?' (22.42) will not be 'Son of David' but 'son of God' (22.45, cf 16.16).

Keep your eye on this title whenever it appears, though. Important developments occur in connection with it.

- *son/Son of God*

'son/Son of God' is a little harder for us to grasp because we need to appreciate it in its OT context. As we said above concerning the title 'Messiah/Christ', we are likely to confuse 'son of God' with the fully developed usage of the Seven Ecumenical Councils and later theology, in which it means 'second person of the blessed Trinity'.

Originally in the Bible, the 'son of God' is *Israel*:

Ex 4.22 Say to Pharaoh, Thus says the LORD: *Israel is my son*, even my firstborn.

Later, the 'son of God' was Israel's *king*, as the embodiment and representative of Israel:

Ps 2.7 The LORD has said to me, *You are my son*; this day have I begotten you';

Ps 89.26-27 He shall cry to me, *You are my father... and I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth.*

So it's important to recognize that *the 'son of God' is an earthly figure*, in fact one specifically said to have been 'anointed' as such in Ps 89.20ff: 'I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him... He shall cry to me, *You are my father*', etc.

Thus, 'son of David' (ie, the royal heir), *king*, and 'son of God' are more or less equivalent titles. All refer to the *king of Israel* as the one whom God has designated, anointed, and shown to be *Israel's champion and God's own viceroy*, to whom the nations will bow down. The 'son of God' is the one who implements God's order in the world. And just there, we see why the obedience of the king / Son of David's is so important: if Israel's king is not in alignment with God, then the universe over which he is viceroy will necessarily be out of whack. Which, in political terms (there is always a political dimension in the Bible), means terrible injustice, oppression, and even environmental degradation. Of course, none of Israel's kings ever lived up to the task, a fact of which the genealogy's 'Babylonian' section is a painful reminder.

As we mentioned above, each of the three main parts of Matthew's gospel culminates in a revelation that Jesus is 'God's son'. At the end of Part 1, when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, God himself declares that Jesus is his *beloved son* (3.13-17); at the end of Part 2, near Caesarea Philippi, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the *son of the living God* (16.16-20); and in Part 3, at his trial Jesus affirms that he is the '*Messiah, son of God*', when he died on a Roman cross, 'the centurion and those guarding him said, "This one really was *God's son!*"'. And finally,

at the very end of the story, the exalted Jesus refers to himself as '*the Son*'— 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (28.19).

In this text I will always write 'son of God', and never 'Son of God', to distinguish this biblical usage from the later Christian theological usage, in which 'Son of God' is synonymous with the divine and eternal Word. Always remember: for Matthew, the 'son of God' is an *earthly figure*— the *king* as the righteous one who exercises God's rule on earth as in heaven. Matthew is dealing in Old Testament and first-century Jewish ideas and expectations. The Seven Councils of the Church, with their more philosophical questions, haven't happened yet.

- *son of man / Son of Man*

Just as, for the Bible, the 'son of God' is an *earthly figure*, so also, for the Bible, the 'Son of Man' is a *heavenly figure*.

The expression 'son of man' first appears in Nm 23.19 with the ordinary meaning of a 'human person'; see also

Jb 25.6 A mortal man, who is but a maggot, a son of man, who is only a worm (also note Jb 35.8);

Ps 8.4 What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

But the term undergoes development. While not ceasing to mean 'ordinary person', it is used for example in Ps 80.17, which speaks of the *king*:

Ps 80.17 Let your hand be on the man of your right hand, / the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!

The king is, of course, only a mortal— and that's half the point in this psalm— but he has moved somewhat towards becoming '*the son of man*'. Daniel, however— a very late document— is still using the expression in the ordinary sense (= 'human being') when he writes,

Dn 7.13-14 Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came *one like a son of man*, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

In Daniel, this figure, 'one like a son of man', *ascends to heaven* and is given *dominion over all the nations*. The next verses make it clear (three times!) that the one 'like

a son of man' who is being given universal dominion is *Israel* ('the people of the holy ones of the Most High', Dn 7.18,22,27), summed up in/as a royal figure. Daniel is just calling this figure 'one like a son of man' but, lacking anything else to call him, people start referring to him as 'the Son of Man'— the one Daniel meant. This is the way Jesus uses the term. *Whenever we find this term in the gospels, the background is this passage in Daniel.*

Note, however, that the Son of Man here is *ascending* to the Ancient of Days, to be enthroned with him. Specifically, it's *from the standpoint of the heavenly throne room* that Daniel sees the Son of Man 'coming on clouds'. So whenever Jesus talks about the 'Son of Man coming on clouds', he's talking about the Danielic 'Son of Man' (who is *Israel*) coming *up* to be enthroned at the right hand of the Ancient of Days. From there, he is to rule all nations. Once we grasp this, huge parts of the New Testament come into focus.

But again notice that, as a result of his ascent, the 'Son of Man' has now become a *heavenly* figure— the *heavenly* counterpart of the *earthly* 'son of God'.

Now, one question on at least some people's minds in Jesus' day apparently was, *When* is that Danielic 'son of man', the 'son of God', Israel's king and champion, finally going to *ascend* and *come to God on the clouds*, so that he may receive the everlasting universal dominion of which Daniel spoke? Precisely *that* is what Jesus and the high priest were talking about when they had this exchange:

The high priest said to him, 'I put you on oath by the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the "son of God".'

Jesus said to him, 'You've said it. But I tell you, *from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of the sky.*' (Mt 26.63-64).

He's not talking about the second coming; he's talking about his crucifixion *as* his exaltation. That's why he says '*from now on, you will see*'.

In this text I will write 'Son of Man' to signify this Danielic, exalted, heavenly figure, and 'son of man' to signify an ordinary human being.

One thing Matthew is *not* doing, though, is referring to Jesus' 'human nature'. That is an expression from the Seven Councils. Valid though that later theology is, Matthew moves entirely within the ambit of Old Testament and first-century Jewish thought. Understand the Jewish background of the New Testament, and you've understood more than most.

1.B.3 The Nations Pay Homage to Israel's King

2.1-12

Mt 2 is still talking about who Jesus is. The deadly serious stories of the magi, the flight to Egypt and the massacre of the innocents, the return from exile and the settling in Nazareth are not just vignettes about 'the baby Jesus' for Christmas pageants, but theological cameos that highlight dark aspects of Jesus' 'backstory', and bode very ill for the narrative to come.

The first part of chapter 2 depicts a positive response to Jesus' advent— but this evaluation comes from outsiders rather than from his own people. It centers on Jerusalem and Bethlehem, with the Magi foiling Herod the Great. Herod threatens Jesus' life. In this conflict, Herod is the precursor of both Pilate and the leaders of the Jews later in the story.

What is more, this conflict with *empire* is the context in which Matthew introduces the Jewish religious leaders for the first time. They actually appear three times in Part 1 (1.1-4.16). The first is here, in connection with Herod the Great. When asked by the Magi where the King of the Jews has been born, 'Herod and all Jerusalem were shaken' at hearing news of such a birth (2.1-3). To discover the Messiah-King's whereabouts, Herod assembles 'all the chief priests and scribes of the people' and asks them (2.4). In replying to Herod, they announce that the place of the Messiah's birth is Bethlehem, and to prove it they cite Scripture (2.5-6). In all of this, they share Herod's fear and are collaborating with him.

2.1: 'Magi from the East'— The wisdom of the people of the east was legendary (cf 1Kg 4.30). Matthew's audience would not have been surprised by the claim that men from the east saw a star 'in its rising' (2.2) that heralded the birth of a king or that guided magi in a quest to find him. Virgil reports that a star guided Aeneas to the place where Rome should be founded (*Aeneid* 2.694), and Josephus speaks of a star that stood over Jerusalem when the Romans captured it (*War* 6.5.3; no. 289). The births of both Alexander and Augustus were said to have been presaged by the appearance of a star.

Many people have speculated over what the 'star' was: supernova or a conjunction are the most likely choices. This might explain (somehow!) its 'rising'. But how could it 'go before them' and eventually 'stand over the place'? Stars were thought of as supernatural beings, not necessarily limited to the sky, akin to angels. John Chrysostom didn't think it was physical at all, but noetic, and many of stories about heroes suggest more or less the same.

But did the magi 'represent the best of pagan lore and religious perceptivity which has come to seek Jesus

through revelation in nature' (R Brown)? Well, not really. 'Magi' (*magoi*) were, first of all, not kings or 'wise men'.

They have been viewed as kings because of these verses—

Ps 72.10-11 The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. All kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him.

Isa 49.7 LXX Kings shall see him and arise, and bow down to him, for the Lord's sake: for the Holy One of Israel is faithful, and I have chosen you.

Isa 60.6 The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the LORD.

—and Matthew *may* have these passages in mind. Note how, in Isa 49.7 LXX, kings 'shall bow down (*or*: worship) before him'; that's the verb that Matthew uses in 2.2. Also, Isa 60.6 mentions gold and frankincense— but no myrrh. We should be aware that Christian tradition settled on *three* Magi only several centuries after the gospels were written, likely because of the three gifts. Matthew doesn't actually say how many magi came from the east.

But magi were not kings. They *were* members of a Persian priestly class that sometimes served the ruler, and important ones had some access to power, as these magi do to Herod. They did claim knowledge and powers based on dream interpretation, astral lore, and the like, though they weren't 'astrologers' in the modern sense (astrology as we know it was only just developing at that time). Sometimes *magos* is paired with *sophos* in the sense of 'wizard'. So, were they 'wise men', then?

Roman and Greek writers knew of *magi* and mocked them as frauds. Juvenal presents them as slaves or freedmen associated with taverns and brothels, and with superstition— fortune-tellers who dealt in dreams and stars. Significantly, the only use of '*magoi*' in the LXX is Dn 2.2-10, where Nebuchadnezzar's magi *fail* to recall the king's dream, despite being threatened with loss of property, limb, and life. A man named Simon, Ac 13.6,8, is the only *magos* to appear in the NT apart from the present context, and he's a fraud. Slightly after the NT, Christians are commanded in *Didache* 2.2 not to act the part of a *magos*. Moreover, knowledge gained from stars

was viewed negatively in Jewish traditions.† Thus Matthew's audience would mostly have regarded them as skilled in nonsense, and unreliable at the very best.

Nonetheless, like Ronald Reagan and Jeanne Dixon, some emperors took magi very seriously, and Herod felt threatened by their report. After all, they did observe Jesus' 'star at its rising'. *But*— they came to Jerusalem because they *didn't* know who the king was, or where he was; they were looking for him in the halls of power and, not finding him there, needed to be instructed by the Scriptures to find him. Only then 'did the star go before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was' (2.9).

That they came '*from the east*', though, points us to Nm 22–24: Balak, king of Moab, wanted to destroy the Israelites who had come up from Egypt under Moses. Balak summoned Balaam, a famous seer, to put a curse on Israel. Balaam came '*from the east*' (Nm 23.7). He is a curious figure: obviously a non-Israelite, an occult visionary, and an enchanter (23.23); in fact Philo calls him a *magos* (*Vita Moysis* 1.1; no. 276). Like magi generally, he could be both good and evil. In Nm 22–24 itself, he is a positive figure who prophesied good for Israel. He even had two servants— and thus a party of three was constituted. Yet Nm 31.16 tells us that he persuaded Israel to 'trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD' (cf also Rv 2.14).

When King Balaq hired him to curse Israel, Balaam received from Israel's God an authentic prophetic spirit and blessed Israel, rather than cursing them as his employer had hoped. He announced Israel's future greatness and the rise of its royal ruler:

Nm 24.17 I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a *star shall rise* out of Jacob, and a man shall *arise* out of Israel;...

Nm 24.19 And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion [LXX: 'he shall *arise* out of Jacob']...

So here's the story of Balaam: A wicked king sought to use a foreign magus to destroy Israel, but the magus obeyed God and honored Israel. Now, of the Magi: A wicked king sought to use foreign magi to destroy Israel's Messiah, but the magi obeyed the Scriptures and bowed down before the Messiah, bestowing high-status gifts.

And Balaam prophesied a star, and a ruler in Jacob.

† See Ex 7–9, Isa 47.12-15. In *Jub* 12.16-24, Abram learns that he needs to trust God, not the stars. Philo, Jesus' exact contemporary, describes the 'magus' Balaam as 'the most foolish of all men' (*Moses* 293).

2.2: The Magi seek the 'King of the Jews'. Because they are sincere (2.2,11), we naturally accept this as a correct way of thinking about Jesus. But 'King of the Jews' is what Pilate calls Jesus— and Jesus ambiguously accepts it— but it is the title by which the soldiers mock him, and the title Pilate hangs on Jesus' cross (27.11,29,37).

2.3: In contrast to the Magi, 'Herod the Great and all Jerusalem' react with fear to the news that the Messiah, the King of the Jews, has been born. Herod is often thought of as a kind of 'type' of Pilate. That may be, but more importantly Herod typifies the reaction of *power*, especially of *imperial power*, to the announcement of another king. The magi refer to Jesus as 'the King of the Jews'; Herod evaluates him as a potential revolutionary, and Pilate and his soldiers will treat the 'king of the Jews' as precisely that, even if cynically. (The title is not used elsewhere in the gospel.) And it is precisely for refusing to honor Caesar as king that Matthew's little community of Christians will suffer as well.

Herod is joined in fear by 'all Jerusalem'. This doesn't mean 'all Jews' reject Jesus, as opposed to the good 'gentiles' represented by the magi, but that the powerful center/elite are troubled. Something has happened at the inconsequential and insignificant margins, among the powerless. Jerusalem, the 'holy city' (cf 4.5; 27.53), becomes a place of fear because God's actions challenge vested interests and power.

2.4: The first time that the religious leaders appear in Matthew's account, they do so as Herod's allies. Herod has 'gathered' (*synagogōn*) them; one thinks of a *synagogue*, an institution from which the narrator consistently distances Jesus by saying 'their synagogues', etc (4.23, 9.35, 12.9, 13.54, 23.34). It is ever the site of improper, if not evil action (eg 6.2,5; 10.17, 23.6). The verb *synagō* appears six times in the passion narrative: four times of the religious leaders carrying out their murderous plot (26.3,57; 27.62; 28.12), once of the crowd 'gathered' under their control (27.17), and once of the Roman soldiers (27.27). In Ps 2.2— a royal psalm quoted constantly in the early church, 'the rulers of the people have *gathered* together, against the LORD, and against his anointed'.

The Jewish religious elite are only mentioned here, but as the story unfolds, they will turn out to be Jesus' major antagonists. All we know about them so far is that, with Herod, they react with fright, not joy, at the news of the birth of Jesus Messiah. They search the Scripture at Herod's bidding. They are well versed in it, but they not in accord with it. They failed to see what the disreputable magi saw in the sky, and after telling the magi and Herod where the child is, *they do nothing*.

'All the chief priests' is an unusual expression; there was only one high priest, but later the expression indicates the whole religious elite, including the chief priest, the former chief priest, heads of the priestly families, etc— the central religious and political power structure of the Jewish people whose status derives from birth. The 'scribes of the people' would be the professional legal experts, teachers, interpreters, and administrators of the Torah, whose authority derived from training. In summoning them, Herod summons the religious, social and intellectual leadership of the imperially incorporated center.

2.5: 'And you, O Bethlehem, land of Judah, are not least among the princes of Judah: for out of you will come a ruler, who will shepherd my people Israel'. Matthew quotes quite loosely from

Mi 5.2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Among other things, he makes Micah say that Bethlehem is 'by no means' insignificant, where Micah says it is insignificant— but the point is the same— the birth of a Davidic son from Bethlehem, one who is to be a ruler in Israel.

Matthew added to Micah's prophecy the line, '...who is to shepherd my people Israel' (2.6). This line comes from 2Sm 5.2, and is what the tribes of Israel said to David King of Judah, when they asked him to become their king as well.

Note that, in context, Micah immediately goes on to say,

Mi 5.3 Therefore will he give them up, until the time when *she who is in labor has brought forth*: then the remnant of his brethren shall return to the children of Israel.

This prophecy alludes to Isa 7-9, already quoted at 1.23-24 ('a virgin shall conceive').

Matthew drops the last line of Mi 5.2 and combines that verse with

2Sm 5.2. In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'

Significantly the very next story in 2 Samuel is that of David capturing Jerusalem:

2Sm 5.6-10 6 And the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, 'You will not come in here, but the blind and the lame will ward you off'—thinking, 'David cannot come in here'. 7 Nevertheless, David took the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David. 8 And David said on that day, 'Whoever would strike the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack "the lame and the blind", who hate David's soul' [or: whom David hates]. Therefore it is said, 'The blind and the lame shall not come into the house'.

The prophecy from Mi 5.2 was about the birth of a son to David. Whenever Jesus is acclaimed 'Son of David', there's some relation to a situation of conflict, and a healing of blind people (9.27, 12.23, 15.22, 20.30-31, 21.1-9, 21.15, 22.42-45).

2.8: Herod asks the magi to come back and tell him where the child Messiah is, 'that I may also go and bow down (or: worship) as well'. Hypocrisy gets a whole chapter of woes in Mt 23. Here we meet it for the first time as a ruler schemes to protect his interests.

From 2.8 on, Matthew designates Jesus as 'the child' no fewer than eight times (2.8,9,11,13 [twice], 14,20,21; note also 'children' in 2.16,18). Children in the ancient world were not the cute little darlings we 'adore' today. People did love their children but at the same time, children were viewed as a threat to order; they were weak, irrational, ignorant, needy, unpredictable, and of little present value, though valuable for the future— if they survived. When half of all babies died, they weren't worth much. People became valuable the more resources you poured into them. Thus in referring to Jesus as a 'child', Matthew underscores his marginality and vulnerability. In this story, the weak child and the marginal magi receive God's protection, not the elite and powerful. But in 2.15, Matthew will break this pattern and show who 'the child' actually is: not just a 'child', but 'my son', that is, the Israel of God.

The magi 'worship'; that is, they bow down in prostration, as one did before kings. But they bow down before Jesus in backwaters Bethlehem, not in the Temple or palace of Jerusalem.

2.12: A dream, the regular form of revelation in Matthew's infancy narrative, prevents the Magi from being Herod's accomplices. God thwarts the schemes of empire.

1.B.4 Israel's King Forced into Exodus/Exile, and Redeemed 2.13-18

The second part of chapter 2 depicts 'official' Israel's negative response to Jesus' coming.

Herod's reaction to the birth of the King of the Jews is to seek the child's life. God foils his attempt through an angel who guides Joseph. By God's command, then, Jesus enters into the pattern of Israel's Exodus/Exile, which will bring him out of Israel, into Egypt, back to Israel, out into the desert, through the waters of the Jordan, and once again out into trial in the wilderness.

2.13: 'Flee to Egypt'. 'Bethlehem' was the lowly town in which prophecy dictated that the royal Messiah should be born (2.4-6, cf Mi 5.2, 2Sm 5.2). Now 'Egypt' becomes both a land of refuge, and as Joseph brought Jacob/Israel to Egypt for refuge (Gn 45-46), and of Exile, the place from which Israel was called forth as God's son (2.13-15; Ex 4.22-23, Ho 11.1).

The child is saved by flight to Egypt. Thus Jesus relives not only the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, but also (and first) the patriarch Jacob/Israel's departure from Canaan into Egypt. In fact the main figure in Matthew's story of the flight to Egypt is Jesus' legal father Joseph who, like Joseph the patriarch, brought Jacob/Israel down to Egypt. Jewish tradition made a comparison between Laban the Aramean who sought to destroy Jacob and his family, and Pharaoh, who sought to destroy the Hebrew male children. Laban's usual designation, the '*Aramean*', was regarded by the Rabbis as referring not only to his origin but also to his character as a 'deceiver', *rammay*; and there are numerous descriptions of him as such. An ancient Passover Haggadah draws together Jacob's difficulties with Laban (Gn 31) and his subsequent migration to Egypt during the famine (Gn 46). In this sequence we have an attempt against Jacob and his family by Laban the Aramean/deceiver, a flight to Egypt directed by God in a dream, and Israel's (sons') later return under Moses.

Herod seeks 'to destroy him'— the same verb appears in the passion narrative: 'Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the people to ask for Barabbas and to destroy Jesus' (27.20). In many ways the infancy narratives fore-echo the passion narrative.

In immediately obeying the command from God and the other commands that follow, Joseph's righteousness (cf 1.19) casts Herod's wickedness in ever sharper relief.

2.14: 'Withdrew (*anechōrēsen*) to Egypt'— in Exodus, we read that after Moses had killed the Egyptian whom he had seen beating a Hebrew, Pharaoh heard of it and sought to kill him. 'But Moses withdrew (*anechōrēsen*) from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian' (Ex 2.15).

Later in the story, Jesus will 'withdraw' from one place to another because of unbelief, see 2.22; 4.12; 12.15; 14.13; 15.21.

Egypt was a classic land of refuge for those fleeing from imperial tyranny in Palestine. When King Solomon sought to put Jeroboam to death, he fled to Egypt (1K 11.40, another passage with close verbal similarity to Mt 2.14). The prophet Uriah fled there from King Jehoiachin (Jr 26.21), and the high priest Onias fled there from Antiochus (Josephus, *Ant* 12.387).

The phrase 'by night' highlights the seriousness of the threat and contrasts Joseph's immediate obedience to the angel to Herod's unrighteousness.

2.15: 'Through the prophet... "Out of Egypt have I called my son"'— cf Ho 11.1. This is the fifth of six appearances of the verb 'call' in Mt 1–2, all but one of which emphasize Jesus' role and relationship with God, his 'vocation' (1.21,23,25; 2.15,23; but in 2.7, Herod 'calls' the priests).

—> **See material on Hosea 11.1.**

Hosea is referring to *Israel's* exodus from Egypt, and it was *Israel* whom God had designated as 'my Son' in Ex 4.22. So in applying this passage to Jesus, Matthew is saying that *the child Messiah embodies Israel*, a theme that he comes back to more than once in his story. Like Moses, Jesus escapes death at the hands of an evil king and finds refuge in a foreign land. Upon the death of his enemies, he returns to his homeland.

In Hos 11, the verse does not refer to Jesus. It refers to Israel's exodus from Pharaoh's oppressive power, and to the covenant people as God's 'son' whom God loves with maternal love (Ho 11.3-4). Despite their liberation from slavery, the people do not heed God's call and practice injustice and idolatrous worship (Ho 10.13; 11.2); thus they will be punished.

Yet Matthew uses this verse to underscore God's protection of Jesus from Herod (anticipating 2.16-17) and foretells Jesus' exodus from Egypt as reliving Israel's. Like Israel, he is in filial covenant relationship with God and is freed from oppression. Unlike Israel, he will remain faithful.

The term son/child does not indicate that Jesus is divine. This expression identifies *Israel* in Ho 11.1, the *wise person* in Wi 2, and the *king* in Ps 2.7, none of whom is divine. Rather it indicates a faithful relationship with God and a significant role in God's purposes. (So in 2Sam 7.14 the king as God's son is to rule faithfully in God's love).

With this verse, Matthew privileges the audience with better information than the characters in the story have. The audience now knows that Jesus is *Israel*, and not only David's son, but *God's* son.

Jesus is designated as *God's 'son'* for the first time by God himself, speaking through a prophet. Affirmation of divine sonship must be revealed by the Father in the sky; it cannot come from a human source, even the narrator himself (16.16-17). It will be affirmed seven times from different angles and points of view, not only here but also at Jesus' baptism (3.17), Peter's confession (16.16), the transfiguration (17.5), the trial (26.63), on the cross (27.54), and finally at the great commission (28.19).

But in citing Ho 11.1, Matthew has identified Jesus as God's 'son' in such a way that *Israel* ('my son', Ex 4.22-23) is now summed up in Jesus, who will relives the history of his people.

2.16: 'Had been tricked / played with / fooled'— this verb also appears both in the Exodus story, where God thwarted Pharaoh (Ex 10.2). In the passion account, it's the verb for mockery or ridicule (20.19; 27.29,31,41).

Herod 'sent and destroyed all the male children in Bethlehem'— the verb for 'destroyed' here is the one that prompted Moses' 'withdrawal' from Pharaoh— 'Surely you don't want to destroy me as you destroyed the Egyptian yesterday!' (Ex 2.14-15).

2.17: 'Then was fulfilled'— This is a formula quotation, but with a difference: Matthew avoids saying that the deeds were done *so that* the prophecy might be fulfilled, as he usually does. He narrates the *fact*, but shrinks from saying that it was God's *intent*. Matthew avoids saying 'so that' in one other formula quotation: the suicide of Judas (27.9).

'Through the prophet Jeremiah'— see Jr 31.15. Rachel, the wife of Jacob/Israel, is imagined to be weeping at Ramah, five miles *north* of Jerusalem. Ramah was both the place of her death and also the place where, centuries later, the Israelites were gathered for the march into the Babylonian exile. Later tradition placed Rachel's tomb at another Ramah, on the road to Bethlehem, *south* of Jerusalem, and this tradition may have influenced Matthew's choice of this Old Testament text. As Jesus, the new Israel, goes into exile, Rachel bewails her slaughtered children of a later age.

The massacre of the male children in Bethlehem echoes Pharaoh's slaughter of the male infants of the Hebrews. But Matthew connects this event in Egypt with the Exile to Assyria and Babylon through the verse about Rachel. The persecution in Egypt and the Exile where the two greatest trials to which God's people had been subjected; the Exodus and the return from Exile were the two greatest manifestations of Yahweh's protective power. Jesus, who will save God's people from their sins (1.21), relives both of the great moments of trial and salvation in Israel's past.

The three formula citations of chapter 2, mention *Bethlehem*, the city of David, *Egypt*, the land of the Exodus, and *Ramah*, the mourning-place of the Exile. Jesus summed up the history of his people in his genealogy; now he does so in his geography.

1.B.5 Divine Guidance to Israel, to Galilee, to Nazareth 2.19-23

Matthew is writing at a time when people knew of Jesus' humble origin and may have been questioning his legitimacy on that basis. At least, in Jn 1.46, Bartholomew says, 'Can anything good come out of Galilee', for Galilee was not only an obscure locale, but it had little to recommend Davidic or divine associations. In 1.1-12 Matthew showed that Jesus did meet the strictest Jewish expectations about the Messiah: true Son of David, he was born in Bethlehem, the ancestral Davidic home. The further geographical interests of 2.1-18 seem to address this same question.

Luke (who says nothing about any exile to Egypt) has to explain how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem, so he tells the story of the census. Matthew presupposes that Joseph and Mary already lived in Bethlehem: there was no need to explain that. But everyone knew that Jesus grew up at Nazareth and was called a Nazarene. So Matthew has to explain this.

Joseph's righteousness (1.19) and prompt obedience contrasts sharply with Herod's wickedness. After Herod's death, the angel of the Lord again comes to Joseph in a dream and orders him to return to Israel (2.19-21). However, warned against Herod's son Archelaus by yet another dream, Joseph settles in Nazareth (2.22-23).

2.20: What Herod planned for the child Messiah is what has happened to Herod himself: death! But the fact that the angel says 'those who sought the child's life have died'. doesn't comport with the fact that (as far as the story goes) one person only, Herod, had sought to kill the child Messiah. It nicely recalls the Lord's instruction to Moses, though: 'Go, return into Egypt: for all the men are dead who sought your life' (Ex 4.19). Return from a foreign land to Israel is a return from exile, which was the subject in Ho 11, cited at 2.15. But Hosea was describing Israel's *faithlessness*. The child Messiah will undo that faithlessness.

'And he went into the land of Israel' echoes the exodus under Moses, Ex 12.25, Nm 32.9, Dt 4.21, as well as the return from Babylon, Ez 20.36-38. Jesus relives his people's history of liberation from oppression in anticipation of the full accomplishment of God's purposes.

Three geographical indications— Israel, Galilee, Nazareth— each governed by *eis* ('to') and each more specif-

ic, form the backbone of this scene, guiding the Exodus and the return of Joseph with the child.

The purpose of the directive to go 'to the land of Israel' is easily detected: Jesus, reliving Israel's experience under Moses after the escape from the Pharaoh, is to go to the Promised Land of God's people.

2.22-23: The notice about what Joseph did 'when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod' is a comment to the audience, not communicated to anyone within the story (2.15). As omniscient narrator, Matthew is privy to what characters sense, what they may hear (2.22; 4.12) or see (3.16; 9.11) on several occasions.

In Exodus, the king of Egypt is the enemy of Israel, here, a king of Jerusalem is the enemy. In Exodus, Moses flees for safety from Egypt and then returns; here, Jesus flees Israel, is taken into Egypt for safety, and then returns. There, Egypt and Pharaoh are the symbols for unbelief and hardness of heart; here, Jerusalem and Herod fulfil this role.

A dream warns Joseph not to go back to Bethlehem in Judah, so Joseph goes to Galilee. The choice of Nazareth is not particularly inspired by an angelic vision or dream, but Galilee is 'Galilee of the nations', and Jesus goes there, we learn later, so that a people sitting in darkness and the shadow of death may see great light (4.14-16).

'What was spoken by the prophets: He will be called a Nazorean'— the citation is not from the OT. But just as the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem was announced by the prophet Micah (2.5), so also the fact that Nazareth should serve as his home was announced also.

Some have said that *nazōraios* is derived from Nazareth. Philologists have questioned the correctness of such a derivation, but Matthew accepts it and uses the term one other time, in 26.71, 'This one [Peter] was also with Jesus the *nazōraios*'. Interestingly, Matthew calls the town *Nazaret* here in 2.23, *Nazará* in 4.13, and *Nazareth* in 21.11.

'Nazorean' may also refer to the nazirite vow (*nazir*), setting one apart for God's service from his mother's womb, like Samson (Jg 13.5, 7) and Samuel (1Sm 1.11).

It may also refer to the 'crown' (*nezer*) of the high priest's miter, inscribed 'Holiness to the LORD' (Ex 29.6; 39.30; Lv 8.9): Jesus is the consecrated one:

Lv 21.12 Neither shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the crown (*nezer*) of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD.

And finally, the word may refer to the messianic 'branch' (*nešer*)— the blossom from the Davidic root announced in Isaiah 11.1-2, as part of Isaiah's description of Emmanuel:

Isa 11.1-2 And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch (*nešer*) shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD...

Matthew brings together with ingenious symmetry the first and last of his formula citations in the infancy narrative: 'Shall name him Immanuel' (Isa 7.14, cf Mt 1.23), and 'He will be called a Nazorean' (Isa 11.1, cf Mt 2.23). The first citation concerned the conception, birth, and identity of the prophesied child; the last citation concerns his consecration, that is, his mission and destiny. The announcement of the child's birth (1.18-25) closed when Joseph 'called' the child *Jesus*; its aftermath (2.1-23) closes with Joseph bringing the child to Nazareth so that all may 'call' him a *Nazorean*. We now have Jesus' full earthly identity. He is the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Nazorean, God's son.

Matthew and Luke report very different events. None of the scenes in Matthew are found in Luke, and vice versa. Even the genealogies are at odds. Luke, for the most part, narrates in a friendly tone, the picture sketched by Matthew is a darker one. These 'discrepancies' should clue us in to the deeply *literary* and *theological* nature of our Scriptures. For Matthew, Jesus is the persecuted one, the Messiah rejected by Israel's leaders.

The fathers noted these differences of course, and some taught that that Luke wrote from the standpoint of Mary, while Matthew wrote from the standpoint of Joseph. This can hardly be sustained, for Joseph and Mary cannot have disagreed, for example, over where they lived before the child was born. But, despite the differences, we must not overlook what the two accounts have in common: Jesus was born in the time of Herod, and in Bethlehem in Judea; his mother was named Mary; Joseph was Mary's husband but not Jesus' father; the family established a home in Galilee. These few details predate the gospel writers. But neither evangelist wrote simply to teach history. Rather, their interests were, above all, theological.