

Matthew 1-3: The Ancestry and Birth of Jesus

When we start a story, we tend to want a “hook” – a line that will reach out and grab our attention. Perhaps that’s why many people skip over the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel (1:1-17) and go straight to the familiar birth narrative (1:18-25); genealogies don’t strike us as very exciting. But there’s a catch if we skip over the genealogy. The catch is that, for Matthew, the genealogy, a Matthean addition to the Markan source (Mark 1:1-11), is crucial for the rest of the story.

After the genealogy establishes a frame for the Gospel, the story itself begins with an account of Jesus’ birth. Matthew’s version of the infancy narrative is filled with danger, drama, and intrigue, including strange visitors from the East (2:1-12), the machinations and plotting of a jealous King (2:1-12, 16-18), the Holy Family’s escape to Egypt in the dead of night (2:13-15), and a massacre of innocent infants (2:16-18). Unlike Luke, who includes a story of the twelve-year-old Jesus (Lk. 2:41-52), once Matthew has said that the family makes their home in Nazareth (2:23), he follows the chronology of his Markan outline: the story launches immediately into Jesus’ adulthood, beginning with the appearance of Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptist (3:1-12), moving into Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River (3:13-17), and then the temptation in the wilderness (4:1-11).

The Genealogy (1:1-17)

The genealogy (Matt. 1:1 has the word *genesis* in Greek) is separated into three sections of fourteen generations each (1.2-6a; 6b-11; 12-16) with varying time spans: the fourteen generations cover about 750 years in the first section, 200 years in the second,

and 600 years in the third. It was not unusual in ancient genealogies to omit names, and in fact, the final section only lists thirteen names, even though Matthew says it covers fourteen generations in v. 17. The point is that Matthew's genealogy isn't really about biological lineage. Rather, as is common with ancient linear genealogies, Matthew's aim is to honor Jesus by associating him with key figures in Jewish history. With this genealogy, Matthew introduces several key theological themes that will appear throughout the rest of the narrative.

On the one hand, the genealogy creates unity between the Jewish tradition and the new community of Jesus followers. Matthew sets Jesus up as Israel's promised Messiah within the framework of Jewish history (notice the reference to the Babylonian exile of 597-539 BCE in Matt. 1:11). He traces Jesus' genealogy back through the Davidic line (see 1 Sam. 16:1-1 Kgs. 2:12) to Abraham, ancestral patriarch of the Jewish nation (see Gen. 17:4-5). Matthew thus highlights Jesus' Jewish origins (compare this with Luke 3:23-38, where Jesus' genealogy ends with Adam, the first human), and establishes that followers of Jesus are directly connected with Judaism.

On the other hand, the genealogy highlights discontinuity and difference from Jewish traditions of Matthew's day. For example, it is remarkable (if not unprecedented; see, e.g., Gen. 11:29; 22:23; 25:1-4; Exod. 6:23) that Matthew includes four women in Jesus' lineage: Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), and the "wife of Uriah," that is, Bathsheba (v. 6). These women's stories are found in Genesis 38 (Tamar), Joshua 2, 6 (Rahab), Ruth 1-4 (Ruth), and 2 Samuel 11-12 (Bathsheba). Notably, all four of these women are Gentiles; for Matthew, from the beginning, Jesus is King of the Jews, but also of Gentiles, of men, but also of women. God had promised Abraham that he would be the

father of many nations (Gen. 17:4); tracing Jesus' lineage to Abraham subtly prefigures the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel, where Jesus says to go make disciples of *all* nations (Matt. 28:16-20). All who have traditionally been "on the margins" culturally and socially are, and always have been, incorporated into God's plan. The genealogy is filled with named individuals, each with his or her own story, and yet, God draws these individuals together. One by one, their stories bring us to the birth of Jesus, and ultimately, to the birth of a new community – the followers of Jesus.

The Birth Narrative (1:18-2:23)

If we set aside our familiarity with this story for a moment and compare Matthew's Gospel with Mark's, it is striking that there is a birth narrative at all. Mark has no stories of Jesus' birth or childhood; when the curtain opens in Mark, Jesus is already a grown adult, coming to the wilderness to be baptized by John (Mk. 1:1-11). One effect of adding the infancy narrative to the Gospel story is that Matthew expands the time period that his narrative covers: Matthew's Gospel stretches over decades, lasting much longer than the short year or so depicted in Mark.

Today, annual Christmas pageants, cards, and nativity scenes can obscure the fact that we actually have two quite different versions of Jesus' birth story in the New Testament: one account in Matthew 2:1-23, and a separate one in Luke 2:1-20. Christmas celebrations conflate the two, with depictions of shepherds and wise men visiting Jesus, Mary, and Joseph together in a barn, star and angels high overhead. But in the New Testament, the only major details the Matthean and Lukan accounts share are the characters in the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary, and Joseph), the location (Jesus was born in

Bethlehem), and the miraculous nature of Jesus' conception (both refer to Mary's virginity).

Matthew focuses on Joseph's experience (as opposed to Mary's perspective, which predominates in Luke's version). Joseph is extolled as righteous (1:19) and receptive to divine guidance (immediately obeying the angel's instructions in 1:24-25; 2:13-15, 19-21). Repeatedly, Joseph protects Jesus and Mary: he takes them to Egypt to avoid Herod's massacre of all the boys two years old and under (2:16-18; another event not narrated in Luke), and then even after returning to Judea after Herod's death (2:15, 19-20), he takes them to Galilee to keep them safe from Herod's son, Archelaus, who ruled over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea from 4 BCE-6 CE (2:22-23).

Another unique Matthean element is the visit of wise men, or magi, from the East (2:1-12). Extensive traditions arose around these figures over the centuries; they were numbered (usually to three due to the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh mentioned in 2:11), given names (traditionally Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar), and honored in annual festivals (Epiphany). What matters to Matthew, however, is that these visitors, who rightly recognize the importance of Jesus' birth, are Gentiles. The irony is that the Jewish priests and scribes know exactly where the Messiah is to be born (they can even quote the relevant Scripture to Herod in 2:5-6), but they fail to follow what the Scripture teaches. Instead, Gentiles who do not know the Jewish Scriptures at all are the ones to recognize rightly the newborn king. As was the case with the genealogy, this small narrative detail points ahead to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20).

Magi were astrologers in antiquity, interpreting the stars; their recognition of Jesus' star and desire to pay him homage (2:2) has added political significance in

Matthew's world, where celestial events like comets or the appearance of stars were commonly associated with the birth or death of great heroes, such as the emperors. Thus, Matthew sets Jesus up as a rival ruler, not only threatening the Jewish King, Herod, but also potentially threatening the Roman emperor himself.

Matthew paints Jesus' story as the story of Israel in miniature: just as the firstborn sons of the people of Israel are spared at the first Passover (see Exod. 12), Jesus is passed over – spared – in Herod's slaughter of the innocents (an event that also echoes Pharaoh's ruling at Moses' birth in Exod. 1:15-22). In Matthew's narrative, Herod becomes a new Pharaoh, which is especially significant in light of the fact that Herod rules on behalf of the Roman Empire. Just as Israel was called out of Egypt in the exodus, so too is Jesus called out of Egypt into the land of Israel (Matt. 2:19-21). The people of Israel were tested for forty years in the wilderness before entering the promised land (Deut. 8:2); similarly, once Jesus is grown, he spends forty days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan (4:1-17). All of this indicates that for Matthew, embracing the story of Jesus is synonymous with embracing the story of the people of Israel.

If embracing the story of Jesus is embracing Israel's story, then conversely, Matthew also takes care to show that the story of Israel prefigures Jesus. He frequently stops the action to use formulas, or "fulfillment citations," to make explicit that: "This happened to fulfill the prophecy . . ." In fact, fourteen quotations begin with this introductory formula. For example, Matthew establishes that Jesus is the Messiah because he is born of a virgin, citing the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 (Matt. 1:22-23). The prophet Micah (Micah 5:2-3) had predicted that a ruler of Israel would be born in Bethlehem, so Matthew points out that Jesus fulfills this prediction (Matt. 2:5-6).

The Appearance of John the Baptist (3:1-12)

Chapter three jumps ahead in the chronology of the tale to Jesus' adulthood, with Jesus' forerunner John the Baptist proclaiming a message of repentance in the wilderness (3:1-12). The description of John wearing camel hair and eating locusts and honey recalls the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament (2 Kgs. 1:8). Elijah had ascended into heaven (2 Kgs. 2:1, 11) and was expected by many to return, a detail that reappears later in Matthew's story, when Jesus explicitly equates John with Elijah (11:13-14).

John's mission is to prepare people for the coming of God's kingdom, partly through repentance and partly through purifying them through the symbolic act of baptism. Several themes of this passage will prove crucial for the rest of the story. First, only Matthew has John preaching what ultimately becomes Jesus' message throughout the Gospel: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2; see 4:17). Matthew also adds the Sadducees and Pharisees as opposition: these two Jewish parties, usually rivals, unite "against" John's baptism (3:7; some translations have "for"), provoking John's strong apocalyptic indictment: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (3:7) Here already judgment is imminent: the fire that will burn fruitless trees (3:10), and the one who comes to separate the good from the bad (3:11-12) become recurrent motifs throughout the Gospel.

Jesus' Baptism (3:13-17)

Whereas John prevents the baptism of the Pharisees and Sadducees because they are not genuinely repentant, he tries to prevent Jesus' baptism for a different reason: John

knows Jesus should be baptizing *him* (3:14). Jesus insists that his baptism will fulfill all righteousness, by which he means it is God's will (3:15). This exchange between John and Jesus is another Matthean addition to his Markan source, and it might reflect embarrassment in Matthew's community over the implication that if Jesus was baptized, he must have needed forgiveness. No, Jesus' baptism was simply God's will.

Another detail distinguishes Matthew's telling of the baptism account with the parallels in Mark 1:2-6 and Luke 3:1-6. Matthew says Jesus is the one who sees the heavens open, but then he has the voice from heaven say in the third person, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). In Mark and Luke, the voice speaks directly to Jesus: "You are my Son." In Matthew, then, the voice speaks to onlookers, not principally to Jesus, as a kind of public endorsement.

The identification of Jesus as the "Son of God" is a common Messianic title in Matthew (Matt. 2:15; 4:3, 6; 8:29; 11:27; 14:33; 16:16; 26:63; 28:19). Many people today read this Christologically, as though it is equivalent to Jesus being called God, but the language of sonship in the Old Testament typically refers to the people of God, and to kings as God's representatives on earth (see 2 Sam. 7:14). The "Son of God" was also a common claim made about the Roman emperors, who were themselves divinized only after their deaths; typically, during their lifetimes, they were not yet called a god, but the son of a god. In that context, an emperor's divine sonship was mostly about legitimating his rule, establishing that he was the actual, legitimate heir of the previous ruler. Thus, in both the Jewish and Roman contexts, Jesus being God's son means he is chosen and commissioned to carry out God's will, to enact God's kingdom on earth.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do the unique aspects of Matthew's version of the nativity story reflect Matthew's unique message? Do you find it useful to distinguish between Matthew's version and the one found in Luke?
2. In the genealogy and birth story, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' Jewishness, but he also includes key examples of Gentiles who are incorporated into God's plan. What are the implications of these features of Matthew's story for today's world?
3. John the Baptist preached a message of repentance and chastised the Pharisees and Sadducees for not bearing fruit "worthy of repentance" (3:8). He warned of the coming judgment and eternal punishment for the unrepentant, who are destined for destruction. How is repentance a part of the "good news" of the gospel?
4. A voice from heaven says Jesus is "my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). Is this a description that applies only to Jesus, or do you think it also applies to us today?

Recommended Reading:

Warren Carter, "Matthew 1—2 and Roman Political Power," *New Perspectives on the Nativity*. J. Corley (ed.) London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2009, 77-90.

J. Nolland, "The Four (Five) Women and Other Annotations in Matthew's Genealogy," *NTS* 43 (1997): 527-539.

Mark Allen Powell, "The Magi as Kings: An Adventure in Reader-Response Criticism," *CBQ* 62 (2000): 459-480