

# THE FIRST CHRISTMAS AND THE FIRST FAMILY – PART III

## THE NATIVITY NARRATIVES IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

I. The Gospel according to Matthew emphasizes the fact that Jesus fulfills Jewish history and brings her promises to the world.

A. The Gospel according to Matthew emphasizes how Jesus fulfills Jewish prophecies, frequently cross-referencing them. See Matt. 1:23, 2;7:15, 18, 23, 4:15-16, 8:17, 12:18-21, 13:35, 21:5, 25:56, 27:9-10.

- Thus, for example, the Gospel traces Jesus' genealogy) back to David and Abraham, that is through Israeli history. (By contrast, Luke's Gospel traces Jesus' genealogy goes back to Adam.)

- Likewise, the infancy narratives stress the role of St. Joseph, through whom Jesus is in the line of kings.

- The Gospel begins with the word "The Book of Genealogy," which in Greek is translated "The Book of Genesis," a clear reference to the fact that the Gospel is a new beginning of the history begun in Genesis.

B. The Gospel has a sophisticated structure that balances narrative discourses and sermons by Jesus to lead up to the Death and Resurrection of Christ and His commissioning of the disciples. Thus, the Gospel features five long sermons, probably reflecting the five books of the Pentateuch, the center of Hebrew Scriptures; the first of these sermons, the Sermon on the Mount, is meant, in large part, as a fulfillment of the Mosaic law. See Matt. 5:17-20.

1. One proposal is to organize the Gospel along the lines of alternating narratives and sermons, each fulfilling the other. One common organization is as follows. See Benedict Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew" in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary 42:8. Although Fr. Viviano does not think of it in this fashion, this organization can be seen in a traditional sense of five narratives and five discourses, pointing to the climax in Jesus' redeeming sacrifice and resurrection.

a. Chapters 1 to 4 narrate the birth of Jesus, His Baptism, the beginning of His ministry, and the call of His first disciples.

b. Chapters 5 to 7 are the Sermon on the Mount, the central description of the Christian moral life.

- c. Chapters 8-9 narrate the continuing expansion of Jesus' ministry with miracles of curing and the call of additional disciples.
- d. Chapter 10 is a sermon on discipleship.
- e. Chapters 11-12 narrate the increasing opposition to Jesus and His response.
- f. Chapter 13 consists of discourses involving parables about the kingdom of God, emphasizing how some people respond to Jesus' call and others do not.
- g. Chapters 14-17 narrate how Jesus builds up His disciples with miracles and His commissioning of the disciples (including the Petrine commissioning) in contrast with the rejection by the leaders outside.
- h. Chapter 18 is a discourse both warning against temptations and also calling for forgiveness.
- i. Chapters 19-22 narrate increasing conflicts with the leaders as Jesus enters Jerusalem.
- j. Chapters 23-25 are discourses on the scribes and Pharisees and on the final judgment.
- k. Chapters 26-28 bring the Gospel to its climax with Jesus' death and Resurrection, and the final commissioning before His Ascension.

2. Another way of seeing the Gospel is in five parts, again reflecting the five-fold structure of the Pentateuch. Cf. The Navarre Bible: The Gospel and Acts 45-48 (with a similar organizing principle.) The sections are as follows.

- a. Chapters 1:1 – 4:11 describe the birth of Jesus and the preparation for His ministry.
- b. Chapters 4:12 – 13:58 describe Jesus' ministry in and around Galilee.
- c. Chapters 14 – 20 describe His journey to Jerusalem, with increasing conflicts.

d. Chapters 21 – 25 describe His final days in Jerusalem.

e. Chapters 26-28 describe His death, Resurrection, and final commissioning before His Ascension.

C. There is a dramatic contrast between Jesus as the promised king, whom the angels and the just of the earth (represented by the magi) honor and King Herod, the earthly king, whose violence and treachery are emphasized by the narrative.

II. The Gospel begins with a genealogy, which is meant to emphasize the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish history, bringing the promises made to Abraham to the world. He is the long awaited Messiah, who will save His people and bring the kingdom of God to all the world.

A. God had promised Abraham that His descendants would be innumerable and that, through his descendants, all nations would be blessed. See Gen. 12:1-3, 15:4-6, 17:1-8. The prophets and psalmists had likewise spoken numerous times of a king to come who would bring God's kingdom of righteousness to all nations. See, e.g., Ps. 2, 89, 110; 1 Sam. 8; Isaiah 9:2-7, 11:1-12:6; Zech. 9:9-12; 10:1-7; 12:10-14; Micah 5:1-4. By tracing Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham and David, the Gospel is indicating the fulfillment of these promises. The Gospel will later emphasize Joseph and then Jesus as the Son of David. See Matt. 1:20, 12:23, 15:22, 20:30-31, 21:9, 15.

B. The idea that the line of kings had been restored was particularly dramatic, for there had not been a king since 586 B.C. when the last king was exiled. After the exile ended 40 years later, the Medes, who were then dominant, would not permit Zerrubabel, who was the next likely successor, to be crowned, possibly trying to prevent the prophecies from being fulfilled. Even though the Jews achieved independence from 143 – 63 B.C., there was no king from the Davidic line. And then a dynastic dispute about who should be ruler over the Jews allowed the Roman general Pompey to establish that empire's dominance over the area.

- C. At the time of Jesus, there was a great expectation that the Messiah, i.e. the Anointed One, would soon arise. And so this Gospel is announcing that Jesus is that one.
- D. The genealogy as three sets of 14, probably for two or possibly three, reasons.
1. First, in Hebrew, as with the Romans, there were no separate symbols for numbers. Instead, letters from the Hebrew alphabet represented numbers. In particular, the letter corresponding to D represented 4, and the letter corresponding to V (or actually more like a combination of V and U) represented 6. One common way of representing the number 14 was thus DVD (4 + 6 + 4). Because there were no vowels in written Hebrew, that term would also be the name of king David.
  2. The figure can also be seen as six sets of seven. That would make Jesus the seventh of the sevens. Because seven was considered a symbol of perfection in Judaism (e.g., the seven days of creation), Jesus would be the perfection of perfection.
  3. Dr. William Barclay also suggests that, the three sets are meant to represent: (1) the glory of humanity (symbolized by Abraham to David); (2) the sinfulness of humanity (symbolized by the descent of Israel into the Exile); and (3) the redemption of humanity, leading up to Jesus. See Barclay, The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew 16-17.
- E. The genealogy does not necessarily represent biological descent. An adoption was sufficient to establish succession, as is the case between Joseph and Jesus. That can explain the differences between the genealogies between this Gospel and that of Luke.
1. The genealogy also skips some generations. There are five generations from David to the exile that are apparently skipped. See Fr. Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew" in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary 42:10. In addition, it is unlikely that there were only 14 generations between Abraham in about 1850 B.C. and David 800 years later or between the exile in 586 and Joseph about 550 years later.

2. In Jewish thought, the terms "father of" or "son of" could refer to any number of generations between the two parties. Thus, the angel refers to Joseph as "son of David." See Matt. 1:20.

F. The genealogy includes reference to four women: (1) Tamar, the daughter – in law of Judah, who became pregnant by him after he broke his promise to replace her deceased husband; (2) Rahab, the harlot of Jericho who assisted the Jews in their initial conquest of the Holy Land; (3) Ruth the just Moabite woman who married a Jewish man and became Jewish, and then became the great-grandmother of king David; and (4) "the wife of Uriah," i.e. Bathsheba, who committed adultery with King David, but later married him after her husband's murder and became the mother of Solomon. Scholars have heavily debated the reasons for these inclusions.

1. One argument is that they were generally outsiders, whom God incorporated into His saving plan.

2. Another explanation is that God works in unexpected ways and even through sinful people, or (as in the case of the just Ruth) despised pagans. See Duet. 23:3 (prohibiting Moabites from being a part of Israel to the tenth generation.)

3. Another possibility is to emphasize that God often works through irregular unions, and thus will work through the union of Joseph and Mary. However, this explanation does not seem to work well, for the marriage of Joseph and Mary was normal, and the conception of Jesus higher than the law, not lower.

G. The numbering in the genealogy has a curious absence. In the first two sequences, there are fourteen generations with: (1) 14 figures from Abraham to David inclusive; and (2) 14 figures from David's son Solomon to Jechoniah inclusive. However, there are only 13 new figures in the last list, from Jeconiah's son Shealtiel to Jesus. One explanation is that Jesus

counts twice, once as the (adopted) son of Joseph, and once as the Son of God, as the next passages will explain.

- H. The last line of the genealogy changes the language to say that Jesus was born of Mary, who was the wife of Joseph. In every other passage, even the passages that mentioned women, the text says that the man "was the father of" the next in line. Here, however, the text clearly omits any reference to Joseph being the father of Jesus.

III. The text describes the birth of Jesus is a simple, surprising bluntness.

A. The text begins by describing the situation. Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but not married.

1. At that time, there were three stages to a marriage.

a. First, there was the engagement, which could be made by parents when the couple were children. It was not completely binding, and could be called off if either side were unwilling.

b. Second, there was an betrothal of about a year. This betrothal was considered to make the couple husband and wife, even though they did not live together. If the husband died during this time, the wife was considered a widow. And it would take a divorce to separate them.

c. Finally, there was the full marriage, the celebration of which could last a week, during which the couple actually came together. John 2:1-11 describes such a wedding at Cana.

2. It appears that Joseph and Mary were in the period of engagement.

B. Then, the text makes the stunning statement that Mary was found with child through the Holy Spirit.

1. The notion of the Spirit of God was a common one in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Spirit (ruach, which also means wind or breath) was there at creation, inspires and guides the prophets, is in holy people and even craftsmen, and is promised to dwell in the people of God in the great Messianic era. See, e.g., Gen. 1:2 (the Spirit at creation); Gen. 41:38; Is. 62:11 (guiding prophets); 1 Sam. 10:10, 16:13; Is. 11:2-9 (coming upon kings); Ex. 31:3, 35:31 (guiding craftsmen); Ez. 36:26, 37:4; Joel 2:28-29 (the spirit coming to all peoples in the last days.) There are over 50 references to the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of God in the Hebrew Scriptures.

2. There was also a concept of people being symbolically the sons of God. Thus, for example, angels, the king, the people of Israel, the just man, or even Adam are called sons of God. See e.g., Ps. 29:1, Job 1:6, 2 Sam. 7, Hosea 11:1, Wisdom 3:18; Luke 3:38.

3. However, here there is plainly a sense of a divine intervention outside the usual framework. Jesus clearly becomes man without the intervention of a man. That alone does not of necessity imply that Jesus is God, as well as man. For Adam likewise was created directly by God. But there is a miraculous birth and a first hint here, which the Gospel will later develop, or God dwelling with us.

### C. The focus then turns to Joseph, the just, prayerful and merciful man.

1. The first emphasis is on Joseph's justice and compassion, a balance that Jesus focuses on later. See, e.g., Matt. 5:6-7, 5:17-26, 18:1-35. Joseph begins as a model disciple.

- Joseph is just and thus does not want to take a sinful wife. On the other hand, the penalty for adultery was (at least in principle) stoning, and at a minimum lifelong shame. And he was too compassionate to inflict such a fate on what he thought was an erring woman.

2. An angel then suddenly appears to Joseph to give him consolation and instruction.

a. Angels had appeared at rare times to the just in the past. See, e.g., Gen. 16:7 (to Hagar), 19:1-23 (to Lot), 22:11 (to Abraham), 28:12 (Jacob and the latter with angels); Josh. 5:13-14; Judges 6:11-40 (Gideon), 13:3-21 (Samson's parents); 1 Kings 19:5 (Elijah); Dan. 3:49 (Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego), 6:22,

8:16, 9:21, 10:5 (Daniel); Zech. 2-6; Tobit. And, as the Book of Tobit indicates, the angels guide people of God and the just. See Ex. 23:20, 33:2; Num. 20:16; Ps. 33:8, 90:11.

- b. However, it had apparently been centuries since angels had appeared to men, as it had been four centuries since the last prophet, Malachi, had proclaimed the word of the Lord. Once again, the long period of waiting, here the time before an angel would appear again, had come to an end.
3. The angel refers to Joseph by the exalted title, "Son of David," which those in need and then the people of Jerusalem will later use for Jesus. The implication is that he is the successor to king David, and now is restoring the line of kings. The succession to the kingship did not necessarily go to the firstborn; there was discretion over who would inherit the right to be king. Thus it was not clear who in David's sizeable line was the one through whom the kingship would come.
  4. As angels usually do, the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid. But here, the fear the angel refers to is the fear of taking Mary as his wife. It appears that he was not as fearful at the angel's simple presence as others were. He is more like Abraham or Moses, who spoke more freely to God, but were nervous about their roles.
  5. The angel then informs Joseph that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and that her son will be called Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.
    - a. In Hebrew, the name we render Jesus was roughly Jeshua, which is the same as the name for Joshua. Joshua led the people into the Holy Land, a feat that Moses, because of his slight sins, was unable to do. There is a signification here that Jesus will lead His people to the Promised Land, which Moses, for all of his glory, could not do.



b. The name Jesus (or Jeshua) is based upon the Hebrew word for Savior or "God saves." And thus the name is fitting for the Savior of the human race. For, as the angel points out, Jesus is the only one who can save us from the final evil master, that is, from sin itself. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 430-32.

6. This revelation, like the other revelations to Joseph or the magi, is during a dream. The Bible is generally skeptical of claims that revelations have come through dreams, seeing them more as based upon one's own desires. See, e.g., Duet. 13:1-5; Sir. 34:1-8; Jer. 23:16-32, 29:8. They are generally fleeting images. See. Ps. 73:20, 90:5. However, the Bible does recount some rare instances in which God communicates through dreams. See, e.g., Gen. 31:10-24, 37:5-11, 39:-23, 41:14-45; 1 King 3:5-15; Dan. 2.

a. The Book of Sirach indicates that the key is to live a virtuous life, and all else will be provided. The book of Deuteronomy indicates that false dreams will lead one to false gods, and the Books of Jeremiah and Sirach say that false prophets will report dreams that fulfill their own wishes.

b. Here, the dream is vivid, comes to a just and holy man, and gives a message that he would not have come up with on his own.

D. The text then records in straightforward fashion the birth of Jesus in fulfillment of the prophecies.

1. The text begins by stating that this nativity fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah. In that prophesy, Isaiah gave comfort to the people of Israel by telling them that a child would be born and would be called Immanuel, which means "God with us" and that, in that within his lifetime, the enemies of Israel will be vanquished.

a. The context was that the northern kingdom of Israel, with its ally in Syria, had invaded the southern kingdom of Judah in an attempt to depose the king Ahaz and place a puppet king in his place. Isaiah was assuring King Ahaz and his court that God would protect him. In that assurance, Isaiah tells King Ahaz to ask for a sign, but King Ahaz will not do so. Isaiah then speaks of the sign that God will give all the same.

b. The prophesy says that an alma will give birth. That term could mean either a young woman or a virgin. The

Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was made in Alexandria during the century before Christ and in common use at the time, translated that word as a virgin. It thus implied a future birth of a king to come, not the child born to Ahaz at the time. Matthew is adopting that translation, although not rejecting the idea that the prophecy could have had a partial fulfillment with a young woman having a child, namely Ahaz's wife having a son, namely, Hezekiah the heir to the throne.

- c. The child will be named Emmanuel, which means "God with us." A later passage in Isaiah indicates that the name Emmanuel could be used for Hezekiah, who was king of Judah from about 715-687 B.C.. See Is. 8:8. For, although flawed, he was more just than his predecessors and was considered God's representative among the people, as the kings were supposed to be. See 2 Kings 18:5-6; see also Ps. 2, 45, 110 (describing the king as God's representative.) However, the prophecy is fulfilled only completely in Jesus Christ, who is totally and in fullness God with us.
2. The text then says in a straightforward fashion that Joseph, this righteous man, did as the angel told him. That may seem obvious, but his unquestioning obedience is in some contrast with the hesitant obedience of the likes of Gideon from the Old Testament, or Zechariah from the New Testament.
  - a. It would not have been easy for Joseph to take Mary, both because he would not have a normal marriage, and because the world would think that he had taken a sinful wife, or perhaps had sinned with her before marriage. In the ancient Jewish culture, that would have been looked down upon.
  - b. Unlike other heroes, Joseph's words are never recorded. His faithfulness is of a silent, active type, in contrast to the noise of the world.
3. The text makes plain again that Mary had a son without intercourse with Joseph. The Gospel emphasizes for a third time that Jesus is directly from God.

- The text says that Joseph did not have relations with Mary "until" she had born a son. The word "until" here, (eos in Greek) does not imply that there were relations afterward. In a like manner, for example, at the end of the Gospel, Jesus promises that He will be present with His disciples until the end of the age (or end of the world), certainly not implying that He will not be with them afterward. See Matt. 28:20.

4. The text emphasizes Joseph's authority as a husband, and in fact the successor to the kings by making it clear that he names the child Jesus. Even though not the biological father, he fulfills all of the roles of a father, and therefore becomes the model for all fathers.

IV. The Gospel then turns to the gathering of the magi around Jesus, a first promise of the gather of the nations into the kingdom of God.

A. The Gospel begins by saying that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The Gospel according to Luke describes the events leading up to His birth in this city, but St. Matthew simply stated the fact. Bethlehem, which means "house of bread" in Hebrew, was the hometown of King David. And the prophet Micah, who was a prophet of the seventh and eighth centuries B.C. and a contemporary of Isaiah, had prophesied that the saving king, who would bring in the world-wide kingdom of God, would come from Bethlehem. See Micah 5:2-4.

- The town itself at this time would have had about 500 residents. It was built in the midst of several hills; and it was common for people to make stables and other structures out of caves in these hills, whether natural or manmade.

B. The background is the reign of King Herod, who was king over the area from 37 – 4 B.C. He became governor of Galilee in 47 B.C. and, through political maneuvering and a very authoritarian structure of government, had managed to become king of the entire region, surviving the downfall of his patron Marc Antony, and currying favor with the new emperor Augustus Caesar. Although not born of Jewish parents (he was from Edom, whose people were descendants of Esau), he found it helpful to support Jewish projects and in particular expanded the Temple to a glorious height. But his personal life was ruthless, and he put any suspected enemies to death, including his wife and three of his sons.

- C. Suddenly magi from the East come onto the scene, inquiring after the child Jesus.
1. The term magi could mean different things. According to Herodotus, the magi had been a political class among the Medes, but eventually turned to more spiritual and philosophical matters and became a priestly class. See Histories 1.101. Other magi were a combination of philosophers, spiritual leaders, astrologers, magicians, and doctors. Professions were not as distinct at the time. In any case, they would be considered learned men and, in some sense, spiritual leaders.
  2. They have also been classified as kings because of three prophecies that spoke of the gathering of kings as signs of the nations coming before the restored Israel: (1) Psalm 72:10-11, which speaks of kings of three countries coming to make offerings to the Messiah; (2) Isaiah 49:7, which speaks of the kings and rulers prostrating themselves before the Redeemer of Israel; and (3) Isaiah 60:6, which describes rulers coming from three countries bringing gold and frankincense to the new light of God.
  3. These magi came "from the East," which most likely meant Persia, in the Parthian Empire, although it could also have meant Syria or Arabia, which were in the Roman Empire. They may or may not have been from a similar area. It is customary to present one from Europe, one from Persia or Arabia, and one from Africa, which most likely would mean Ethiopia.
  4. According to tradition, their names are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, and their relics are buried in the cathedral at Cologne, Germany.
- D. They came to Jerusalem and reported that they had seen a star indicating that a new king had been born, and that they had

come to worship him.

1. There was a common belief at the time that a Savior would arise from the eastern part of the Roman Empire and indeed from Judea. Roman historians such as Cicero, Tacitus, Virgil, Suetonius, and the Jewish Roman Josephus recount such expectations. See Barclay, The Gospel According to Matthew 31-32; Fulton Sheen, The Life of Christ 18-19.
2. It is not clear what the star was. It could have been a comet. (Haley's comet had appeared in 11 B.C., although that would be a bit early.) It could have been the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn, which occurred in 7 B.C. It may have been a miraculous physical light, or a spiritual light that they alone had been able to see. On a similar note, the star may have been an angel appearing to them as a brilliant light. Cf. Job 38:17 (the stars associated with angels praising God); Rev. 9:1 (a fallen angel symbolized by a fallen star); Matt. 28:2-3 (an angel appearing like lightning).
  - There is no endorsement here for astrology. Even if the star they saw was a physical one, it was only by a particular revelation to them that that star had any specific meaning. God may have told them that, when they saw a special star, that would be the indication that the new king had been born. Although the stars are considered to be signs of God's wonder and, in their inanimate way praising God, see, e.g., Ps. 8:3, 19:1-2, 148:3, and as signs of His providence, see Gen. 15:5, 22:17, there is no indication of them predicting anything in any other passage.
  - This use of a star could have been a symbol of God bringing even the pagans, who usually did believe in astrology, through their real although limited understand, to the Christ child. In this way, it could be a parallel to the inclusion of the sinful or pagan women in Christ's genealogy.
3. It is unfortunate, but in some ways predictable, that the reaction of Herod and the rest of Jerusalem at the magi's report was being troubled. They should have rejoiced at the birth of the Messiah. But such a birth would also upset their comfortable lives; and that consideration seems to have been dominant.
4. Herod's reaction shows his usual duplicity, although that will only become apparent later. He inquires where the

Messiah is to be born, under the pretext of wanting to worship him too.

a. The chief priests and scribes, i.e., the most learned ones, inform him of the prophecy of Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. They add the prophecy of Samuel that the David "would shepherd My people Israel." See 2 Sam. 5:2; 1 Chron. 11:2

b. Their reaction is odd; they do not bother to investigate themselves, but rather wait for the magi. They may have been too "busy" to go find out themselves, or they may have been afraid, either of Herod or of popular opinion, or perhaps of the embarrassment if the adventure turned out to be a false hope. See Barclay, *The Gospel According to Matthew* 35.

E. The magi then come to Bethlehem with the famed gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

1. The star shines specifically on the house where the Holy Family was, indicating that, even if it was a natural star, there was a supernatural radiance that extended from it to earth, a radiance that apparently only the magi, and perhaps a few other select people, saw.

2. The text emphasizes that their reaction was one of joy. The term for "exceedingly," in Greek *sfodra*, means vehemently, almost violently and beyond any ordinary bounds. In addition, it is probably no coincidence that the word Matthew uses for "rejoice" (*magalein*) is the same as the word Luke uses to translate Mary's song of her rejoicing in the Lord, as described in the Gospel according to Luke. See Luke 1:46.

3. They come to the house where Mary and Jesus are. This arrival is sometime after the birth of Jesus Christ, and likely after His presentation in the Temple 40 days later. By this time, Joseph (perhaps with some help from pious members of the community) had found a house for the Holy Family, and was likely out working when the magi came. In any case, this event is a classic example of coming to Jesus in the presence of Mary.

4. The gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, partially foretold by Isaiah, are at one level three of the most valuable gifts they could bring. See Is. 60:6-13. At another level, they are symbolic of the roles Jesus will fulfill. Gold was the fitting offering for a king, as well as being a useful gift. Incense represented holiness and prayers, used frequently by both Jews and pagans in worship; that gift reflects Jesus' role as the high priest. Myrrh was the oddest gift. It was a perfumed oil, used most commonly at burials. The magus who brought this gift presumably understood that Jesus would be a sacrifice for us.