

Study Guide Week 1: Introduction & Matthew 1-2

The Birth Stories as an Introduction to Jesus

Introduction

Introduction and background material for this program can be found in a separate file labeled “Gospel of Matthew Background – Lent 2020.”

Matthew, Chapters 1 & 2

Matthew introduces his Gospel by addressing the questions, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?” and “Where does he come from?” He starts with a *genealogy* which explains Jesus’ origin. The word translated “genealogy” is, in Greek, *genesis*, the same as the title of the first book of the Bible. It literally means, “origin.”

Matthew presents a family tree that stretches from Abraham, through David to Joseph, the adoptive father of the divinely conceived Jesus. The characters in the genealogy are drawn from Old Testament stories known to the Jewish Christian portion of Matthew’s audience in Antioch. Much of Matthew’s message is indirectly conveyed by references to the Old Testament.

A Biblical genealogy is usually straightforward and frequently boring: A is the father of B, B, the father of C, etc. The genealogy Matthew presents is unusual because the family tree of God’s messiah is advanced by a number of unconventional unions. These are the result of initiatives taken by women.

Allow me to highlight some of the “unconventional unions.” Tamar was a Canaanite woman married to a Hebrew man who died before their union produced children. Her father-in-law, the Patriarch Judah, ignored his legal obligation to provide another husband for her. In response Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute, seducing her father-in-law and continued the line by having children by him (Gen.38:1-30). Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute in Jericho who aided the Hebrew spies in their effort to conquer Canaan. In exchange she was spared in the destruction of Jericho, joined the Hebrew family and continued the Messianic line (Joshua 2:1-21; 6:17, 23, 25). Ruth was another foreigner, a Moabite, who married a Hebrew. When her husband died, Ruth valiantly chose to support her widowed mother-in-law’s return to her Hebrew relatives instead of going home to Moab. Her kindness was recognized by Boaz, a Hebrew, who married her. She became the great grandmother of King David (See the Book of Ruth). Finally, the messianic line is continued through King David via Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite. David had Uriah, a soldier in his army, killed so that he could legitimately marry his widow who was already pregnant with his child. Bathsheba becomes the mother of Solomon. (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25). Matthew traces Jesus’s ancestry through Solomon, son of David and Bathsheba. Jesus’s family tree gives us much to think about. His genealogy is not a boring list of names.

Next Matthew provides us with five stories, known as the Infancy Narratives, which continue the process of introducing Jesus. Each of these segments makes reference to an Old Testament passage that Matthew describes as being “fulfilled,” as in, “all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.” (Matt. 1:22) Matthew is

pointing out that the subject passages are filled with additional meaning, and that meaning was fulfilled when read it in the light of what we know about Jesus of Nazareth. This is an example of the spiritual meaning of Scripture, a meaning intended by God, the sacred author of Scripture, which is beyond the meaning intended by the inspired human author. (See Catechism #117.)

Episode 1 concerns the birth of Jesus. The circumstances are explained to Joseph in a dream. Joseph is to take Mary, who is with child by the Holy Spirit, as his wife. The child is to be named Jesus, from the Hebrew meaning “God saves,” in accordance with his divine mission of saving his people from their sins. Jesus is also given the title, Emmanuel, meaning “*God with us*,” reflecting who he is (Isaiah 7:14). The messianic family tree is thus completed by a final unconventional series of events: virgin birth and adoption.

Episode 2 concerns the reaction to the birth of Jesus. His own people, represented by Herod, reject him. Gentiles, represented by the Magi, seek him. This anticipates the Gospel story. (Jesus’s birth is the fulfillment of Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2.)

Episode 3 relates the experience of the Holy family to the history of the Jewish people and their great prophet and leader, Moses. The family flees to Egypt because the child’s life is threatened. Jesus is called “out of Egypt,” as Moses was, but as God’s son, to save his people for all time. (Hosea 11:1) Episode 4 explains that even Herod’s attempt to kill Jesus is a fulfillment of scripture (Jeremiah 31:15). Finally Episode 5 explains how the Messiah of the Jews, destined to be born in Bethlehem, comes to grow up in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. The town name, Nazareth, sounds like the Hebrew word *nazir*, meaning one consecrated to God (See Numbers, Chapter 6.)

For further reflection:

How would you explain who Jesus of Nazareth is to someone who had never heard of him?

What is the significance of someone’s genealogy? Why does Matthew begin with the genealogy of Jesus?

How do you feel about the “unconventional unions” being part of the genealogy of Jesus, the Son of God?

If you have time, compare the divine message regarding the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew to the message in the Gospel of Luke. How are they similar? How are they different? Compare Joseph’s actions to Mary’s.

In what ways does the appearance of the Magi seeking the Messiah serve as anticipation of the future mission of the Church?

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