

MATTHEW

John Proctor

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

A devotional commentary for study and preaching

PREFACE

This commentary was written with churches and church people in mind. Some Christians have followed it in their daily Bible reading. Others have used it to help them lead Bible study. Preachers have turned to it, as they think about their sermons for Sunday. All of that is exactly what we hoped for when BRF asked me to write this commentary. It is a joy to know that it is being reissued. I hope it will help many people to grasp the good news of Jesus and to follow it in their own living.

There are some excellent big commentaries on Matthew's Gospel, some stretching to several volumes. I have learned a lot from these. Yet for many people a big commentary would be no help at all—they would find it too costly or too heavy. So this much smaller commentary aims to digest the insight into Matthew that specialists can give, and to reflect on Matthew's message for today. What does it mean in the 21st century to hear the good news, to welcome God's kingdom and to be a disciple of Jesus? What can we receive from this Gospel for Christian living in our times and among our neighbours?

God has surely given us four Gospels for a good reason. Each of the four is unique. They tell of the same Lord, but in different ways. Each has its own angles and emphases, as it shares the message of Jesus. Here are some of Matthew's:

- Roots and continuity were important to Matthew. He wanted to connect the Christian good news with the past, with the story of God's work in the Old Testament. He believed that history pointed forward to Jesus, and that the New Testament story is rooted in the Old. To read Matthew is to be reminded of a God who works through the generations, and to think again about our own debt to the past.
- Matthew's Gospel follows a sandwich pattern. Word and deed alternate. Blocks of Jesus' teaching are interleaved with blocks of action, with reports of things he did and people he met. Action and teaching mesh with one another, and in the mesh is a message. Belief in Jesus and practical Christian living are linked. True Christian living should be an integrated whole, where faith and conduct nourish one another.

- Matthew is a demanding Gospel. It takes Christian commitment seriously—commitment to Jesus, to discipleship, to high standards of conduct, to one another. To read with care is likely to be quite a searching experience. Yet Matthew was realistic. He knew that Christians are fragile, vulnerable and fallible. His Gospel urges us to be patient with one another, and to find gentle ways of supporting each other in the Church and in the Christian life.
- Matthew is a Gospel of hope. He believed in the lordship of Jesus Christ, in Jesus' authority and presence in the Church's mission, and in his coming to judge the world. To follow Jesus is to be in his company, under his command and within his care. Matthew wrote to give Christians confidence as they served Jesus in a complex world and in difficult times. We may read this Gospel, and share its message, with that same aim. We too can be confident in the Christ who is with us always, whose word and presence we proclaim and enjoy.

Some people who use this commentary may worship in churches that use the Revised Common Lectionary. This calendar of Bible readings runs over three years of Sundays. In Year A of the three-year cycle—starting in Advent 2010, 2013, 2016 and so on—most of the Gospel readings come from Matthew. Roughly half of this Gospel will be read in main Sunday services, but it is not followed in precise Gospel order, because we cover the sweep of the Gospel story from Jesus' birth to resurrection in the four months from December to Easter. This involves a very selective approach to Gospel readings in these months. The rhythm of the church year, rather than the flow of Matthew's text, sets the tone and context for these.

Once we come into the weeks after Trinity Sunday, from June to November, however, the Gospel readings run steadily through Matthew from chapters 7 to 25, sometimes skipping a slice but always moving forward. Many of Matthew's main themes figure plain and large: miracles and mission, preaching and parables, crisis and controversy, fellowship and following. For churches who want to trace the movement and message of a big biblical book, the Revised Common Lectionary offers a great deal. Listen to Matthew's Gospel in worship, and live by it through the year.

John Proctor

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PBC MATTHEW: INTRODUCTION

Jesus of Nazareth has a strong claim to be the most influential person who ever lived. Two thousand years after his own time, hundreds of millions of people in every part of the world are glad to be known as Christians, as his friends and followers. The life he lived, the things he said and did, how he died and what happened afterwards, make a remarkable story. Christians have always wanted to know about Jesus, to understand the Lord who launched our faith.

Why write Gospels?

That is why we have Gospels. Probably they arose something like this. For a few years after Jesus' time, people remembered what he had said and done. Memories were good in the ancient Middle East, as they have to be in any culture where paper is expensive. But the people who remembered gradually died out, and Christians wanted a record of Jesus that they could keep. So about a generation after Jesus' lifetime, the Gospels started to appear.

That is very approximate. Nobody really knows when Matthew was written. Guesses vary from about AD40 to AD100. Many scholars come down in the middle of that range, between about 60 and 90. Around that time, the record of Jesus' life that we call Matthew's Gospel was put on to paper.

Global or local?

For whom was the Gospel written? Two answers are popular today. One says that Matthew (and Mark, Luke and John) always meant their Gospels to be widely read. The Church of that day was spread across much of southern Europe, western Asia and northern Africa. There were good communications between various Christian centres. The Gospels were bound to travel. The Gospel writers believed that Jesus' story was worth telling and wanted to preserve it for their own generation and those who would follow. From very early on, the four Gospels belonged to the whole Church.

A second approach suggests that the four Gospels were written for Christians in different local areas. Each of the writers was trying to help the Christians he knew best. So each Gospel is angled differently, to reflect the needs and circumstances of the writer's own local church. If we follow that sort of tack, we may try to read between the

lines of each Gospel to find out about the needs and situation of the first readers, as well as about Jesus himself.

I think there is some truth in both those theories. The early Christians were interested in Jesus. They thought his life was important. They wanted to preserve their memories of him, so that others could know about him too. Jesus is the main focus of the whole gospel story and of Christian faith. But the four Gospels do have different selections of material and different emphases. They are portraits, not engineers' drawings. To some extent they each reflect their own author's perspectives on Jesus and the questions and concerns of four different groups of early Christians.

Why read four Gospels?

So I take a positive approach to the Gospels. I value the material they contain, and I believe they give a true picture of Jesus. But none of them gives the whole truth. All of the Gospel writers had to choose what to include and how to present it. Let me mention four reasons why it is helpful to have several Gospels.

Selection: Some material in other Gospels is not in Matthew. For example, Matthew only shows Jesus making one journey to Jerusalem, at the end of his ministry. Jesus goes with grim foreboding, expecting to suffer. His enemies there act quickly and harshly against him, very soon after he arrives. That sequence of events is easier to understand if we connect it to John's Gospel, which shows Jesus making several visits to Jerusalem. By the time of the last Passover visit he was known in the city and was a marked man. Both he and his enemies were ready for trouble. The accounts in two different Gospels mesh together, to give a fuller and clearer picture of Jesus' career.

Order: Some material in Matthew is in a different order in other Gospels. For example, much of the teaching in Matthew 5—7 (the Sermon on the Mount) is scattered through Luke. Matthew seems to have a tendency to collect material on a similar theme and include it in one place in his Gospel. There is something similar in Matthew 8 and 9, which shows a series of miracles in quick succession, whereas in Mark the same material is spread more widely, across Mark 1—5.

Detail: Some material in Matthew is briefer than in other Gospels. Mark reports action at length. Matthew cuts to the main point.

Compare Mark 5:21–43 with Matthew 9:18–26, for example. Mark shows each scene very closely and clearly; Matthew makes an impact by moving swiftly from one incident to the next.

Angle: Some material in Matthew is told a bit differently in other Gospels. Look at the comment on Matthew 26:26–30, for example. Jesus’ words at the Last Supper vary a little as we move from one Gospel to another. The main lines of the incident are very clear, but each Gospel has its own emphasis and angle.

So for many reasons it is helpful to have four different Gospels. But in some vitally important ways they are closely similar, both in broad outline and even in some fine details. Why is this? Why in particular are Matthew, Mark and Luke so very like each other at so many points?

Identify your sources

Most people who study the Gospels think that Matthew knew Mark’s Gospel, or something very like it. The two Gospels have a great deal of material in common. Most of that material—indeed all of it after Matthew 13—is in the same order, and much of it has very similar wording. So the thought that Matthew knew and used Mark, and adapted Mark’s material into his own Gospel, has become widespread in modern study of the Gospels.

However, a lot of Matthew’s material is missing from Mark. About half of that extra material, almost all of it sayings of Jesus, is very like parts of Luke’s Gospel. This raises the suspicion that Matthew and Luke both had the same source for this stuff. This source has been named ‘Q’, which is the first letter of the German word for ‘source’, and a suitably mysterious title for a shadowy body of material about which we really know very little indeed.

Everything in the two paragraphs above is sensible guesswork; we cannot be certain. Matthew, like many a modern journalist, does not identify his sources. Even so, something like the above may very well explain Matthew as we now have it. But as we read Matthew, it is important to hear the way he tells the story of Jesus, to listen for his own emphases, and trace his own plan.

Matthew’s plan

Have you ever been in an old building that was converted from one use to another during its lifetime? Both the original design and the

later modifications contribute to the ground plan and the shape of the rooms. Some people think that has happened to Matthew. At any rate there seem to be two plans, dovetailed into each other.

The ‘Jesus began’ plan: The first three or four chapters of Matthew are a sort of preface to the main action. Jesus is born; later on he is baptized and tempted. Then he is ready to start his ministry, and at 4:17 it says, ‘From then on Jesus began to preach.’ The Gospel then shows Jesus making God’s kingdom known, in word and action, in and around Galilee.

Gradually we see a very mixed response arising, and there is a hint that serious difficulties may be emerging, when we read in 11:20, ‘Then he began to speak against the places which had not heeded his word.’

Opposition now starts to sharpen, and at 16:21 we realize where this will lead: ‘From then on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer and die.’

By using the word ‘began’ as a milestone, we have found the route the Gospel takes. By that plan, Matthew’s Gospel has twelve chapters about the mission of Jesus in Galilee (4—16), and twelve chapters leading to the Passion of Jesus in Jerusalem (16—27). Once we pass chapter 16, the story is drawn to the cross like a moth to a lamp. Opposition steadily advances, the moment of destruction is inevitable, and there is a deepening mood of sorrow and fear. Only at the very end does hope return, with Easter and resurrection and a completely new beginning.

The ‘Jesus finished’ plan: The first plan has picked out the action of the Gospel—what Jesus did. The second plan picks out what Jesus said. The words ‘When Jesus had finished these sayings’ come five times in Matthew (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Each one ends a major block of teaching, the five great sermons of Matthew’s Gospel. Each of the blocks has a main theme running right through:

- Chapters 5—7, the Sermon on the Mount, about practical living.
- Chapter 10, about mission and evangelism.
- Chapter 13, a long string of parables about God’s kingdom.
- Chapter 18, about Christian community and relationships.
- Chapters 24 and 25, about the future.

So the teaching and action are interspersed, like a giant multi-decker sandwich. Each section of teaching connects with the action around it, and carries the story forward.

Why two plans? Many people answer something like this. Mark used the first plan: half of his Gospel is about Jesus' mission in Galilee, and half is about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his suffering and death there. Matthew adopted Mark's plan. But Matthew also knew a good deal of Jesus' teaching, most of which Mark had missed (including the so-called 'Q' material), and wanted to highlight this. So the second plan, overlaid on the first, draws attention to Jesus as teacher. The Church remembers and trusts the Lord who lived, died and rose again. The Church also values and follows what he taught. Both aspects are important to Matthew.

Who was Matthew?

Jesus had a follower called Matthew, a former tax collector, whom he had called and who belonged to the circle of twelve disciples. We meet this man at Matthew 9:9, and there is an ancient tradition that his personal reminiscences of Jesus have come into this Gospel. But did he actually write it? Many people think it would be odd if Matthew, who was one of the Twelve, copied from Mark, who was not.

Matthew's Gospel also shows a close acquaintance with Jewish religious lore and custom, and tax collectors were not very religious Jews. Some of the style in the Gospel seems to be much more like that of a Jewish religious teacher. So could Matthew the tax collector be the source for some of the information, but someone else be the writer? And is there a trace of that writer—rather like a film director appearing for a moment in the film—in Jesus' saying about the 'scribe trained for the kingdom' (13:52)? None of the other Gospels has this saying, but the writer of Matthew feels it describes his own calling, and is glad to include it.

If we take that approach, whom shall we mean when we say 'Matthew': the tax collector, or the writer of the Gospel? I shall use the name 'Matthew' to refer to the person who wrote the Gospel, and to the way he tells the story of Jesus.

Matthew and Judaism

In many ways, Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels. It shows a strong acquaintance with Jewish customs and laws (for example,

5:23; 17:24; 23:5). It stresses how the ancient law of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the teaching of Jesus (5:17), and how the prophecies come to fulfilment in his life and work (1:23; 12:17). In some sections it presents Jesus as a new Moses (see comment on 2:13–23, pp. 28–29).

Yet Matthew also includes some very sharp criticism of Jewish leaders. This is clearest in chapter 23. We also read that ‘the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom’ (21:43). Some of Israel’s ancient privileges are being taken over by the community that Jesus is founding. So Matthew’s Gospel is very Jewish in its background and atmosphere, but it also tells of Judaism being split by the coming of Jesus.

At the start of Matthew’s Gospel, we see Jesus’ mission focused on Israel. But Israel divides: there is a core of opposition among the nation’s leaders, yet many of the ordinary people are warm and receptive. Although Matthew does not directly mention this, the Christian gospel made great strides among the Jewish people in the years after the resurrection, as the Church began to grow. But it was never accepted by the nation’s official leadership.

Matthew’s Church

The strong Jewish flavour to Matthew’s writing suggests that he was writing for a Jewish audience, probably for a group of Jewish people who had accepted and believed in Jesus. He believed that their faith was a true fulfilment of their ancient Jewish heritage. Prophecy and law found their focus and completion in Jesus. Jesus was their Messiah, and God’s ancient purpose was being carried forward through him.

Yet Matthew’s first readers may have had very awkward relations with some of their neighbours, who did not share their beliefs. Jews who had accepted Jesus would have been suspect, seen as a fringe group within Israel. That may be the reason Matthew included so much controversial material, involving disputes and criticism between Jesus and his opponents. All the Gospels show some of this, but it is clearest in Matthew, and it may have been especially relevant to his readers’ own situation. (The comments at the start of chapter 23 discuss this point further.)

But Matthew did not expect Christianity to get stuck within a Jewish horizon. He was convinced that the Church’s mission should include Gentiles too. Jesus sometimes met Gentile people during his

mission in Galilee. When he saw their faith, he recognized and welcomed it. Those contacts were a hint of what was ahead. Once Jesus is risen, the horizon is the world. After the resurrection the Christian message spreads out to all the nations.

Matthew and Christian living

Three major emphases stand out when we compare Matthew with other Gospels.

- Matthew's is the only Gospel to use the word 'church' (16:18; 18:17). He shows very clearly that Jesus is gathering and shaping a community.
- There is a lot of material in Matthew about practical living. Jesus' teaching about lifestyle and relationships has a very prominent place. Matthew obviously believes that faith must show itself in everyday life.
- Matthew includes a great deal of Jesus' teaching about judgment. God weighs and measures the way people live. Faith that does not show itself in deeds is hollow, and will never be able to bluff God. God is rich in forgiveness, but that does not give Christians the right to be casual or complacent about how we live.

So Matthew's Christianity is church-centred: we belong to one another. It is practical: we aim to express our faith in love and action. And it is serious: we trust God's mercy, but we must not be careless in how we serve him.

Text and translation

Have you ever noticed a footnote in your Bible saying, 'Some manuscripts have...' or 'Other ancient authorities read...'? We do not have the original manuscript of any book of the Bible. Thank God, the early Christians copied out the biblical books, by hand. But some of the first copies got lost, or decayed, or were destroyed in persecutions. So when we want to find out what Matthew wrote, we use the earliest copies we have. But these manuscripts come from several generations after Matthew's own time.

These manuscripts do not agree with each other precisely. That can always happen with copying by hand. Where we meet disagreements in wording, we have to work out as well as we can which version is

original—what Matthew actually wrote. Very rarely those differences affect a whole verse—included in some manuscripts, missing from others. Examples of this are 6:13; 16:2–3; 17:21; 18:11; and we now doubt whether those five verses were actually written by Matthew. Yet much, much more often we have no serious disagreements in the manuscripts: what we read in our 21st-century English Bibles is based on a very solid knowledge of what Matthew wrote in the first century.

Matthew did not write in English. He used Greek, though not exactly the language spoken in Greece today. In some places it has been hard to translate the Greek into English, and English Bibles show different meanings. One example is in 28:17: the last few words could mean ‘but they doubted’ or ‘but some of them doubted’. Were all the disciples hesitant, or just a few of them? We do not know. That sort of problem is occasionally to be expected when we use a very old piece of writing. It is hard to know fully and exactly what the ancient language meant. But most of the time we can be confident in our modern translations. In our day, as for the last two thousand years, Christians are happy to use the four Gospels because they were written close to the time and place where Jesus lived, and give us the best information we have about his life and work.

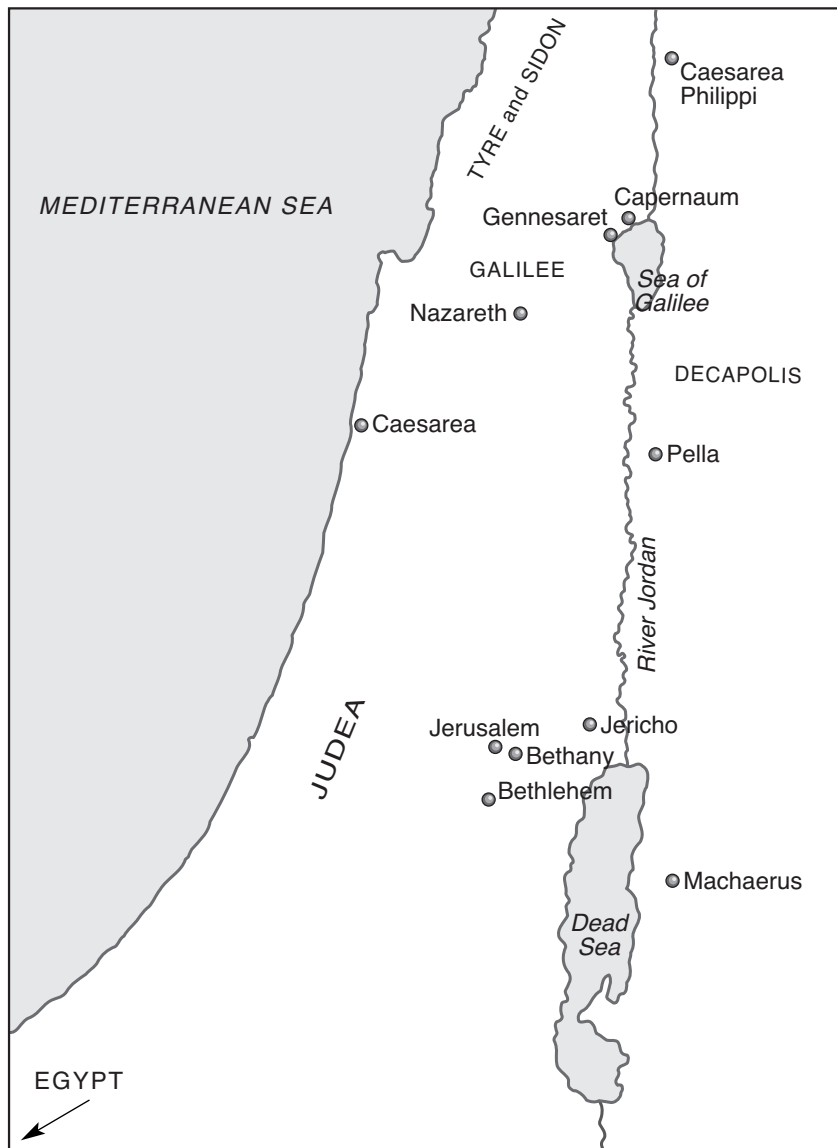
Matthew’s good news

So Christians read Matthew as an introduction to Jesus. That was Matthew’s main motive, to present Jesus clearly and helpfully, so that his readers would understand and trust Jesus. The word gospel means ‘good news’, about Jesus and about the life he invites people to live.

So listen to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, take it seriously, and try to apply it in your own life. Value your Christian relationships with the brothers and sisters who help you to follow this way. And treasure above all your relationship with Jesus who is ‘with you always, to the end’ (Matthew 28:20).

The Bible quotations included in the commentary are usually taken from the New Revised Standard Version; occasionally I have used a translation or paraphrase of my own.

PALESTINE *in the* TIME of JESUS



LINES *of* INTRODUCTION

The scenery on a stage helps you to enjoy the play. Action makes more sense, a story carries more impact, if you can see where the events are set. The scenery can sharpen your hearing and tune your mind to the author's intentions and concerns. These opening verses of Matthew's Gospel lay out the scenery. Matthew presents Jesus against the background of the Old Testament. There were clues, longings, promises, running through the Old Testament, that had come to life in Jesus. The very first verse of the Gospel names some of them: 'Jesus the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham'.

Son of Abraham

Abraham was the great forefather of the Jewish people. Jesus was born a Jew, spent most of his life among Jewish people, and rarely travelled outside Jewish territory. He thought, taught, argued and prayed in a Jewish way. We understand Jesus properly only if we understand him as a Jew.

Yet God had called Abraham for a wider purpose: 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3). Abraham is an international figure. The promise to Abraham is that Israel's God will do great things for the whole world. From this small people, a blessing will flow outward to the nations. To call Jesus 'son of Abraham' means that he is heir to this promise. He has blessing to share with the world.

Messiah, son of David

Jesus is also called 'son of David'. David was remembered as Israel's most successful king, who made the nation peaceful and prosperous. But that had been long ago. The Jews had grown hungry for a new David, a leader to make them great again and give them fresh hope. So the title 'son of David' is not just about ancestry. It is a job description. Through Jesus the kingly power of God will be made known in Israel. That is why he was called 'Messiah'. The word means 'anointed', a person marked out by God for a special task. In Greek—the language Matthew wrote—the word for 'anointed' is our word 'Christ'. Jesus Christ was God's anointed leader, a new David, the shepherd king who would show the loving rule of God.

Undulating path

The long genealogy (vv. 2–16) is divided into three sections of fourteen names each (v. 17). At the very start is Abraham (vv. 2, 17). The next marker in the sequence, ending the first main section, is the name of ‘David the king’ (vv. 6, 17). Then the second major landmark is the ‘deportation to Babylon’ (vv. 11, 12, 17), when many thousands of Jews were led across the desert to exile.

This is a roll of honour. It reflects the whole Old Testament story of Israel’s long journey of faith and the patient goodness of God. Yet it is no whitewash. David and the exile are the milestones on the road, marking triumph and tragedy, fortune and failure. Jesus came to a nation with a patchy record. He stepped into real human history, the mixture of grief and glory that the world still experiences today.

Mothers with a message

The genealogy is mainly a list of fathers. Only five mothers are mentioned. Four have unusual stories to tell. Tamar (v. 3) acted the part of a prostitute to claim the protection of the family into which she had married (Genesis 38). Rahab (v. 5) was a prostitute in Jericho who helped two Jewish spies (Joshua 2). Ruth (v. 5) was a foreigner who came into Israel’s line through a complex story of bereavement and famine. ‘The wife of Uriah’ (v. 6) was Bathsheba, whose husband David murdered to conceal his adultery with her (2 Samuel 11); yet she later became the mother of King Solomon. These are not ideal Jewish mothers. Possibly all were Gentiles. Their circumstances and their conduct were unusual, and even irregular. Yet they underline the element of grace, that God can take human life as it is—often untidy, sometimes perverse and odd—and fill it with the rich promise of his love. They hint too that the fifth mother, Mary (v. 16), will also give birth amid unexpected circumstances. So Jesus comes out of Israel, for the world. He is born to be king, yet from a turbulent and tangled heritage. He is Mary’s son and God’s Messiah, a figure of perplexity, and a child of promise.

PRAYER

We praise you, God of Israel and our God, for the long reach and far horizon of your purpose, and for the breadth and generosity of your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

CHILD *of* GOD

The long line of ancestry has run from Abraham down to Joseph. Yet the genealogy ends with a novel and intriguing turn of phrase: instead of the repeated ‘was father of’, the last link in the chain is that Joseph was ‘husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born’ (1:16). We discover the reason for that wording in this next passage, in verses 18–25.

Joseph was not the father of Jesus, at least not biologically. No human father was involved in Jesus’ conception: he was ‘born of the Virgin Mary’. The life in him came directly from God. Matthew—and indeed Joseph himself—knew perfectly well that this is not the normal order of things; that’s why Joseph wanted to break the engagement when he first heard of Mary’s pregnancy (vv. 18–19).

Father-in-law

Matthew tells this section of the Gospel from Joseph’s point of view. He is said to be ‘a righteous man’ (v. 19), anxious to avoid a marriage that seemed compromised from the start, yet unwilling to make more trouble than necessary about calling the plans off. A dream helped to settle his fears (v. 20), so that he, a ‘son of David’, married Mary and gave his name and his family line to her child (vv. 24–25). Legally he became the father of Jesus. He protected mother and child through the hazards ahead (2:13–25). He taught Jesus his own trade (13:55; compare Mark 6:3). He seems to have died before Jesus launched into public ministry, but, so far as we can tell, his work was lovingly and faithfully done.

In a name

The child’s name, Jesus, is a loaded word (v. 21). In Hebrew it is written Joshua, and means ‘God to the rescue’. There had been an earlier Joshua who led the people of Israel, centuries before, into the land God had promised them. So Jesus too would make hopes become real. He would be God to the rescue. He would offer the Jewish people a new era, filled with freedom and forgiveness.

As the prophets foretold

A quotation from Isaiah helps to explain the virgin birth (vv. 22–23,

from Isaiah 7:14); it had been predicted this way, we hear, seven centuries earlier. Yet no one—so far as we can tell—had taken the Isaiah text in quite that way until Jesus came. Isaiah seemed to be speaking of a young woman, perhaps a girl on the threshold of marriage, who would soon be pregnant with her first child. Then Matthew heard a fuller meaning in those ancient words, as a description of the birth of Jesus. He found fresh life in an old prophecy; but he also took up the hopes that had always been seen in it.

For this text from Isaiah 7 is about a prince, a royal leader for Israel. To connect these words to Jesus is to mark him out as a kingly figure, a new David. But he was more than a king. Isaiah's prophecy spoke of Emmanuel, which is Hebrew for 'God is with us'. In Jesus the creative power and love of God took human flesh, personally and directly. Through Jesus, in a unique and immediate way, God comes to be with his people.

Worth taking seriously

For many people, even some church people, the whole idea of Jesus' virgin birth seems a fantasy. But the evidence should not be sneezed at. Two positive points may be made.

Firstly, the Jewish people read Isaiah for centuries without expecting a virgin birth. Matthew turned to Isaiah, not primarily because he spotted ideas in the text that others had missed, but because it fitted the facts he had to tell. The scripture did not teach him his story; it resonated with what he already knew.

Secondly, Matthew and Luke tell the Christmas story in very different ways in their two Gospels. Yet at the heart of it all they match, and confirm one another's material, as two very different witnesses to the same event: that Jesus was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary'.

So Jesus, son of the Jewish people, carried in his humanity the life and presence of Israel's God. The hopes of the prophetic scriptures took flesh in him. Joseph and Mary's love nurtured the Son of God.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, we praise you that you lived the life of God in our human flesh, truly one of us, yet not merely one of us.

WORSHIP *from AFAR*

Matthew's first chapter has told of a Jewish king, born of Jewish descent, according to the promises of Jewish scriptures. That raises an intriguing question. Has Israel not got a king already? If so, what will the old king and the new have to do with each other?

The Gospel begins to answer that question by telling us (v. 1) that 'in the time of King Herod... Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea'. Herod was a notoriously ruthless king, with grand ambitions and a paranoid fear of any possible rival. The reader expects an ugly clash. Yet this clash comes about in an unexpected way, as light and worship stream into the story from two quite new directions.

Travelling light

The word 'magi' means possessors of mysterious wisdom or hidden knowledge. They are 'wise men', not 'kings', and the text does not mention how many they were, only that they gave three gifts. Here they represent the wealth and wisdom of the Gentile world, the deep yearning and generous worship of the nations beyond Israel, coming to greet God's royal Messiah.

As the magi represent the praise of the Gentiles, the leading of the star suggests that even creation worships. The lights of heaven rise to greet the birth of the Christ, to hail the coming of God's creative love in human flesh. The nations and the skies are moved to worship. How will Israel and her king respond?

We two kings

Herod hears of the child's birth from the magi (v. 2), and apparently wishes to worship too (v. 8). But his deeper reaction is hostile and fearful. He is disturbed and troubled, he gathers his religious leaders for advice, and his plans for action are discreet and devious. Threat, foreboding and danger are in the air, and no one (except the magi, v. 12) does anything to thwart or divert the king. Gentiles can see the reality of Christ's birth, yet Israel seems curiously unaware, while her leader tries to destroy him.

For those who know the gospel story, there are uncomfortable similarities with the events of the Passion. Jesus is called 'king of the Jews'

(v. 2; 27:37). Israel's leaders gather against him (v. 4; 27:1). There are secret plots (v. 7; 26:4, 14–16). The end of the Gospel is foreshadowed in its beginning. Yet even now the wrath of men does not achieve all its plans. God is in control (v. 12), and Jesus' life is secure in his hands.

Threads of prophecy

Much of Matthew's Gospel is like woven cloth. As the lines of the story lead forward, across them run strands from scripture. The narrative is dense with echoes of and allusions to Old Testament themes.

The direct quotation in verse 6, from Micah 5:2, presents Jesus as a new David, born at Bethlehem to be shepherd king for God's people—and that royal theme will be important right through Matthew. Yet surely in this chapter we hear also an echo of Isaiah 60, which speaks of light rising in Israel and Gentiles gathering with gifts: a new era has come, an age of light and hope. Psalm 72 tells of Israel's ideal king, to whom the nations will bring worship and gifts. Numbers 24:17 prophesies the coming of a messianic figure, as the rising of a new star.

Matthew (who knew the Hebrew scriptures better than we do) would have been well aware of these echoes and of the hints they conveyed. His tapestry is rich and whole precisely because of this intersecting weave. He shows us meaning in the story by the light of the scriptures.

But is it all i-magi-nation?

So how could these events have actually happened? For myself, I am intrigued by some Iranian traditions which seem to match this story from the other end of the journey; impressed by some recent and serious astronomical enquiry into the nature of a planetary conjunction in 7BC and of a comet in 5BC; and inclined to think that improbable events become a little more probable when God's Son is born.

But I realize that this account of a wandering star and visiting foreign academics strikes some modern people as far-fetched and incredible. If that is your view, don't overlook the points of Matthew's story: that the coming of Jesus is important enough for nations and creation to honour him, for tyrant thrones to tremble, and for all the glories of scripture to be recalled.

FOR THOUGHT

'The hinge of all history hangs on the door of a Bethlehem stable.'

Anon

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