



## **WEEK FOUR: A GOSPEL FOR THE NATIONS**

❖ **Author of Matthew** Imagine you're in my Bible class and you're reading Matthew's Gospel for the first time. If I ask you "Who wrote Matthew's Gospel?" you might think it was a bit of a no-brainer: "Matthew: it says it on the cover!!" This Matthew was also the same person as Levi the tax collector whom Jesus called to follow him as a disciple (compare Matt.9:9 with Mark2:13). As a former tax-collector, he was a highly organised man and most likely did the early church "the marvellous service of collecting and writing down the sayings of his Master"<sup>1</sup> which we find in the teaching sections of Mathew and Luke. We have early testimony from Papias, a disciple of the apostle John: "Matthew composed the oracles (logia) in the Hebrew tongue and each one translated them as he was able." The Greek word "logia" can mean "sayings." There is one other feature unique to Matthew:

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<sup>1</sup> The Message of Matthew, Michael Green p22

his great work in compiling the Old Testament Prophecies as they were fulfilled by Jesus. However, Matthew's Gospel does not read in Greek as a translation from Hebrew (it is written in very elegant Greek); and so the Gospel as we have it today shows the work of another hand, which adding to Matthew's work, used the structure of Mark's Gospel (as does Luke) as a source. That would seem somewhat strange for an apostle and eyewitness, following the account of someone like Mark, who was neither. The intriguing possibility is this: both Matthew and Luke follow Mark's Gospel, but they also have another source "Q". Q could well be none other than Matthew, our well organised former tax collector!! Never mind the Greek, when you read Matthew in English you can see the hand of a former collaborator and swindler, totally transformed by his encounter and calling by Jesus. It is, due to Matthew's organisational skills, the most Jewish of the Gospels, with its common refrain: "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophets..." One word about the final editor: he was a humble man who preferred to give Matthew not himself all the credit; he was clearly a believer involved in the practicalities of his local church; he was a gifted teacher with a scribal background (5:19 and 28:20) and most likely first written in Antioch in Syria (Acts 11:19-

25;13:1-3)the sending base of Paul and Barnabas. For me, however, I just love the transformation by Jesus of Matthew the tax collector, who then used his pen and his skill at book work (a rare skill among the disciples!!) to record the teaching of Jesus. As Michael Green comments, “if we are to believe the united testimony of the early Christians, he used this gift in the service of the Gospel”.

### **MATTHEW CH1:1-17: THE GENEALOGY**

We have already noted that this genealogy is Joseph’s (because of the inclusion of Jehoiachin)<sup>2</sup>. What we might not spot, however, is that three names are highlighted: Abraham (v2), David (v6) and Jesus (v16). The numerical value for David is 14 and you will note three generations of 14 (Abraham to David; David to the Babylonian Exile; from the Babylonian Exile to the Messiah. The climax? Great David’s greater son: Jesus, whose reign will never end (Isaiah 9:7). Also four women are mentioned: Tamar (an adulteress Gen.38), Rahab (a prostitute Josh.2:1-7), Bathsheba (an adulteress 2Sam:11, 12) and Ruth (not Jewish but a Moabitess Ruth 1:4). All highlight the difference with Mary, the gentle and pure mother of Jesus. That women are mentioned at all, points

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<sup>2</sup> Week 1, Great Expectations p4, section vii

forward to Jesus who was the first person in history to regard women as equals (unlike the church???) And as for bad people v. good people? “There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace. (Romans 3:22-24)

**1:18-25** Mary was betrothed to Joseph; during this time no sexual intercourse could take place. Also if Mary had committed adultery, then Joseph not only had the right to divorce her publicly but also had the right to cast the first stone (the penalty for adultery). You sometimes wonder why God didn't warn Joseph in advance, but, of course, we forget that God looks into the heart. Joseph was going to divorce Mary, but *“he was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly”* v.19. This was quite exceptional for his day; God choose a really gracious man for Mary's husband! However, even a quiet divorce was wrong, for Mary had committed no adultery. So an angel appeared to him in a dream explaining that the child was conceived by no man, but through the Holy Spirit. Jesus was and is fully God and fully man. The Virgin Birth reminds us that salvation is similar: salvation can never be bought or earned or deserved; it cannot come through human effort, but must be the work of God himself.

**THE WISE MEN** The first thing to notice is the time of the visit: Jesus was no longer in a manger, but was in a house (an “oikia”). In Luke we are told there was no room in the inn (that word is kataluma : the same word used for the upper room where the Last Supper was held). Jesus now must be older than one year and younger than two (Matt. 2:16). Notice how God had kept the baby Jesus hidden from satan, until he could safely travel to Egypt. A new born baby (as in most Christmas tableaux of the visit of the Wise Men) would not survive such a long journey through difficult terrain.

Let’s look at the Virgin Birth. The former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, famously once said on television “I very much doubt if God would arrange a virgin birth” But as Michael Green points out: “but Christianity is concerned with what actually happened, and we are not at liberty to rewrite history in order to fit in with what we imagine to be likely”<sup>3</sup> And anyway, it was a normal birth, but a virginal conception!!

**THE WISE MEN: Matthew ch.2** The most probable suggestion for the star the Wise men followed, is that it wasn’t a new star at all, but the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the are of the sky known as Pisces; this occurred three times in 7BC: it was seen on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 3<sup>rd</sup> October and 4<sup>th</sup> December (according to a cuneiform inscription from the observatory of

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Green, The Message of Matthew p62

Suppar in Babylonia). Pisces, according to the Magi, marked the end of the sun's old course and the beginning of the new; also Jupiter was the royal planet and Saturn had long been the symbol of Israel! Naturally, they came to Jerusalem and sought out King Herod (noticeably not led by God at this point!!) Notice that the Old Testament scholars knew exactly where the Messiah would be born: Bethlehem. You might complain about the Wise Men being guided by a star, but how worse is it for biblical scholars not to be guided by God's Word!!! The Bible is not head knowledge: it is heart knowledge. I reckon the Magi's hearts were in the right place!

Notice very carefully what happened next: these Magi or Kings came to worship: they knelt down in worship (something Herod refused to do). You don't worship babies, but you do worship God! And they knew who they were worshipping : a king (the gift of Gold), a priest (the gift of Frankincense) and the Lamb of God (the gift of myrrh to anoint a dead body). In these three gifts we see who He is, what He came to do, and what it cost Him. They had been listening to God alright! Do we follow the wise men's example?

They were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. Herod wasn't interested in worship, only holding on to power at any cost. Obviously, Augustus Caesar's plan to restrict his

behaviour through the insult of a census had failed (SEE WEEK 2). Jesus was under two years old (v16) but strong enough to travel. God warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt, which is what he did, and the money from the sale of these three gifts would have sustained them there. Also note when Herod died, Joseph didn't need to read the newspapers: God appeared in a dream. When he arrived back in Judea, he was nervous about staying there. One consideration would have been the slaughter of all the baby boys under two in Bethlehem by Herod; maybe some 30 baby boys were killed, but the real target was Jesus. Another consideration was that after Herod's death, Rome had taken over the direct rule of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria. Joseph, therefore, felt it was safer to settle in Nazareth in Galilee (even though it was under the rule of one of Herod's successors, Antipas). Matthew comments, "So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene"" (Matt.2:23). Quite where that prophecy is found in the Old Testament is anybody's guess!! Isaiah 49:6 might be the best candidate, but it all hinges on a slight change in Hebrew pointing (no surprise for this most Jewish of Gospels)! The phrase "those I have kept" can then be read as "Nazarene" and so we get "it is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and a Nazarene to restore Israel" As not one of the

**world's greatest experts in Hebrew, I don't really like to argue!!**

**If we look back to Herod and his many, many assassinations (more than half of the Sanhedrin, the last remnants of the Hasmonean dynasty of Jewish high-priestly kings, his Hasmonean wife, Mariamne, her mother, Alexandra, and his sons, Aristobolus, Alexander and Antipater, and as he lay dying, all the notable men of Jerusalem brought into the hippodrome to be killed when Herod himself {at long last!!} died), and add to them the murder of the baby boys in Bethlehem, we can see a glaring difference between man's way and that of the Prince of Peace, who came to die in our place. As Michael Green points out, "all this is an awesome reminder of how deeply opposition to Jesus can be rooted in the hearts of people who are not prepared to allow his gentle rule to control them. If we are determined to get our own way at all costs, we will go to any lengths to eliminate all trace of Jesus and his claims on our life"<sup>4</sup>**

**As we consider this, let us first kneel with the Magi in worship, then continue kneeling in prayer for those outside Christ (who resist his claim on their lives), and then go out excitedly like the shepherds with the Gospel news of the real life- transforming meaning of Christmas!**

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Green, The Message of Matthew, p72