

The Gospel According to Matthew

Part One

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Matthew 1–2

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

God of all righteousness, send your Spirit into my mind and heart so I may understand your word and live its truth. Inspire my life with the words of this Gospel.

Read the Introduction on pages 12–14 and the Bible text of Matthew 1–2 found in the outside columns of pages 15–21, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 23–24, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 25 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In many ways the Gospel of Matthew holds primacy of place for Christians. It is the first book in the New Testament, and in patristic times it was thought to have been the first Gospel written. It was the Gospel most used in worship in the early church. And it has been the one most commented upon and preached, beginning with the first known commentary on the Gospel of Matthew by Origen (ca. A.D. 185–254).

Some of the best-loved passages in Scripture, as well as some of the most difficult sayings and teachings of Jesus, are found in this Gospel. This Gospel is distinctive for its emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus, as authoritative teacher, whose life and ministry fulfill the Scriptures. Wisdom motifs also mark Matthew's presentation of Jesus. The assurance that Jesus is Emmanuel, "God-with-us," frames the whole Gospel (1:23; 28:20).

Author

Traditionally, the author of the first Gospel has been identified as Matthew, the tax collector who was called by Jesus (9:9) and sent out as an apostle (10:3). But, like many ancient authors, the evangelist nowhere identifies himself. The apostle Matthew may have been responsible for an earlier stage of the Gospel tradition, or he may have been a missionary to the area where this Gospel was composed. But most scholars agree that he was not the author of the Gospel. The composer copied extensively from the Gospel of Mark; an eyewitness would have told the story in his own words. It is also doubtful that a tax collector would have the kind of religious and literary education needed to produce this Gospel. Finally, the theological concerns in this Gospel are those of second-generation Christians. For the sake of brevity, however, we continue to refer to the author as "Matthew."

The evangelist was likely a Jewish Christian, writing for a community that was predominantly Jewish Christian. The author had

extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and a keen concern for Jewish observance and the role of the Law.

Date

Allusions to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (21:41-42; 22:7; 24:1-2) indicate that Matthew wrote after A.D. 70. A date of approximately A.D. 85 would allow time for circulation of the Gospel of Mark, one of Matthew's sources, which was composed close to A.D. 70.

Setting

We do not know the precise locale of the Matthean community, but a prosperous urban setting is likely from the twenty-six times that Matthew uses the word *polis*, "city" (cf. Mark, four times; Luke, sixteen times) and the twenty-eight times he mentions gold and silver (cf. Mark, one time; Luke, four times). Matthean Christians, like those of other locales, were women and men of diverse social and civic status, ethnic identities, and levels of wealth. They comprised only a small percentage of the total population. It was a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, striving to work out their identity as the New Israel.

The oldest tradition, and still the most frequently suggested locale for the Matthean community, is Antioch of Syria. As the third largest city of the empire, it had a sizable Jewish population. It was an important center of emerging Christianity (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3), where Jewish and Gentile Christians struggled to work out their new relationship in Christ (Gal 2:11-13). Other possible settings include Caesarea Maritima, Sepphoris, Alexandria, Edessa, Tyre, and Sidon.

Jews and Christians

The relationship of the Matthean community to their Jewish counterparts is not entirely clear. Pointing to a rupture between the two groups are references to "their synagogues"

(4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54), “your synagogues” (23:34), “their scribes” (7:29), “the Jews to the present [day]” (28:15), Jewish persecution of Jesus’ followers (10:17; 23:34), and bitter denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees (ch. 23). There are stories of exemplary faith of those who are not Jews: the magi (2:1-12); a Roman centurion (8:5-13); a Canaanite woman (15:21-28); a Roman soldier (27:54). That Jesus’ message is for Gentiles is seen clearly in the final commission (28:19) and more subtly in the inclusion of Ruth and Rahab in Jesus’ genealogy (1:5); the coming of the magi to worship Jesus (2:11); the saying “in his name the Gentiles will hope” (12:21); the faith of a Canaanite woman (15:21-28); and in the parables of the tenants (21:33-43) and the marriage feast (22:1-10).

Yet, at the same time, Matthew stresses a specific outreach to Israel. Only in Matthew does Jesus tell his disciples to confine their mission to the towns of Israel (10:5-6, 23; 15:24). And Matthew’s Gospel, overall, is strongly Jewish in tone, emphasizing the abiding validity of the Law and fulfillment of the Scriptures.

This Gospel is designed to offer Matthew’s Jewish Christians an account of Jesus’ life and mission that enables them to relate to the two loyalties that pull them. On the one hand, they are Jews who are trying to define themselves in relation to other Jews who have not accepted Jesus. The latter see them as disloyal to the Mosaic covenant, engaged in dangerous partnership with pagans. On the other hand, they are Christians trying to relate to a community in which the majority is now Gentile, for whom the continued adherence of Jewish Christians to Jewish Law and customs would prove problematic. Matthew’s Gospel tries to defend and define Jewish Christianity, on the one hand, and unity with Gentile Christians, on the other. It validates the community’s continuity with the past promises to Israel, while at the same time justifies their new allegiance to the person of Christ and his mission.

A prime pastoral concern is the impact that Christian use of the Gospel of Matthew has had on Jewish-Christian relations. Statements in

the Gospel that reflect the historical tensions of an emerging Jewish Christian community struggling to define itself in relation to other Jews need to be clearly explained as such so that they are not used to fuel anti-Judaism in contemporary contexts.

Composition

Most modern scholars think that Matthew relied on the Markan tradition as one of his prime sources. Matthew has retained some 600 of Mark’s 660 verses, often streamlining the story and converting narration into dialogue. He follows Mark more closely from chapter 13 onward than in the first twelve chapters. Matthew adds infancy narratives and resurrection appearance stories, and recasts Jesus’ teaching into five large blocks of discourse. He adapts the story to his predominantly Jewish Christian community by omitting explanations of Jewish customs (e.g., Matt 15:2; cf. Mark 7:3-4). Matthew also emphasizes more explicitly Jesus’ fulfillment of the Scriptures, often citing specific texts from the Old Testament, particularly from the prophet Isaiah (e.g., 3:3; 4:14; 8:17). He gives more attention to the question of the Law and its observance (5:17-48).

Matthew, as well as Luke, also used a source called “Q” (for *Quelle*, German for “source”) for some two hundred sayings of Jesus. Although no copy of this collection of sayings has yet been found, its existence can be supposed, due to the similarity in the wording and order of these sayings in the two Gospels. Finally, Matthew also relied on oral and written traditions, designated “M,” that are unique to his Gospel.

Scholars take different approaches to defining the structure of Matthew’s Gospel. For detailed information about these approaches, see the addendum to this volume (page 98): “The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel.”

Purpose

This Gospel, with its emphasis on Jesus as authoritative Teacher and its stress on the ethical

Lesson One

implications of discipleship, is a powerful catechetical tool. The evangelist may have composed it with the idea of providing a handbook for church leaders to assist them in preaching, teaching, and leading worship. This text is a particularly useful guide for helping believers discern what to keep from tradition and what to let go in changing circumstances. Its strategies for peacemaking, reconciliation, and formation of community make this Gospel a potent pastoral aid. In every age it continues to bring new vision and hope to Christians in mission,

inviting them into ever deeper relationship with Jesus, who remains always with them (1:23; 28:20).

The commentary in this book is primarily based on the Greek text rather than the New American Bible, Revised Edition translation. Accordingly, the translation of words or phrases in the commentary sometimes differs from the translation provided in the outside columns of this book. It is hoped that these complementary translations will enhance understanding of the Gospel.

THE ORIGINS OF JESUS

Matthew 1:1–4:11

The opening chapters set the stage for the whole Gospel. Matthew, like Luke, begins with two introductory chapters of infancy narratives. The differences between the two accounts indicate that they did not share the same sources for this portion of the story. Matthew tells the story of Jesus' origins, the unusual circumstances surrounding his birth, and the threat to Jesus' life by Herod from the perspective of Joseph. Luke, in contrast, makes Mary central. Beginning with the infancy narratives, Matthew calls attention to the fulfillment of Scripture through Jesus' life and ministry. In the opening two chapters he highlights Jesus' Davidic descent and presents Jesus as recapitulating in his own life important events in the history of Israel. Matthew then situates Jesus in relation to John the Baptist, followed by his account of Jesus' testing in the desert in preparation for his public ministry.

1:1 Book of origins

The title verse introduces motifs that run throughout the whole of the Gospel. The opening phrase, "book of the genealogy (*biblos geneseōs*)," can also be translated "account of the birth" or "book of origin." This same phrase begins the account of creation in Genesis 2:4 (LXX) and the list of descendants of Adam in Genesis 5:1. Matthew narrates a new creative act of God. Three important titles follow. Jesus is *christos*, "messiah," the "anointed" of God. This term designates one who is set apart by God for particular service, such as kings (Pss 2:2; 89:20); priests (Lev 4:3, 5); prophets (1 Kgs 19:16). Some Jewish writings spoke of a coming messiah who would carry out God's purposes in a new way. Expectations surrounding this figure were by no means uniform. "Son of David," one of Matthew's favorite designations of Jesus (1:1, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42-45), underscores Jesus' royal status and also recalls God's choice of unlikely persons for important roles in salvation history. "Son of Abraham" relates Jesus to the prime

I: The Infancy Narrative

CHAPTER 1

The Genealogy of Jesus

¹The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. ³Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, ⁶Jesse the father of David the king.

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figure in Israel's history, the one whose struggle to be obedient to God brought blessing for all the peoples on earth.

1:2-17 The genealogy of Jesus (cf. Luke 3:23-38)

The genealogy functions not as a historical record but as a way to situate Jesus in relation to the memorable characters in Israel's history. It tells who he is by recounting who his people are. Drawing on 1 Chronicles 1:28-42; 3:5-24; Ruth 4:12-22, Matthew outlines Jesus' ancestors in three schematized sections of fourteen generations each (v. 17). The progression is from Israel's origin in Abraham to its glorious days under David (vv. 2-6a), then to the disastrous time of the Babylonian exile (vv. 6b-11), and finally to the hope-filled future with the birth of the Messiah (vv. 12-16). The number fourteen is symbolic. Some think that it represents the numerical value of the name David ($d + v + d = 4 + 6 + 4 = 14$), but more likely it signifies fullness or completion, being double

David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. ⁷Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph. ⁸Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah. ⁹Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. ¹⁰Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah. ¹¹Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.

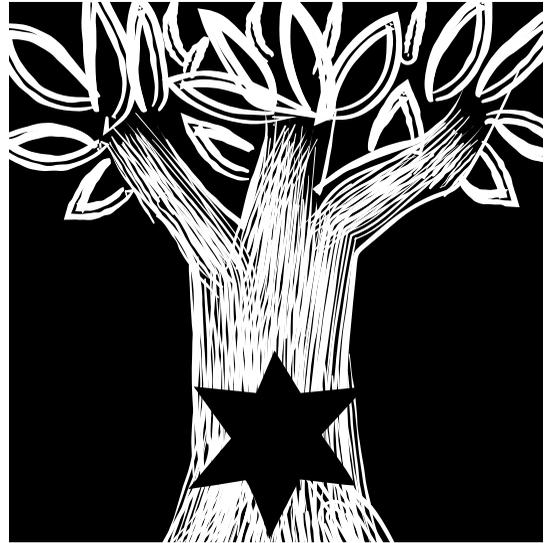
¹²After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

continue

the number seven, which symbolizes perfection in the Bible. A problem is that the last section has only thirteen generations. Matthew simply may have miscounted, or a name may have dropped out in the transmission.

The linear progression of thirty-nine male ancestors is broken at four points by the names of women. They are not the ones who would immediately come to mind as great figures from Israel's past. Each has an unusual twist to her story. Tamar (v. 3), after being widowed, took decisive action to coerce her father-in-law, Judah, to provide an heir for her (Gen 38). She



conceived Perez and Zerah, who continued the Davidic line. Tamar is the only woman in the Hebrew Scriptures who is called righteous (Gen 38:26), a term that is of central importance to Matthew. Rahab (v. 5), a prostitute in Jericho (Josh 2), risked disobeying the orders of the king of Jericho and sheltered spies sent from Joshua to reconnoiter the land. She subsequently gave birth to Boaz, the great-grandfather of David. Ruth (v. 5), a Moabite woman, returned with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Bethlehem, rather than stay with her own people after her husband Mahlon died. In Bethlehem, Ruth presented herself to Boaz at the threshing floor and conceived Obed, who carried forth the Davidic line. Finally, the wife of Uriah (v. 6) is the one who bore David's son Solomon after David arranged to have Uriah killed in battle (2 Sam 11).

Each story speaks of how women took bold actions outside the bounds of regular patriarchal marriage to enable God's purposes to be brought to fruition in unexpected ways. Not only were the circumstances unusual, but some of these women were also outsiders to Israel. Remembering their stories prepares for the extraordinary circumstances of Jesus' birth and the salvation he will ultimately extend to those outside Israel (28:19). The women's presence in the midst of the male ancestors of Jesus also signals the integral role that women disciples

play in the community of Jesus' followers. They remind the reader that women are not marginal to the history of Israel or of Christianity.

1:18-25 The birth of Jesus

Both the genealogy and the account of the birth of Jesus stress the theme of continuity and discontinuity. The same faithful God of Israel continues to act with saving grace toward the New People of God in surprising ways. Verses 18-25 explain how Jesus is son of God through the holy Spirit and "son of David" through legal adoption by Joseph.

Marriage in first-century Palestine, usually arranged by the elders of the two families, took place in two steps. There was a formal betrothal before witnesses that was legally binding. The bride remained in her father's home for another year or so until the ceremony of her transfer to the home of her husband. Jesus' conception occurs between these two stages. The agency of the holy Spirit (v. 18) is not sexual; rather, the Spirit is God's life-giving power evident in creation (Gen 1:2; Ps 104:30) and in prophetic speech (22:43). It is the divine power at work in Jesus (3:16; 12:18, 28) and his disciples (10:20).

Joseph is faced with an impossible dilemma (v. 19). He is a righteous (*dikaïos*) man, that is, one who is faithful to the demands of the Law. The Law prescribed death for adulterers (Deut 22:23-27). But Joseph is unwilling to publicly denounce his betrothed. A secret divorce is not possible; two witnesses are needed, and Mary's pregnancy would be known by all her relatives and townspeople. Joseph decides on a middle course: he will divorce her quietly (Deut 24:1), without stating the reasons. He will not initiate a public trial (Num 5:11-31). This solution, however, does not prevent Mary from being exposed to public shame. The only way to prevent this would be for Joseph to complete his marriage to her and adopt the child as his own. This is what the angel instructs him to do in a dream (v. 20).

This is the first of four instances in the infancy narratives in which an angel communicates with Joseph through a dream (see also

The Birth of Jesus

¹⁸Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. ²⁰Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. ²¹She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

²³"Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means "God is with us." ²⁴When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. ²⁵He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

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2:13, 19, 22). This is a common means of divine revelation in biblical tradition (see Gen 16:7-14; 37:5-11), especially to announce the birth of important figures in Israel's salvation (Ishmael, Gen 16:7-12; Isaac, Gen 17:1-19; Samson, Judg 13:3-22). There are usually five elements in annunciations: (1) the angel appears; (2) the person is afraid; (3) the angel gives reassurance, announces the birth, tells the child's name and its meaning, and foretells his great deeds; (4) the person objects; (5) the angel gives a sign. The angel assures Joseph (v. 20) that this child is of God, and not from any act of unfaithfulness. God asks Joseph and Mary to complete their commitment to each other in difficult circumstances. But they also have the promise that God

CHAPTER 2

The Visit of the Magi

¹When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, ²saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

⁶And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of
Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go

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to King Ahaz refers to the birth of a royal son in the near future who will be a sign of hope to Judah. The Hebrew word *‘almâ*, “young woman,” refers to the mother’s age, not her sexual status (*betulah* is the Hebrew word for “virgin”). The Septuagint, the Greek translation, however, renders this *parthenos*, “virgin.” Isaiah is predicting a birth that will come about in a normal way, but Matthew applies it to the virginal conception of Jesus. The promise of Emmanuel, “God is with us” frames the whole Gospel (1:23; cf. 28:20).

Joseph follows the angel’s commands and completes the marriage ceremony with Mary (v. 24) and names her son Jesus (v. 25). Again Matthew underscores Mary’s virginity at the time of Jesus’ conception and birth. Verse 25 is ambiguous; it neither affirms nor denies Mary’s perpetual virginity.



In contrast to Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus that features Joseph, Luke 1:26–2:14 has an extensive portrait of **Mary** the mother of Jesus, including the annunciation by Gabriel, the Canticle of Mary, and the visitation to Elizabeth.

will be with them throughout (v. 23). The angel pronounces and interprets the name of the child, Jesus (v. 21). This derivative of the name Joshua (in Hebrew, *Yeshua* or *Yeshu*) was common in the first century. It means “God helps” but came to be associated with the verb *yšc*, which means “God saves.” Jesus’ saving mission of forgiveness is enacted in healing stories (9:2-8) and is confirmed in his words to his disciples at his final supper with them (26:28).

The first of Matthew’s quotations of the Hebrew Scriptures (vv. 22-23) is from Isaiah 7:14. As in 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9, the citation begins with the formula “this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet” (see also the Old Testament citations without this exact formula in 2:5; 3:3; 12:17; 13:14). In Isaiah 7:14 the oracle

In this opening chapter Jesus’ identity is established in relation to God, to the royal line of David, and to notable figures of Israel’s past. He embodies the faithfulness and startling creativity of God, the kingliness of David, and the bold and socially questionable righteousness of the women in his ancestry and of his legal father, Joseph. In the next chapter the focus is on positive and negative responses to Jesus. Place names figure prominently, linking Jesus with significant events of Israel’s history.

2:1-12 Herod and the magi

Matthew does not relate details about Jesus’ birth (cf. Luke 2:1-7). What is of interest is the place and the initial reactions to him. Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, the place where David was anointed king (1 Sam 16:1-13), highlights his royal Davidic identity. The reigning king is

Herod the Great, who was appointed by the Roman senate to rule Judea in 40 B.C. A power struggle will ensue between Jesus and the Herodian kings over who bears the title “king of the Jews” (v. 2; see 27:11, 29, 37, 42).

The first visitors to the newborn Jesus are exotic characters from the East. The term “magi” originally referred to a caste of Persian priests, who served their king. They were not kings or wise men, but were adept at interpreting dreams. Here they appear to be astrologers who can interpret the movement of the stars. Magi were often associated with sorcery and magic, and were not always held in high regard (e.g., the magicians of Pharaoh, Exod 7–8). Matthew, however, portrays them very favorably. These Gentiles who respond positively to Jesus stand in stark contrast to Herod, the chief priests, and scribes (v. 4), foreshadowing the inclusion of non-Jews in the Jesus movement and the rejection of Jesus by many Jews.

There is much speculation whether the episodes in Matthew 2 have a historical basis or whether they are creations of Matthew to serve his theological purposes. With regard to the star, some think it was Halley’s comet, which appeared in 12–11 B.C., others the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn in 7–6 B.C. Alternatively, Matthew may have created it in conformity with the belief in antiquity that royal births are marked by astrological phenomena. Or Matthew may have intended an allusion to the story of Balaam, a sorcerer from the East, who predicted that a star would come out of Jacob (Num 24:17).

The Scripture quotation in verse 6 is a conflation of Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2. Matthew customarily adapts the biblical citations to fit his context and purposes. As Jesus’ birthplace, Bethlehem is no longer “too small to be among the clans of Judah” (Mic 5:1), but now is “by no means least among the rulers of Judah” (Matt 2:6). And just as God called David from Bethlehem to shepherd Israel (2 Sam 5:2), so Jesus is shepherd to God’s people (9:36; 26:31).

The response of the magi to Jesus matches that of disciples. The magi are overjoyed at the sign of Jesus’ birth (2:10), just as disciples’ ini-

and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.”⁹ After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ They were overjoyed at seeing the star,¹¹ and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

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tial acceptance of Jesus is marked by joy (13:20, 44) and is promised as an end-time reward (25:21, 23). The magi bow down in homage to Jesus (v. 11; cf. Herod’s insincere desire to do so in v. 8), as do the disciples after the storm (14:33), the Canaanite woman pleading for her daughter (15:25), and the women disciples (28:9) and the Eleven (28:17) when they meet the risen Christ. The magi give to Jesus the most precious gifts they have (v. 11), just as disciples offer him their very selves (4:22; 8:15; 10:37-39). Finally, the magi, like Joseph, are obedient to divine commands conveyed in dreams (v. 12), just as disciples are to obey the covenant and Jesus’ word (5:19).

The text does not say how many magi there were or exactly from where they came. The traditional number of three magi is derived from the three gifts that they bear (2:11). It is possible that Matthew has in mind Psalm 72:10, which speaks of the kings of Arabia and Sheba bringing gifts to the newly anointed king. Or he may have intended an allusion to Isaiah 60:6: “All from Sheba shall come / bearing gold and frankincense, / and heralding the praises of the LORD.” In any case, Matthew sets the stage for all who will come from east and west to dine in the realm of God (8:11; 22:1-14).

The Flight to Egypt

¹³When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.”
¹⁴Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. ¹⁵He stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

The Massacre of the Infants

¹⁶When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the magi, he became furious. He ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the magi. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet:

¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah,
sobbing and loud lamentation;
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she would not be consoled,
since they were no more.”

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2:13-15 The flight into Egypt

Each of the Gospels tells of those who not only reject Jesus but who actively seek to destroy him from the beginning of his ministry. Matthew begins this theme even earlier. From Jesus’ very infancy Herod tries to kill him. As an intended victim of violence, the Matthean Jesus teaches his disciples how not to respond in kind to violence, to love their enemies, and to pray for their persecutors (5:38-48). There are circumstances, however, when flight is the necessary course of action (2:13-15).

Joseph takes center stage once again as he obediently fulfills the divine command conveyed in a dream (as also in 1:20-24; 2:19-20, 22). He takes Jesus and his mother to Egypt, a

traditional place of refuge for Israelites (Gen 42-48; 1 Kgs 11:40; 2 Kgs 25:26; Jer 26:21; 41:16-18; 43:1-7).



Dreams feature in both Old Testament and New Testament stories as vehicles for revealing God’s will to human beings. In Genesis, Jacob’s dream expresses contact with God (Gen 28:12). Also, another Joseph is honored for his “dreams,” though they make his brothers jealous; his ability to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams properly saves him (Gen 37-41). In Matthew, God uses dreams to direct Joseph to accept Mary as his wife and Jesus as his son. The magi also receive dreams to avoid contact with the evil King Herod. Even Pilate’s wife receives a dream that testifies to Jesus’ innocence (Matt 27:19). Dreams, then, are a means of divine communication that can have serious consequences in human affairs.

The quotation from Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (2:15), seems odd, for the holy family is just going into Egypt. What Matthew presumes is that they will, indeed, leave Egypt, and by doing so Scripture is fulfilled in one more way. The text alludes to the Exodus and identifies Jesus with the paradigmatic saving event for Israel. Here begins Matthew’s portrait of Jesus as a Moses-like figure, the authoritative Teacher of the Law.

2:16-18 The slaughter of the children

There is no verification of this event in historical records, but sources do attest to the cruelty of Herod. Josephus (*Ant.* 15; see also *T. Moses* 6:2-7) tells of how Herod, in his paranoia about his power, killed members of his own family. He also ordered the murder of one son from each of the leading families of Judea to ensure that there would be mourning at his funeral. The episode of the slaughter provides another parallel between Jesus and Moses, recalling Pharaoh’s murder of the male Hebrew

children (Exod 1:15-22). Just as God protected Moses through the actions of Moses' mother and sister and Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:1-10), so divine protection surrounds Jesus through the obedient actions of Joseph.

Once again, a citation from the Old Testament underscores the fulfillment of Scripture (2:17-18). Matthew adapts the quotation from Jeremiah 31:15 to fit his context and purpose. Rachel, who died en route from Bethel to Ephrath (which is identified with Bethlehem, Gen 35:16-21), is weeping for all the descendants of Israel who were marched off into exile. Ramah, about five miles north of Jerusalem, was on the route of the exile. Whereas Matthew uses this text to express the bitter lamentation of Israel over its slaughtered children, in Jeremiah it is part of an oracle that promises an end to the suffering and the return of the exiled Israelites (Jer 31:16).

2:19-23 A home in Nazareth

Just as Moses received a divine command to return home after the rulers who sought his life had died (Exod 4:19), so Joseph follows the angel's directive to go home to Israel with his family. Although Herod the Great is dead, his son Archelaus still poses a menace. Archelaus was the eldest of Herod's three sons among whom the kingdom was divided. He ruled Judea, Samaria, and Idumea for ten years (4 B.C.–A.D. 6), while Philip governed the area north and east of the Sea of Galilee, and Herod Antipas (14:1-12) controlled Galilee and Perea. Archelaus followed in his father's footsteps when it came to cruelty, but he did not have his father's administrative ability.

Joseph, once again directed by a dream, takes his family to Galilee (2:22), which enjoyed greater peace than Judea. They settle in Nazareth, some four miles from the city of Sepphoris, which Herod Antipas was building as his capital. It is possible that the availability of work for Joseph, an artisan (13:55), was also a motivating factor for their choice of Nazareth as their new home. Matthew, however, sees this as one more way in which Scripture is fulfilled. There is actually no text in the Scriptures that

The Return from Egypt

¹⁹When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." ²¹He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. ²³He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazorean."



Nazareth in relation to Jerusalem.

says "He shall be called a Nazorean" (v. 23). Most likely Matthew sees a wordplay with *nēšer*, "shoot" or "branch," and intends an allusion to Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse." This reference to a Davidic royal heir once again highlights Jesus' identity as king in the line of David (see Rom 15:12;

Lesson One

1 Pet 4:14; Rev 5:5, which also interpret Isaiah 11:1 in relation to Jesus as Messiah). Another possibility is that the wordplay is with *nāzîr*, meaning “one dedicated to God.” Nazirites, like Samson (Judg 13:5-7), took a vow, did not cut their hair, and did not drink wine (Num

6:1-21) as a sign that they were set apart for God. Matthew may have in mind an allusion to Isaiah 4:3, “he . . . will be called holy.” In any event, this final verse of the infancy narratives rounds out the portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of all God’s promises to Israel.

EXPLORING LESSON ONE

1. According to the Introduction, how did the Matthean community struggle with its identity? How is this situation reflected in the text of the Gospel? (See examples such as 4:23; 9:35; 10:5-6; 10:17; 15:21-28; 23:34.)

2. What did you find most interesting in your study of Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17) and why?

3. What was the “impossible dilemma” that Joseph faced when Mary was found to be with child during their betrothal period (Matt 1:18; Deut 22:23-27)? How did he choose to respond (before and after his dream)?

4. Why was Bethlehem a significant city for Jesus’ birth (Matt 2:1-6; Mic 5:1; 2 Sam 5:2; see also 1 Sam 16:1)? Why would this have been important to Matthew’s community?

5. Who are the magi, and what is their significance as Jesus’ first visitors in Matthew’s infancy narratives (2:1-12)?

Lesson One

6. In all of the Gospels, those who oppose Jesus wish to destroy him from the beginning of his ministry (e.g., Mark 3:6; John 7:1). What is different about this violent intent in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 2:13)?

7. Why do Joseph, Mary, and Jesus settle in Nazareth, according to Matthew?

8. What are several ways that Matthew presents Jesus as a "New Moses" in Matthew 1-2?

9. Reading Matthew's infancy narratives in isolation helps us identify the origin of many of our "manger scene" traditions. Think about your manger scene at home, or the one your family had when you were a child. Which "characters" or features do you read about in Matthew's account? Which "characters" or features are not found in Matthew's account? (Some that are not found in Matthew 1-2 are found in Luke 1-2.)

CLOSING PRAYER

Prayer

*"Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw his star at its rising and have come
to do him homage."*

(Matt 2:2)

Lord Jesus, the story of your birth into our world inspires us to search for you who are Emmanuel, *God-with-us*. Guide our steps as we follow your star so we may find and worship you. Guide our hearts so that our worship will lead us to serve others in the ways you ask. Open the hearts of all those in need of your light and presence, especially . . .