

Christmas According to Matthew

The question is where does the story of Jesus begin? The Gospels are big sermons after all. We think of them as documentaries on the life of Jesus, but they're not. The Gospels are proclamation, faith statements, "sermons". Each writer has their own perspective. Each evangelist chooses to tell some stories and not tell others. Each Gospel puts the stories of Jesus together in its own unique way - for a reason.

The writers want to give their witness to the life and death of Jesus!

(Picture - St. Matthew and a Cherubim/Muse inspiring his writing.)

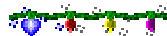


The Gospel of Mark, for example, has no Christmas story at all. Mark 1 starts out, **"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"** Translated that means, *I believe Jesus is the promised messiah. His story starts out with Old Testament prophecy and the work of John the Baptist.*

Mark starts with Jesus' adult ministry. There is no Christmas story here because for Mark Jesus' birth is not important. **"Preparing the Way"**, though - taking Jesus into your heart - that's important!!

The Gospel of John is different again. John 1 reads, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."** For John the Jesus story starts way back at creation where God was at work for us as He is today. There is only one God and continuity was important for John. The birth of Jesus was not. John did not find in Jesus' birth the "signs" of his Messiahship so evident in other parts of his life. It is enough for John that we know Jesus was born **"not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."** (John 1:13)

Only Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with a Christmas story. We say "a" because the stories are quite different. Forget everything you think you know about the birth of Jesus. Let's just allow Matthew to tell the story the way he really wants to! Ready? Let's go!



(Matthew 1:1-17) **"An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers . . ."**

A genealogy of Jesus, the **Messiah**, the **son of David**, the **son of Abraham**. Like Mark Matthew puts it right out there. **This Jesus is the Messiah, I am a believer, my story is biased.** That's okay! Not only okay but we call sharing this biased story "witnessing". We are believers - biased - our hearts have been convicted by the Holy Spirit. I can't "prove" anything to you, but I share my faith. That's what Matthew is doing.

Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham. These are Jewish designations. They are Old Testament ties that are vitally important. It may seem logical to start out a Gospel with a genealogy, but no one else does. Matthew does, though, because he has a point to make - and that point is that this Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish hopes and dreams. Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus is the true Son of David!

The genealogy itself is very interesting. It starts with Abraham, which is where the story of Jewish history starts. And the genealogy is "stylized". For one thing it turns out this "Jewish" story isn't so "Jewish" after all. Verse 3, **"and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar. . ."**. Remember that story? No?! Tamar was the foreign born wife of Judah's eldest son. When her husband died without leaving her children Judah, her father-in-law, failed to honor her rights and give her as wife to another son. She had to disguise herself as a prostitute whom her father-in-law, Judah, just happened to visit (ahem!). In this way she got a child to carry on the family name. It's a pretty embarrassing story if you're one of Judah's offspring, don't you think?! (*Tamar's story is in Genesis 38.*)

And what about verse 5? **"And Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth . . ."** Both Rahab and Ruth were foreign wives, both remembered for their faithfulness to God. One might even say these foreign women displayed more faith than their Jewish contemporaries.! It's as if Matthew wants to remind his Jewish brothers and sisters that they (we) don't have too much to brag about!

And surely you remember King David's little Peeping Tom/seduction/rape episode?! **"And Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,"** (Mt 1:6) The father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah?! Nicely put, Matthew!! There seem to be a few skeletons in the closet of Jesus' family line. Not to worry, though. Everything can out with Jesus.

Matthew's genealogy is unique by it's inclusion of these women. Faithfulness is obviously not a uniquely Jewish attribute, nor a uniquely male attribute for that matter. We are not perfect, but God's plan is. So Matthew concludes, (Mat 1:17) **"So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations."** How perfect! If prophecy doesn't convince you, suggests Matthew, how about mathematics? As we will see any clue will do. Here we see Jesus proclaimed through the perfection of his genealogy. The wise men will find Jesus in the stars. But you know what? The Chosen People themselves had the Holy Scriptures and they totally missed it. In fact they killed their own messiah. This is part of Matthew's "sermon" and his Christmas story foreshadows this very point.

So much for preliminaries. Now, on with the show!

(Mt 1:18-21) ***"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."***"

Were we just talking about the "oops!" of Father Judah and King David? Not the proudest of family stories! But here is a good guy - Joseph. His wife is pregnant and it's not his child. Still, he still chooses to live in love. First we read that Joseph is unwilling to put Mary up to public shame and ridicule, despite her apparent faithlessness to him. Then, after a dream, he is willing to go the extra mile for God. *"Who wouldn't,"* you say, *"after a dream from God?"* Well, lots of people ignore the clear leading of God in their lives. Maybe you've even been guilty of that now and again. Joseph is just an ordinary guy, but he 'gets it', he understands and believes - and so God's work is done through him. Obviously what God needs is more ordinary guys like Joseph. Could you be one of them?!

Matthew also points out that Mary's pregnancy is the result of divine intervention. ***"The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."*** Truth be told the Christmas story in Matthew and the Christmas story in Luke have almost no details in common - but the virgin birth is one they do indeed share. Jesus is *'conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.'* as we confess in the Apostle's Creed.

(Mt 1:22-25) ***"All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."***

(Picture shows Mary, Jesus & a young John the Baptist)



Watch for the fulfillment of prophecy in Matthew's Christmas story. He points it out again and again. (Luke never does.) Exactly how or why this prophecy applies to Jesus is another question. (Check it out for yourself in Isaiah 7:1-16, the virgin sign is clearly a word to King Ahaz about a political matter of concern to his day), but we won't go there right now. Suffice it to say that Matthew wants us to see that the Jesus story is firmly rooted in the Scriptures!

The story now continues in chapter 2: (Mt 2:1-2) ***"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.""***

Notice what is not here. There is no Emperor Augustus, to taxation, no "no room in the inn". This is all from Luke's story. One would assume reading Matthew alone that Bethlehem was where Joseph and Mary lived normally. The focus of the Christmas story in Matthew is around the visit of unknown "wise men" from the East - not shepherds and stables. These wise men have seen a newborn king's star "at it's rising" and have come to honor him. Of course they have come to the capital city, Jerusalem. Where else would a baby king be?!



While we are used to thinking of a beacon like single star leading the wise men to Jesus that is certainly not the intent here. The wise men (magi, or astrologers) have seen a star "rising" in the House of Israel. It's a horoscope type of thing. Of course neither Christians or Jews believe in such signs, but this only increases the irony. Here are foreigners who have come to Jesus through astrology - all the time while the Jewish leadership has no clue (except for the prophets, of course, which they are apparently not reading!)

Add the arrival of the wise men to the presence of foreign women in the genealogy. Strange who "gets it" and who doesn't!

(Two pictures of the wise men)

Do you know the Christmas carol *We Three Kings of Orient Are*? The song honors these foreigners. However, nothing says there were three of them and they certainly weren't kings. Why has tradition distorted the facts? It's only a guess, but much of Scriptural prophecy speaks of the nations streaming to God in obedience and love. The wise men become "kings" in tradition to represent this hope. Traditional crèche scenes will almost always have one of these figures as a Black man as well. The point is the same. Jesus is for all!



(Mt 2:3-6) ***"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"***

Over against the honor and joy of the wise men we find Herod - and all of Capitol Hill with him - shaking in their boots at the prospect of a political rival being born. Now they consult the Scriptures only to find that the Messiah won't be born in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. You think they would have known that!

(Mat 2:7-9) ***"Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was."***

What a slime ball - Herod that is! Notice the marks of political maneuvering and spin doctoring: "secretly" calling the wise men to him; the "exact" time; sending others to do his dirty work; lying ("so that I may also go and pay him homage"). Right! It is interesting to note how hard both Matthew and Luke come down on government systems. Make of that what you will. Luke's critique seems to be leveled at Rome. Matthew's issue is with Herod, the Jewish head of state. The target of distain is different, but their theory is the same. You just can't trust these guys.

Nonetheless the wise men set out and the constellation they had seen is now right ahead of them. God's hand is clearly in this!

(Mat 2:10-12) ***"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."***

Joy! Gifts! This is as it should be. The wise men kneel before the child and opening their treasure chests bring out gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh - precious metals and costly ointments. (The tradition of *three* wise men probably comes from the offering of *three* gifts.) Notice, though, the reference to a "house" that they enter rather than a stable. When we try to merge the Christmas stories from Matthew and Luke we say that by the time the wise men arrived Mary and Joseph had found better accommodations. You can do that if consistency is important to you, but it seems more likely that we're just dealing with different traditions. The confusion is intensified by our nativity crèche scenes where the wise men are right there in the stable. Long ago, though, the wise men would not have been put into the crèche until January 6, *after* the 12 days of Christmas. The ancient Church recognized at least this much separation between the two traditions.



The wise men's story ends as they are warned of Herod's shenanigans in a dream and return home by another route. Now things get ugly.

(Mt 2:13-15) ***"Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."***

(Two pictures of the Flight to Egypt)

A third prophecy given and now fulfilled in Jesus. ***"Out of Egypt I have called my son."*** But why is Jesus in Egypt? Once again Joseph has listened to the voice on an angel in his dreams and followed God's leading. Like the baby Moses in Egypt so the baby Jesus in Egypt hides for his life. Herod not only refuses to honor Jesus but he outright seeks to kill him. The wise men traveled long distances to honor Jesus, but his own people seek to kill him. How can this be?



(Mt 2:16-18) ***"When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet***

Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."



(The 'Slaughter of the Innocents' is not very Christmas like, but it is a vital part of Matthew's Christmas story. The gruesome nature of this old painting honors a reality we rather ignore.)

We often say that Herod killed all the baby boys two years and under according to the timeline he learned from the wise men. This would make sense, but it is not clear that Matthew is limiting Herod's killing spree to males only. The Greek word for "children" that Matthew uses is not

specific. (So we read **"sent and killed all the children ..."**) Herod is *infuriated* and in a fit anger sets out to kill all babies, boys *and* girls. This is a man out of control and he reminds us of the slaughter in Ramah where Rachel (mother of Israel) weeps for her children - both boys and girls. Ramah, Auswitz, it is all the same. Some pains are so deep they will never heal and for Matthew, a Christian Jew, this seems to be one of them. There is no wound like that inflicted by those who should love and protect you. Jesus knows this truth all too well!

(Mt 2:19-23) **"When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."**



And here we have a fifth prophecy fulfilled. **"He will be called a Nazorean."** We all know Jesus grew up in Nazareth of Galilee, *not* in Bethlehem of Judea as the prophets foretold. This fact is dealt with by both Matthew and Luke in their Gospel accounts, only in different ways. Matthew seems to suggest Jesus was born in Bethlehem (in a house, where he belonged) but was taken away by unfortunate circumstances. Luke seems to assume that Galilee was home, but the taxation of Rome forced Mary and Joseph to relocate temporarily during the time of his birth. It is an interesting difference.

So there we have it, the Christmas story according to Matthew. Of the two Christmas stories in the Bible it is the less familiar. Generally we just borrow the wise men for our nativity set or children's program and call it good. That's not fair to Matthew, though.

His story has a powerful message to offer and it sets the stage for *his* telling of the Jesus story. Matthew's Gospel is primarily a story of the rejection of Jesus by his own people. All this is foreshadowed in his Christmas story. That's why he tells it as he does. The foreign women in the genealogy, the wise men, the anger and fear of Herod, the continual persecution and killing of the faithful throughout history. Each piece is part of the puzzle.

So who are you? Are you one of the faithless chosen or are you among the faithful strangers? Rahab, Ruth, the wise men. They didn't know the prophecies but they knew God's love - and they responded in kind. Welcome to the family, stranger. This baby is for you!

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Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible