

02. Prologue Part I : The Infancy Narratives

Matthew 1



To make the Hebrew Bible accessible, those preaching in the synagogues would select texts and weave them into a story, spoken in Aramaic, that would appeal to their listeners and help them focus on the theme being developed.

This kind of storytelling was called ‘[midrash](#)’, from the Hebrew word for ‘search’. Homilists would search the Scriptures for texts that shed light on the situation upon which they wished to comment; or, alternatively, having read from the sacred text, they would search their situation to see how the text might be applied.

Matthew’s aim in the prologue is not to satisfy our curiosity by revealing biographical details about Jesus’ infancy. Rather, it is to reflect on the profound significance of the person he is about to present, and to do so by presenting him as the fulfilment of the promises and spirituality of the sacred writings of Israel.

In Chapter 1 Matthew focuses on Jesus' **person**.

He presents Jesus as

the 'Messiah' (1:1,16,17,18)

the 'son of David'(1:1,20),

the 'son of Abraham'(1:1),

'conceived from the Holy Spirit'(1:20),

to be named 'Jesus', because 'he will save his people from their sins'(1:21).

as 'Emmanuel' - the one in whom 'God is with us'(1:23).

In Chapter 2 Matthew focuses on Jesus' **mission**.

Born in the city of David, he is to be the 'king of the Jews'(2:2).

He is to enlighten the Gentile world as well (2:1).

He is to fulfil the destiny for which Israel was called out of Egypt (2:15).

The offering of myrrh (2:11) and the weeping of Rachel (2:18)
prepare us for his suffering.

Matthew writes to people whose hearts and minds were captured with the wonder of Jesus' person, whose mission is to build the kingdom of God, and who through his preaching and his life revealed God as all-embracing love.

Matthew 1:1

‘Book of the genesis of Jesus the Messiah,
the son of David, the son of Abraham.’

- **Son of David** - he will achieve the hopes of the people by establishing the kingdom of God.
- **Son of Abraham** - ‘The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’

(Genesis 12:1-3)

²Abraham was the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob, [1 Chronicles 1:34]

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. [1 Chronicles 2:1]

³Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar,

Perez the father of Hezron, [1 Chronicles 2:4-5]

Hezron the father of Aram, [1 Chronicles 2:9-15]

⁴Aram the father of Aminadab,

Aminadab the father of Nahshon,

[= Luke 3:31-34]

Nahshon the father of Salmon,

⁵Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab,

Luke goes back to Adam

Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth,

Obed the father of Jesse,

⁶Jesse the father of King David.

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{ד} \quad \text{ב} \quad \text{א} \\ 4+6+4 = 14 \end{array}$$



¹⁴From Abraham to David are fourteen generations.

⁶David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,

⁷Solomon the father of Rehoboam, [= 1 Chronicles 3:10-16]

Rehoboam the father of Abijah,

Abijah the father of Asaph,

⁸Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat,

Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, [omits Ahaziah, Amaziah]

Joram the father of Uzziah,

⁹Uzziah the father of Jotham,

Jotham the father of Ahaz,

Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,

¹⁰Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,

Manasseh the father of Amos,

Amos the father of Josiah,

¹¹Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers,

at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹⁷from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations

[Luke 3:27-31 has a completely different list. He traces the line through Nathan, not Solomon]. His source is unknown.

Matthew 1:12-14 [no known source]

¹²After the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel,
Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel,

¹³Zerubbabel the father of Abiud,
Abiud the father of Eliakim,
Eliakim the father of Azor,

¹⁴Azor the father of Zadok,
Zadok the father of Achim,
Achim the father of Eliud,

¹⁵Eliud the father of Eleazar,
Eleazar the father of Matthan,
Matthan the father of Jacob,

¹⁶Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, [Luke has Joseph and Jesus]
of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Luke (3:23-27). Source unknown. includes only

The Genealogy is given, not to establish Jesus' actual ancestry, but to make the point of faith that Jesus is the one who inherits the promises made to Abraham and David.

The four women in the genealogy prepare us for the mission to the Gentiles.

Tamar : deceived Judah, her father-in-law, to have sex with her.

Rahab : a Canaanite

Ruth : a Moabite

Bathsheba : a Hittite

They also highlight God as a God of surprises, and so prepare us for God's choice of **Mary**.

Matthew 1:18

The birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother **Mary** was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant by the **Holy Spirit**.



‘I believe in **Jesus, God’s only Son**, who was conceived by the **Holy Spirit**, born of the **virgin Mary**’ (Apostles’ Creed).

Christian faith rests on what Matthew is stating here. Let us examine what it is that Matthew is affirming.

1. When Matthew states that ‘**Mary was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit**’ he is affirming that Jesus is the ‘**Son of God**’ - a teaching that recurs in the Gospel.

2. In declaring that Jesus is the Son of God Matthew is not stating that God miraculously provided the male contribution to conception, leaving the female contribution to Mary. Matthew knew nothing of the female contribution. In saying that Jesus is God’s Son Matthew is saying that God is the sole source of everything Jesus is, has and does.

John has the Jewish leaders falsely accusing Jesus as claiming to be equal to God (John 5 and 10). Jesus' disciples reject that claim. They came to see Jesus as God's obedient Son. Everything Jesus is, everything he says and does flows from his intimate communion with God, an intimacy that is expressed in his calling God 'Abba! It is this intimate communion that we speak of as Jesus' divine nature, a divinity that we are called and graced to share. At the Offertory at Mass we pray: 'May we share in the divinity of him who shares our humanity.'

The whole of Matthew's Gospel makes the same claim, a claim first expressed here in the Prologue when God's Spirit finds perfect human expression in the conceiving of Jesus.

Paul sums up this truth when he states: 'God was in Jesus, his Messiah, reconciling the world to God' (2 Corinthians 5:19), initiating what Paul dares to call 'a new creation', a new sinless way of expressing the yearning of creation for communion with God (Romans 8:19).

Matthew's intention in the Prologue is to open the eyes of our mind and heart to see what the Spirit of God is doing in Jesus, beginning with Jesus' experience in the Jordan at his baptism and culminating in his dying and rising.

The whole of our evolving universe is a word of God who is revealing in increasingly wonderful ways who God is.

In his Gospel John tells us that this self-revelation, this word of God reached its perfect human expression in Jesus of Nazareth, in whom 'the Word was made flesh' (John 1). In John's final portrait we see Thomas overwhelmed by the Presence of God in Jesus as he exclaims: 'My Lord and my God' (John 20).

3. That Jesus was **born of the Virgin Mary** is stating also that Mary is Jesus' mother.

In stating that Mary **was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit before she and Joseph came together**, Matthew is stating, that Mary was a **virgin**. Is the text stating that God miraculously intervened, by-passing Joseph, and enabling Mary to conceive Jesus while remaining a virgin? This is how Christians have traditionally understood it. Is that what Matthew is asserting?

It is important that faith seeks understanding. This must be a humble seeking for we are dealing with matters that remain mysterious, not because they are inherently dark. Rather there is too much light for our limited minds to comprehend.

Some considerations

1. Our faith that Jesus is God's Son is not dependent on Mary being a virgin. When we speak of God as Jesus' 'Father', and when we speak of Jesus as being God's 'Son' we are speaking in metaphors. We are not speaking of Jesus' biological origin.

Again and again the New Testament speaks of Jesus as ‘the Son of God’, but Mary’s virginity is never mentioned by Mark or John, nor by Paul in any of his letters. We find no mention of it in any of the other Letters in the New Testament, or in the Apocalypse. Clearly Jesus being God’s Son is not dependent upon Mary being a virgin.

In the rest of the Prologue and throughout his Gospel, Matthew does not refer to Mary as a virgin. It is only here in this passage.

The only other place where Mary is portrayed as a virgin is in the Gospel of Luke, but, once again, it is only in the Prologue to his Gospel.

2. The Prologue may contain facts about Jesus' life before he entered his public ministry after his baptism experience, but its focus is not on biography. Matthew aims to create powerful and memorable scenes to prepare the reader for his interpretive commentary, the key theological assertions of the Gospel.

3. Matthew's readers were familiar with legends that stated that the founders of the great cities of the Greco-Roman world had a god for their father and a virgin for their mother. Romulus and Remus are celebrated as twin brothers, the sons of a vestal virgin named Rhea Silvia and the god Mars. Asclepius was the son of Apollo. His mother was Coronis. Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda was her mother. Alexander, the Ptolemies, and the Caesars were said to have been "virgin-born".

Is Matthew also speaking of Mary as a virgin to state, using language that his readers would understand, that is Jesus who is divine (the Son of God), not the heroes of their myths, or their emperors?

Virgil (70-19BC) writes that shepherds heralded Augustus's birth.
His birth was called 'good news' ('evangelion').
Augustus the new born child is proclaimed saviour (soter)
and described as lord (kyrios).
He is seen as the bringer of a new age of peace.
He is called the son of God.
He shows exceptional qualities at the age of twelve, etc.

In his *Lives of the Caesars* Suetonius (69-122AD)
says that there were prophecies, portents and prefigurements
before the birth of Augustus.
His was a miraculous conception.
It took place in the context of worship at a temple.
Upon his birth, Augustus was declared to be a King and a Ruler.

4. 'Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect' (Hebrews 2:17).

'We have a high priest who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin' (Hebrews 4:15).

Since 'the Son of God worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, acted with a human will, and loved with a human heart. He has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin' (Vatican II GS. 22 par 2).

Being 'like us in all things except sin', we would expect his conception to be like ours. In portraying Mary as a virgin, Matthew dramatically, and in a way familiar to his audience, reinforces his focus on God as Jesus' 'Father', and on Jesus' intimacy (the Spirit) with the one he called 'Abba'.

5. Matthew's scene of the virginal conception is also a beautiful way of portraying the special relationship between Mary and God. A virgin is a person who gives his or her first love to another. Mary's first love was for God, and the conception of Jesus was a fruit of that special love. Would that every conception came from such a communion. As Jesus will say: **'Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well'** (Matthew 6:33).

In repeating Matthew's portrayal of Mary as a Virgin, the Christian community (however, it has imagined this over the centuries) has kept before us the above truths.



(François Bovon Commentary on Luke in Hermeneia Series 2002, I.45).

‘Biblical marriages are sometimes spiritualised in the Hellenistic Judaism of Egypt, and the sexual vocabulary applied to the mystical union with God. In Philo it becomes clear that births like that of Isaac were regarded as virgin births; for Philo himself these are only an allegory of the ecstatic union of the soul with God.’

Matthew 1:19-21

Her husband **Joseph**, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, resolved to divorce her secretly. But just when he had determined 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 your wife to yourself. What is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and **you** are to name him **Jesus**, for he will **save his people from their sins.**'



Classical Pattern

Isaac (Genesis 18:9-15)

Samson (Judges 13:2-7)

Samuel (1 Samuel 1:9-18)

Matthew 1:22-23

Example of midrash

All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin (Hebrew 'maiden') will conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel,' (Isaiah 7:14) which means, 'God is with us.' (17:17; 18:20; 26:29; 28:20)

(Hezekiah 734BC - Ahaz should not fear Syria and Israel)

‘For this story, which so strongly follows traditional schemas, we do not need to assume that it contains information from the circle of Jesus’ family. Nor are the signs favourable for the historicity of the virgin birth (better, ‘virginal conception’], which in the NT is transmitted only by Matthew and Luke ...

It is probably part of the attempt of Jewish Christian communities to bear witness to the Jesus who was appointed by God as Son according to the Spirit (Romans 1:4) in a way that was analogous to other ancient stories in the form of an infancy narrative. The virgin birth then is a means of confessing faith and has no historical background.’ (Volume 1, page 93)

‘Matthew has added a new scope to the traditional story of the naming of Jesus. Of greatest importance to him is that Jesus is **Immanuel**. He thus calls attention from the very beginning to the reality of the life of the church “with” which Jesus always will be until the end of the world (28:20). Thus from the first Matthew breaches a purely historical dimension of his story of Jesus. Jesus is not a figure of the past; he is the one who accompanies and carries his church. Our pericope and the final pericope 28:16–20 have a reciprocal relationship. If the concern of 28:16–20 is that the risen one is none other than the earthly one and that being a Christian means to keep the commandments of the earthly Jesus, 1:18–25 makes clear that the earthly one is none other than the exalted one who is “with” his community.’

Matthew 1:24-25

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took his wife. He had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, whom he named him Jesus.

‘For Matthew the virgin birth is not the central content of his faith; it is rather a conceptual basis for expressing how Jesus is “Immanuel.” This basis is important, however, because it helps him think very concretely about this “God with us” as a real action of God in history and not simply as an abstract conviction.’

(Luz I.100)

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