

THE
REAL
GODSEND

Preaching the birth narratives
in Matthew and Luke

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Prelude

The purpose of this book is to read the narratives surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in such a way as to draw out their witness to Christ. Two convictions undergird this approach. One is the belief that first and foremost these chapters are works of theology—that is, their concern is to inform and persuade us about the God who has sent his Son into the world for our salvation. Jesus is understood in the light of this gracious God and is the Godsend, the one who comes to us freely as God’s greatest gift. A second conviction is that these passages are only to be interpreted as they are read against the background of the Hebrew scriptures, the books of the Bible that we call the Old Testament. As we read them theologically and with repeated reference to the Hebrew scriptures, which shaped and formed them, they yield up to us their rich witness and wisdom.

This book is written with thoughtful Christians in mind who want to understand these texts at a deeper level and are prepared to ask some critical questions with a view to uncovering their secrets. It is also for preachers, lay and ordained, who are looking for fresh light on the birth narratives. Whatever else they are, these chapters of the Gospels are eminently preachable. Most of what follows has figured in my own preaching. The communication of theological truth through enticing, vivid and richly textured stories has always been, so it has seemed to me, the best part of the preaching task.

In introducing the birth narratives, Edith Humphrey is pleased to comment:

Matthew 1—2 and Luke 1—2 (with the chronology in 3:23–38) are at once among the most beloved, ignored, and debated gospel passages. A treasure-house for the liturgist, they bring the theologian to the edge of

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mystery, the literary critic to the margins of genre, and the historians to the brink of a headache.

She is exactly right, and each one of her comments will be amply confirmed in the pages that follow. I hope, however, that they will stimulate our interest rather than tax our patience!

It is sad to have to record that the birth narratives now need rescuing from Christmas, a season which, as often as not, stifles rather than clarifies their meaning. In fact, contemporary Christians are entitled to feel profoundly ambivalent about Christmas. I find it hard to agree with fellow believers who, in the face of secular and consumerist pressure, want to insist upon the ‘real meaning’ of Christmas. The fact is that what we now call Christmas was previously called Yule or Saturnalia and existed for a long time as a festival of the winter solstice before ever it was pressed into service as the feast of Christ’s birth. 25 December was declared the festival of the Invincible Sun by the emperor Aurelian in AD274. With the rise of Christianity, this celebration of the pagan world was transmuted by AD336 into a Christian festival and given an enormous boost. If there is a ‘real meaning’ to Christmas in the sense of an ‘original’ meaning, it is more likely to be found in the natural desire for a burst of light and warmth and plenty when the world, at least in the northern hemisphere, is at its darkest and the prospect of cold and soggy winter months still awaits. For most people, Christmas is probably simply a secular activity, the chance for happy families to spend time together, packed around with all manner of cultural baggage, of which the Christian aspects are simply a part. The incarnation is certainly absolutely essential to the existence of Christianity. The festival of Christmas as such is purely incidental—indeed, quite dispensable as far as essential Christianity is concerned.

There is, of course, absolutely nothing wrong with Christians choosing to celebrate Christ’s coming around the time of the winter solstice, as long as they realize that this is supremely their collective choice. Indeed, as an act of contextualization it was probably a

brilliant move, co-opting a pre-existing festival into the cause of Christianity in the same way that a pagan temple might become the site of a Christian basilica, with many of the same stones and pillars being incorporated into the new building. But we need to be clear in our minds about what the biblical texts actually say and about the additions and accretions that the Christmas story has accumulated along the way. Jesus was no more likely to have been born on 25 December than on any other day. The Bible itself gives no indication on which day or season in the year his birth may have taken place, unlike the account of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, which is clearly located around the time of the Jewish Passover. Christians ought not, then, to be too distressed when others, who may not share their faith, do not treat 25 December as a particularly religious festival. Nor should they be overly surprised when the more material aspects of the season, on to which the Christian festival has been superimposed, have a way of poking through the surface.

Yet there are dangers in the Christmas we now celebrate, and they are not to be found primarily in the material aspects of the festival. Rather, they are to be located in the fact that we hear the biblical narratives only in a distorted form, reading them through the lens of 2000 years of accumulated legend. This is the problem of cultural overlay. These narratives have been overlaid with accretions to the point where most of us would struggle to retrieve the biblical text from the palimpsest of what they have been made into, as they have been written over by myths, legends and artistic imagination. The typical Christmas nativity scene depicts for us the ox and ass, in the bleak midwinter, with shepherds and three kings (all with names assigned to them) arriving in synchronized fashion to pay homage to the infant king. Carol services even in the most biblically minded churches will reflect this familiar picture, even though the actual details of the narratives upon which it is supposed to be based call its outline and details into question, as we shall see.

There is also, for most of us, the problem of sentimentality. Known by many people (albeit in the corrupted form we have described)

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since their earliest years, even by those who are not churchgoers, the Christmas story abounds with the emotional associations of childhood, children, home and family. In its own way this is, of course, delightful. But it also raises the question of whether, at a season of the year when people attend church more than any other, those people are truly able to hear the word of God through the text, as distinct from revisiting the familiar and comforting cultural artefacts—comforting by reason of their familiarity, not their content. Christmas is probably a time when non-churchgoers feel it easier than at other times actually to visit a church service. Certainly it is a good time to draw people into the community of the church or to reaffirm them in being there. But is it a season of the year that has spiritually converting power or is the edge of the message we celebrate blunted by sentiment? It is a poor thing for the Gospel to be rendered ‘harmless’. Avoiding this is the preacher’s and the serious Bible reader’s responsibility and challenge.

Only two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, contain birth narratives as such and in both cases they form a distinctive corpus at the beginning of the Gospel and (probably) detachable from it. These two Gospels would stand as coherent and sufficient works even without the introductions provided by the birth narratives. The narratives tell distinctive stories but, in terms of their overall message, they do not tell us anything about who Jesus is and what he came to do that could not be equally deduced from other parts of the Gospels. In other words, they are a reaffirmation of that which is already believed and proclaimed in the rest of the Gospels. Although they introduce new information in the form of traditions circulating in the early Church, they do not lead us to draw any different conclusions about Christ’s identity than we may already have drawn. They do, however, affirm, illustrate and enrich that identity. They come, naturally, at the beginning of the story of Jesus of Nazareth. As literature, however, they probably originated from a period later than the other New Testament writings, just as the four Gospels are, for the most part, later literary works than the New Testament letters.

Reading the birth narratives raises a host of questions for today's critical reader.

One such question is as follows. The narratives are strikingly different from each other and relate divergent sets of stories. The temptation is to seek to harmonize the events they record and make a cohesive whole out of them. If they are to be understood primarily for their theological testimony, however, it is better to resist this temptation. Rather, we should be seeking to understand what Matthew and Luke had in mind in telling the story in their different ways. Only when we approach them primarily for their theological content are we properly free to address the question of whether they stand in contradiction to each other. The genealogies offered by Matthew and Luke (note that Luke's version of Jesus' genealogy appears later in his Gospel, in 3:23–38, and is not strictly within the passages we intend to cover) differ markedly from each other to the point of contradiction. This raises the question of what each writer is seeking to achieve through his account of the genealogy, and what historians of the first century understood to be the proper and permissible ways of drawing up a genealogy. The temptation is to believe that we 'modern' people know how a genealogy should be researched and written and to expect people of previous generations to conform to our canons of accuracy. Yet this may be to impose upon another culture and age expectations that deny them their own historical context and approach.

Other questions arise also. Phenomena are recorded in the birth narratives which are at best odd and at worst incredible. What does it mean, for instance, for the Magi to see the Messiah's star rising and then for that star to 'stop over the place where the child was' (Matthew 2:9)? This is to say nothing of the credibility of the virginal conception, the visions that abound and the angels who make periodic manifestations. Things happen in the birth narratives that seem to go beyond the normal experience of human beings and, to our minds today, lean towards the 'magical' or the 'mythical'.

The question is inevitably raised as to whether we are dealing

with strict history here, or some other kind of literature. This is what Humphrey means by the ‘margins of genre’. The language and imagery are delightful, memorable and enticing, but in what sense can they be said to represent history? Most Christians—and, indeed, some commentaries—seem simply to avoid these questions or to wait for somebody else to answer them. The question of historicity could be put in a derogatory fashion so as to suggest that we are dealing with ‘fairy stories’ rather than solid and potentially verifiable history. This is certainly a view held by sceptics and doubters but it would be an unusual Christian who had never entertained similar questions and hesitations. In more sophisticated terms, we might use the language of ‘myth’ and ‘legend’. Although a dismissive use of these terms would mean that we were talking about something which is not ‘true’, this is not necessarily what they imply. Truth can take imaginative metaphorical forms and need not—indeed, cannot—be expressed always in literal form. Rather, such terms can refer to literary conventions and forms that seek to bring out a different kind of truth, not just the historical facticity of a narrative but the depth of meaning that certain events are believed to have, the significance they have for us and in God’s saving purpose for the world. The interpretation of these events is therefore built into their narration in a way that might be strange for people today, but not for the original hearers of these texts.

In this book I hope not to avoid these questions but I do intend to approach the response to them slowly. They will be taken up in the Postlude. As with other parts of the Bible, the question of history, although it should not be ignored, needs to take second place in order of investigation to questions of literary form and theological interpretation. This takes us into the realm of the preacher. How are these narratives to be preached? Those who originally fashioned them had a rhetorical purpose in view. Their intention was not to write supposedly objective history but to persuade, to cause people to see a depth of meaning in the coming of Christ which would lead them to bow the knee to him. That these passages are eminently

preachable is not in question, but to preach them properly requires us to grasp their theology. To grasp their theology means letting the passages first speak for themselves. Only when we have done this shall we be in a position to return to some of the difficult and awkward questions we have raised.

A final word concerns the times when we might read these passages and at what season of the year we might preach them, if that is our calling. The calendar of the Christian year is a fine thing. With the Nativity and the Passion as the pre-eminent Christian festivals, there has grown up around them a whole curriculum of seasons and festivals that give rhythm to Christian worship and devotion and require those of us who follow it to give due attention on a regular basis to the salient beliefs and recollections of our faith. Each time we do so, we lean more fully into the reality of those aspects of our life in God of which the Christian year speaks. Yet the danger in this is that we never give proper attention in our liturgies and preaching to the birth narratives outside the season of the year into which they are made to fit. That season brings with it the cultural baggage of which we have spoken and which is liable to distort our reading of the text, leading us to think we know what is there rather than to let the text be what it is. I have two suggestions to make at this point.

The first is that we study and preach on the birth narrative passages outside the Christmas season, at some other time of the year. This would have a certain surprise value, since, for most people, they are so closely identified with the Christmas season. Yet this sense of surprise might allow us the opportunity to examine the passages with new ideas and new questions. Taking them out of the familiar season might rescue them from being mere subordinate adjuncts to the festivities and give them a new place as scriptures that are profitable for training in righteousness and helping to make us complete.

The second suggestion, in the belief that Christmas has proven to be an enormously successful festival and will continue to be so, is to give a new emphasis in our worship and devotion to the season of Advent and to let Christmas as such take a more modest place within

it. Advent refers to the 'coming' or 'arrival' of the Christ, so it is the season of preparation both for the festival of the Nativity at which we remember his first coming and for that still future coming when Christians believe he will return in glory.

The celebration of Advent dates from the fifth century and was originally construed as a six-week period patterned on Lent, the season of preparation leading up to the festival of the Passion. With the triumph of the Roman rite (that is, the Roman as distinct from Celtic way of organising the Christian year), Advent was shortened to four weeks. The recollection of the ministry of John the Baptist, which was a ministry of preparation for the first coming, fits appropriately into this season. The second Sunday in Advent is traditionally celebrated as 'Bible Sunday' through the influence of the Book of Common Prayer, which set the collect (or special prayer) for that day (printed on page 14) as one that made particular reference to the Bible. Frequently Advent tends to be overshadowed by Christmas, not least in schools, which rush towards the nativity with undue haste, and churches, which treat the whole season as a festival for carols. This can reduce the sense of expectation and patient waiting that Advent is intended to provide. In the developed world, we tend not to be any good at patient waiting, anyway. Yet, because Christmas has become what it is, after 25 December has come and gone it is difficult to maintain focus on the birth narratives. The feeling is that we have 'done Christmas' and we become anxious to move on into the New Year, with its own themes and possibilities. There is a need to maintain Advent as a distinctive festival that anticipates the divine coming, yet also to use it to teach on the theme of nativity by giving careful attention to the birth narratives. When Christmas then comes, we will know whom it is we are celebrating.

Our focus is upon Matthew chapters 1 and 2 and Luke chapters 1 and 2. Properly understood, the purpose and content of these narratives is to display in clear and memorable terms the identity of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and the Son of God. As such, they are superb communication, and this is where we need to focus as

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a first priority. In that sense, these chapters could only have been written after the resurrection through which the man Jesus ‘was declared to be Son of God with power’ (Romans 1:4). They act as witness, along with all scripture, to the one who has come among us from God and is to be received as the Godsend, the arrival of God’s grace in bodily form so as to open a new age. In bearing witness, Matthew and Luke bring their post-resurrection perspectives to bear. They do not just relate an ancient history but invite us to believe in the risen Christ who is alive now. The narratives embody a whole theology—indeed, an eschatological theology in the sense that God’s purposes are being realized and God’s kingdom is coming in the very person of whom they speak. The preacher’s task is not, first of all, historical reconstruction but proclamation of the living Christ. So the message is for everyone, adults included, and not, as is so often the assumption, simply for children. Furthermore, as already stated, we must look to the Hebrew scriptures as the quarry from which the writers have mined the material through which they bear their witness—a fact that is immediately suggested by frequent quotation of biblical texts, but in more indirect ways also. As we read the narratives against the background of the ancient scriptures, the meaning of the birth narrative emerges.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

COLLECT FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT (BCP)



CHAPTER 1

Meet the Ancestors

MATTHEW 1:1–17

First of all we place Matthew's testimony in the spotlight. These chapters were called by John Chrysostom (AD347–407) 'the holy vestibule' to the Gospel as a whole. Although tradition ascribes this Gospel to Matthew, one of the twelve apostles, there is no clear suggestion in the Gospel itself as to who wrote it. Whoever the unknown genius was, you could be forgiven for thinking that he (or she) begins in a strange place. Reading genealogical lists is a minority sport. A long list of names is not the most captivating beginning to any piece of literature. In fact, for today's reader to be confronted with a list that reads like the local telephone directory is tantamount to an invitation to skip the section (as many of us are tempted to skip whole passages in the Hebrew scriptures, like 1 Chronicles 1—9) and cut to where the action really begins in verse 18: 'Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way...' This, of course, is precisely what most of us do. It is also what most lectionaries do, in the belief either that Matthew 1:1–18 has nothing to tell us or that, even if it does, to ask someone to read it publicly in church is like a cruel and unnatural form of punishment. However, these passages form a bridge between the Old Testament and the New in a way which serves to remind us that what we are about to read and study would be almost incomprehensible without the background that the Old Testament provides. Before looking in detail at the genealogy, we might swiftly examine how the Old Testament provides material for the message Matthew wishes to proclaim.

Matthew and the Old Testament

To illustrate Matthew's dependence on the Hebrew scriptures, we can point to the fact that he punctuates his account of the birth of Jesus with five quotations, each of which is preceded by the formula, 'All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord', or something similar to it (1:22 and then 2:5, 15, 17, 23). In this way, Matthew is surely indicating that the Christ who has been born was the fulfilment of the deepest expectations of the people of Israel. When we trace these quotations back to their context, however, we discover that, contrary to our expectations, none of them is a straightforward prediction of the birth and childhood of Jesus. The sense in which they 'fulfil' Old Testament hopes is therefore more complex. Matthew draws attention to various experiences in Israel's history and shows how, even where the purposes of God have been previously fulfilled, they are fulfilled even more so in Christ.

The prediction of the coming of Emmanuel in Isaiah 7:13–16 and taken up in Matthew 1:23 is, in context (eighth century BC), a word of assurance that God will protect his people from being overrun by Assyrian troops. As a sign of this protection, God will grant a child to Israel's childless king—a child (Hezekiah) who will grow up and prove to be a liberator. Matthew takes this text to a higher level: even more than Hezekiah, the child born of the 'virgin' Mary (or 'young woman': the translation and the meaning are disputed) will bring deliverance.

The reference to Bethlehem in Matthew 2:5–6 is drawn from Micah 5:2–6 and involves the same political crisis. It concerns the birth of a better king than the one then in power, a shepherd like David, coming from David's ancient Bethlehem clan. So, for Matthew, Christ born in Bethlehem is an even greater king. The original prophecy is fulfilled, but even more so in the birth of Christ.

'Out of Egypt I have called my son' (2:15) comes from Hosea 11:1 and is a reference back to God's election of Israel. In the days

of Israel's waywardness, God reminds himself of his own steadfast purpose of election. Christ's sojourn in Egypt and departure to return to Israel are a reminder that Jesus is recapitulating the experience of Israel, but this time as an obedient rather than a wayward child, who makes atonement for the deficiencies of his people. He is also a sign of God's faithfulness to his purpose.

The reference to Ramah (2:18; see Jeremiah 31:15) draws on the situation in the sixth century BC, when Jerusalem was destroyed and Judah exiled. Ramah was the place, like a concentration camp, where they were collected before the long march to Babylon. In the massacre of the innocents and the exile, Christ participates in the suffering of his people and is seen to undergo experiences characteristic of the people of Israel. Past experiences of Israel are therefore experienced in a new context in a way that confirms the identification of Christ with his own people.

The final quotation proves not to be a quotation at all. There is no one verse that says, 'He will be called a Nazorean' (2:23) and it is unlikely to have come from a prophetic book that we do not know. Indeed, Nazareth goes quite unmentioned in the Old Testament. It seems to be a play on words, or a composite paraphrase, suggested by the fact that Jesus made his home in Nazareth and by the special place given to nazirites (Numbers 6), those holy men who, like Samson, were especially set aside for the service of the Lord. Jesus is the supreme example of such dedication.

None of these citations represents a simple fulfilment of predictions about Jesus. Instead, they demonstrate at a deeper level that the Christ who springs out of Israel is a product of the experience of Israel over time and is to be understood against the backdrop of that experience. The use of the Old Testament is free but it is meaningful. The God who was working then is working now. The experiences, hopes and expectations of the people of Israel are being pressed into service to interpret the new and supreme thing that God is doing in the person of Jesus. Biblical material is being taken up and applied in new senses, with greater depth and with expanded meaning, to the

life of Jesus. For Matthew, the Old Testament is the supreme source for interpreting the one who comes. Its influence is not only to be discerned in the form of specific quotations but in the very warp and woof of these two chapters. It is in this sense that Christ fulfils the Old Testament prophecies and expectations.

Jesus is Jewish

Now we can return to the genealogy. As we have said, for today's readers this is an unpromising way to begin a Gospel. We are much more comfortable with identifying people through numbers: in fact, each of us is identified by a whole variety of numbers, to do with bank accounts or passports or credit cards or tax returns. Perhaps the most important of them is our National Insurance number, which enables us to find legal employment, to pay our regular tax contributions and then—one day, perhaps—to claim our state pension and be kept in the manner to which we have been accustomed! The numbers we are assigned give us an identity in a technological and bureaucratic society and demonstrate that we are entitled to benefit from its common wealth. By contrast with the people of ancient Israel, most of us would struggle actually to name our great-grandparents, while the Israelites, by contrast with us, did not even have numbers. This is not to say that they were innumerate, simply that they had no system of numerals. Instead, they used the letters of the alphabet to denote numerical values. As ancient Hebrew did not have vowels, either, this meant that the consonants signified numbers. When it came to identifying people, this was done not by numbers but by genealogies. Who you were was determined by where you came from, by whom you were related to—and this is the way it continues to be in traditional societies that value relationship above technocracy. The genealogy in Matthew is about more than a dusty list of names: it is about

identity, where one fits; about one's place in the scheme of things; specifically, about who Jesus Christ is. All of this turns out to be a very relevant concern for today, since identity is a contemporary issue of some significance.

Matthew 1 is not only the first chapter of the Gospel but of the New Testament as a whole (although this latter point is not something that Matthew himself would have been in a position to know, since the New Testament canon was some centuries away from being compiled). It also acts as a link between the Old Testament and the New. Like a package holiday tour, it takes us on a whirlwind journey through the history of Israel, all the way back through the deportation to Babylon (v. 12) to the Davidic kingship (v. 5) and further back to the origin of the nation in Abraham (v. 2), situating the arrival of Jesus as the outcome of the whole story. Unlike the Genesis genealogies, this genealogy is named after the last entry it contains, which is Jesus, not the first (see Genesis 5:1, where the genealogy is introduced as Adam's). It is all about Jesus. In fact, the word translated 'genealogy' in verse 1 is literally the word 'genesis', and means 'origin'. This list of names gives us the origin of Jesus Christ, his origin in the people and the story, hopes and expectations of Israel.

Here we are introduced to the simple and obvious fact that Jesus is *Jewish*, the product of a particular history and people, without which it is not possible to understand him. Everybody has to come from somewhere. It stands to reason, therefore, that when God entered into human experience this involved taking upon himself a particular human identity with all its attendant requirements, a specific language, culture and heritage, a particular family and history within a definite geography. There is no such thing as a generic or abstract human being; we are all particular. Nor is any national or ethnic identity superior to any other. The particular people into which God came was the Jewish people and, whereas this was an act of grace and favour, it did not make the Jewish people inherently superior to any other group of people. It was instead the divine affirmation of ethnic

identity as such, whichever identity it might be. But it is significant for our understanding of Jesus, since the Jewish experience, itself shaped and formed by God precisely in order that Jesus might come to the Jews and through the Jews to the world, plays its part in determining the way in which we understand him.

Chartres Cathedral is famous for its stained-glass windows, and there is a striking detail in one of them. It depicts the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, sitting upon the shoulders of the prophets of the Old Testament. This is the artist's way of making the strong theological point that it is simply impossible to understand Jesus unless we see him against the background of his own people, their faith and their experience. The New Testament 'sits on the shoulders' of the Old Testament and is a continuation and a fulfilment of its story. For this reason, Christians and Jews are inextricably bound up with each other. Modern Judaism sees the 'Old Testament' story progressing and developing in a different way from Christianity, through rabbinic Judaism with its devotion to the law, which has shaped and formed today's Jewish life and practice. Christians, alternatively, interpret the same scriptures in the light of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. They believe that God's word and God's law have come to us embodied in a particular person who was 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). But both Christianity and today's Judaism have grown out of the same root, the biblical faith of Israel. Having this root in common creates an unusual kinship between them, marked by both agreement and disagreement. The fact that Jesus was Jewish means both that Christians have to 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' the Hebrew scriptures (as Jesus himself did) in order to be in a position to interpret Jesus, and that they must honour and respect the people from whom he took his origin.

Jesus is Jewish but has significance for all people

It is clear that Jesus came from a long line of Jewish people, all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of the nation. Matthew seeks to indicate this by giving us a patrilinear genealogy—that is to say, one that traces Jesus' descent through the male line (with the exception of the enigmatic verse 16, to which we shall come shortly). Some familiar celebrity names are here, such as David, Solomon, Rehoboam and Uzziah. Yet, in the family line as constructed by Matthew, there are some surprises, notably the names of four women (apart from Mary) who are mentioned in passing: Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5) and an unnamed woman referred to as 'the wife of Uriah', whom we know from other sources to have been called Bathsheba (v. 6).

These names seem to have been strangely chosen when we consider who they were and what they did. The story of Tamar, for instance, is related in Genesis 38:12–19, where she poses as a prostitute and (unbeknown to him) commits incest with her father-in-law Judah. If we assume that Matthew followed the common custom and missed out generations (in the same way that David is referred to in verse 1 as 'the son of Abraham'), the Rahab of verse 5 could be taken as a reference to Rahab of Jericho, the prostitute mentioned in Joshua 2 who was hospitable to the Israelite spies before the invasion of Canaan. Rahab is the only woman carrying that name in the Bible and is described as an example of a woman of faith in Hebrews 11:31. Ruth is more straightforwardly identified as the heroine after whom the book of Ruth is named. To have a book so named clearly marks her out as a woman of prestige, but even Ruth engages in what we might consider very risky behaviour when she effectively seduces Boaz in chapter 3 of that book. Not a great deal needs to be said about Bathsheba, who committed adultery with King David as related in 2 Samuel 11.

It comes as a surprise to find inserted into the genealogy of Jesus

a selection of women whose behaviour does not exactly conform to what might be expected. (This observation might deflect attention from the fact that the men's names listed also include some dubious characters: Judah and Ahaz, for example, do not emerge well from Genesis 38 and 2 Kings 16:1–4.) Beyond this, all these women played, in ancestral terms, significant parts in Jesus' coming and did so despite the irregularities in their lives. Perhaps this is Matthew's way of telling us that Christ has come into the world as it truly is, into its fallen condition and circumstances, precisely in order that people such as these should benefit from his coming. Or perhaps he is preparing us for the fact that when Jesus was born to Mary, it cannot have been without a degree of scandal, so that Mary is placed in the context of a number of women who, whatever may have been true or thought to be true at one particular point, went on to play significant roles in the life of Israel and in the coming of the Messiah. Accusations of an illegitimate birth were thrown at Jesus by pagan writers as the Church spread in the second century and had to be answered by Christian apologists. This suspicion may also have been behind the indignant reply to Jesus by some Jewish teachers in John 8:41, 'We are not illegitimate children' (understood: 'not like you').

These thoughts are relatively speculative. What is true and cannot be denied, however, is that each of the four women singled out for mention was a Gentile. They came to be incorporated into the story of the covenant people but did not begin there. Tamar and Rahab were both Canaanites. Ruth was a Moabitess, and, although it is nowhere specified where Bathsheba came from, she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite and so it may safely be assumed that she shared his ethnicity. Gentiles and sinners also have a stake in the coming of Jesus. Jesus is a son of Abraham (v. 1) through whom, according to Genesis 12:1–3, every nation of the earth would be blessed. Although Jesus was Jewish, his significance is not confined or limited to Jewish people but embraces all people in all places. Although there is of necessity a particularity about the identity of Jesus, it is a particularity for the sake of a universality. Jesus assumes a particular identity not in order

to show that that identity is superior to anybody else's, but in order that he might sanctify and dignify the particular identities in which all human beings participate. The life and mission of Jesus are lived out for the sake of the whole human race.

In contemporary Jewish thinking, the women identified by Matthew, whatever their irregularities, came to be seen as examples of eagerness to cooperate with God's design, and this is emulated pre-eminently by Mary, who appears at the end of the genealogy. At this point (v. 16), the patrilinear genealogy is interrupted and Joseph is identified not as the father of Jesus, which would be the wording expected, but as the 'husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born'. To our minds, this might serve to undermine the whole genealogy. We need to remember here, however, that this genealogy belonged to an age in which paternity testing and DNA sampling were unheard of. Life operated on much more pragmatic principles. If a father acknowledged a son, then that was the way it was taken to be. A father would acknowledge a son by giving him a name, and this is what happens in the narrative that follows. The Lord tells Joseph that 'you are to name him Jesus' (v. 21) and this is precisely what Joseph does: to all intents and purposes this was Jesus' line of descent. Yet the statement that Jesus was born not of Joseph but of Mary points us to a higher mystery concerning the origin of Jesus not in a human line of descent alone, but in a divine purpose. It is that purpose which gives Jesus the Jew his universal significance.

Jesus has significance because he is the Messiah

It was mentioned earlier that the Jews did not have a system of numerals; they used the letters of their alphabet to denote numbers. In turn, this meant that words could acquire a 'numeric value' by adding up the numeric significance of the individual letters. It also means that, from time to time, the New Testament writers used

numbers to refer to individuals in a cryptic fashion. It should be stressed that this does not mean that all the numbers in the Bible need to be scrutinized for a hidden code. This would be to push an occasional usage to unreasonable lengths. However, we need to be alert when reading the Bible for the times when the writers are using numbers symbolically. Verse 17 of Matthew 1 makes a big point of parcelling up the genealogy of Jesus into three lots of 14 generations. We need to notice that Matthew can achieve this result only by leaving out some of the names listed in the Old Testament genealogies. By contrast, the genealogy given by Luke in 3:23–38 lists 20 or 21 generations between David and the exile and the same number between the exile and Jesus. Matthew is making a literary rather than an historical point, and so his purpose is clearly rhetorical. This might alert us to the fact that he is not producing a genealogy in the way that we might today but with a more theological intention in view. Moreover, in the third part of his list, he gives only 13 names and Jesus' own name has to be added in to make the number up to 14. What is happening here?

When something is repeated three times in the Bible, it is for the sake of emphasis. The writer is saying, 'Don't miss this.' If a thing happens once, it could be an accident. If it happens twice, it could be a coincidence. If it happens three times, it is because behind it is a purpose not to be missed. The name 'David' is comprised of three consonants, DVD, which when added together give us the number 14 (on the basis that D is four and V is six according to their place in the Hebrew alphabet). The coming Messiah was regarded as the greater son of the great King David, so the number 14 is therefore a not-very-coded way of emphasizing that Jesus is the Messiah. That is why he is portrayed as the outcome of this genealogical line and also why his name appears at its head in verse 1. Moreover, the identity of Jesus as the Messiah is implied in the reference to him as the son of David in verse 1, as also in the fact that his line of descent is traced through David (v. 6). In case we still have not taken the point, the genealogy explicitly and clearly names Jesus as the Messiah

(or the ‘Christ’, which is the Greek version of the same title) in verses 1, 16 and 17. This is something that Matthew does not want us to miss, because it is the point of the whole of his Gospel. It is also the point with which he starts when he moves on from the genealogy in verse 18. Jesus’ identity as the Messiah is absolutely foundational.

The word ‘messiah’ means ‘the anointed one’. In the Old Testament, three offices were designated by anointing with oil or the Holy Spirit. There was the office of prophet (Isaiah 61:1), the office of priest (Leviticus 8) and the office of king (1 Samuel 16). The Messiah was expected to be a liberator who would rule fairly and justly over the people of Israel—succeeding in being what no king of Israel had properly achieved, not even the greatest of those kings, David. Jesus himself seems to have been remarkably reluctant to designate himself as Messiah, probably because he did not wish to let that term be defined by the nationalistic and violent expectations of the people of his day. By contrast, his followers, as Matthew shows us, were enthusiastic in ascribing the title to him. But they were able to do so only after Jesus had redefined the term and the meaning of messiahship. For Jesus, the kingly aspects of the Messiah were combined with and qualified by the role of the Messiah as a prophet who both speaks and embodies the word of God, and as a priest who gives his very self as an atoning sacrifice for the people and so enables them to draw near to God. The ministries of prophet, priest and king are combined in Jesus into one saving and redeeming ministry. For this reason, after Jesus things could never be the same again.

Jesus: the end and the beginning

There is more to the number 14 than we have so far identified. Fourteen is twice seven, and seven in the Hebrew convention is the number of completion and perfection. Three 14s are six sevens, and Jesus is born at the end of the sixth seven and the beginning of the

last. Genesis 1 mentions six days of creation followed by a seventh day of sabbath rest—a day which, incidentally, had no ending, unlike each of the other days (see Genesis 2:1–3). If we apply this by analogy to Jesus, we see that with his birth the seventh period of time begins, and it is in this age that the world is to be brought to its fulfilment, to its place of peace and rest. Jesus therefore represents the end of the age of expectation and the beginning of the new age of fulfilment and of peace. He begins this age because he is the agent of this age, the Messiah who has come to make all things new. It is appropriate that this note is sounded at the very beginning of Matthew's Gospel, which happens to be the very beginning also of our New Testament. Jesus the Messiah fulfils the hopes and expectations of the Hebrew scriptures, arising as he does by the Spirit of God from within the life and experience of Israel. And he begins the new age of God's dealings with us as he becomes the universally significant Messiah of Israel and all the world. This is indeed good news, the worthy theme of the Gospel that Matthew goes on to offer to us.

As the whole idea of a Messiah who comes to liberate us is such a Jewish idea, grounded as it is in the Hebrew scriptures, it is worth asking whether it communicates beyond a Jewish or Christian worldview already shaped by the assumptions and language of the Jewish testimony to God's dealing with themselves and humankind. Is it a meaningful concept in today's world for today's people? The answer to this is, 'Yes, surprisingly so.' There is a yearning in people's hearts for something better, and for someone who will be able to capture our loyalty and inspire our minds sufficiently to draw us into the better way. Films such as *The Matrix* are built around the idea of a world in which the truth has been replaced by a lie and where someone needs to break the power of illusion and deceit so that we might see things as they really are. In that particular film, the messianic figure, called Neo (an anagram of 'One' and also a Greek word meaning 'new') has been foretold by prophets and is the agent who brings liberation, although only after having been killed and restored to life; as the sequels indicate, this does not come to

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pass all at once. Stories such as this one, which has achieved cult movie status, are part of our culture and are clearly indebted, to some extent, to the story of Jesus. Perhaps there is an indication here that buried in the hearts of human beings is something that answers to the coming of the Messiah, whom Christians, following Matthew, firmly identify in Jesus Christ.

The genealogy with which Matthew begins his Gospel is a seemingly unpromising place to start. But when we have ears to hear the message that underlies it, we might come to feel that this unequivocal statement of faith in Christ sets us off on exactly the right path through the story that Matthew goes on to tell.