
THE BIBLE KNOWLEDGE COMMENTARY

ON MATTHEW 1 & 2

An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty

New Testament Edition

Based on the *New International Version*

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Introduction

It is fitting that the New Testament begins with four accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. These accounts present the “good news” concerning the Son of God, telling of His life on earth and His death on the cross for the sin of mankind. The first three Gospels take a similar view of the facts surrounding this Person, while the Fourth Gospel is unique in its presentation. Because of this common view of Jesus Christ the first three New Testament books are called the Synoptic Gospels.

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The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament

Matthew 1:1

1:1. From the very first words of his Gospel, Matthew recorded his central theme and character. **Jesus Christ** is the main character in Matthew's presentation, and the opening verse connected Him back to two great covenants in Jewish history: the Davidic (2 Sam. 7) and the Abrahamic (Gen. 12; 15). If Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of these two great covenants, is He related to the rightful line? This is a question the Jews would have asked, so Matthew traced Jesus' lineage in detail.

Matthew 1:2

1:2-17. Matthew gave Jesus' lineage through His legal father, **Joseph** (v. 16). Thus this genealogy traced Jesus' right to the throne of **David**, which must come through **Solomon** and his descendants (v. 6). Of particular interest is the inclusion of **Jeconiah** (v. 11) of whom Jeremiah said, "Record this man as if childless" (Jer. 22:30). Jeremiah's prophecy related to the actual occupation of the throne and the reception of blessing while on the throne. Though Jeconiah's sons never occupied the throne, the line of rulership did pass through them. If Jesus had been a *physical* descendant of Jeconiah, He would not have been able to occupy David's throne. Luke's genealogy made it clear that Jesus was a physical descendant of David through another son named Nathan (Luke 3:31). But Joseph, a descendant of Solomon, was Jesus' *legal* father, so Jesus' right to the throne was traced through Joseph.

Matthew traced Joseph's line from Jeconiah through the latter's son **Shealtiel** and grandson **Zerubbabel** (Matt. 1:12). Luke (3:27) also refers to Shealtiel, the father of Zerubbabel, in Mary's line. Does Luke's account, then, mean that Jesus was a physical descendant of Jeconiah, after all? No, because Luke's Shealtiel and Zerubbabel were probably different persons from those two in Matthew. In Luke Shealtiel was the son of Neri, but Matthew's Shealtiel was the son of Jeconiah.

Another interesting fact about Matthew's genealogy is the inclusion of four Old Testament women: **Tamar** (Matt. 1:3), **Rahab** (v. 5), **Ruth** (v. 5), and Solomon's **mother** (v. 6), Bathsheba. All of these women (as well as most of the men) were questionable in some way. Tamar and Rahab were prostitutes (Gen. 38:24; Josh. 2:1), Ruth was a foreigner, a Moabitess (Ruth 1:4), and Bathsheba committed adultery (2 Sam. 11:2-5). Matthew may have included these women in order to emphasize that God's choices in dealing with people are all of His grace. Perhaps also he included these women in order to put Jewish pride in its place. When the fifth woman, **Mary** (Matt. 1:16), was mentioned in the genealogy, an important change occurred. The genealogy consistently repeated, **the father of,**

until it came to Mary. At that point Matthew changed and said **of whom was born Jesus**. The “of whom” is a feminine relative pronoun (*ex hęcis*), clearly indicating that Jesus was the physical Child of Mary but that Joseph was not His physical father. This miraculous conception and birth are explained in 1:18-25. Matthew obviously did not list every individual in the genealogy between **Abraham** and **David** (vv. 2-6), between **David** and **the Exile** (vv. 6-11), and between **the Exile** and Jesus (vv. 12-16). Instead he listed only **14 generations** in each of these time periods (v. 17). Jewish reckoning did not require every name in order to satisfy a genealogy. But why did Matthew select 14 names in each period? Perhaps the best solution is that the name “David” in Hebrew numerology added up to 14. It should be noted that in the period from the Exile to the birth of Jesus (vv. 12-16) 13 new names appeared. Many scholars feel that Jeconiah (v. 12), though repeated from verse 11, provides the 14th name in this final period.

Matthew’s genealogy answered the important question a Jew would rightfully ask about anyone who claimed to be King of the Jews. Is He a descendant of David through the rightful line of succession? Matthew answered yes!

See map, Palestine in the Time of Jesus

Matthew 2:1

B. Presentation by advent (1:18-2:23)

(Luke 2:1-7)

Matthew 1:18

1. HIS ORIGIN (1:18-23)

1:18-23. The fact that Jesus was born “of Mary” only, as indicated in the genealogical record (v. 16), demanded further explanation. Matthew’s explanation can best be understood in the light of Hebrew marriage customs. Marriages were arranged for individuals by parents, and contracts were negotiated. After this was accomplished, the individuals were considered married and were called husband and wife. They did not, however, begin to live together. Instead, the woman continued to live with her parents and the man with his for one year. The waiting period was to demonstrate the faithfulness of the pledge of purity given concerning the bride. If she was found to be with child in this period, she obviously was not pure, but had been involved in an unfaithful sexual relationship. Therefore the marriage could be annulled. If, however, the one-year waiting period demonstrated the purity of the bride, the husband would then go to the house of the bride’s parents and in a grand processional march lead his bride back to his home. There they would begin to live together as husband and wife and consummate their marriage physically. Matthew’s story should be read with this background in mind.

Mary and Joseph were in the one-year waiting period when **Mary was found to be with child**. They had never had sexual intercourse and Mary herself had been faithful (vv. 20, 23). While little is said about Joseph, one can imagine how his heart must have broken. He genuinely loved Mary, and yet the word came that she was pregnant. His love for her was demonstrated by his actions. He chose not to create a public scandal by exposing her condition to the judges at the city gate. Such an act could have resulted in Mary's death by stoning (Deut. 22:23-24). Instead he decided **to divorce her quietly**.

Then **in a dream** (cf. Matt. 2:13, 19, 22), **an angel** told **Joseph** that Mary's condition was not caused by a man, but through **the Holy Spirit** (1:20; cf. v. 18). The Child Mary carried in her womb was a unique Child, for He would be **a Son** whom Joseph should **name Jesus** for **He would save His people from their sins**. These words must have brought to Joseph's mind the promises of God to provide salvation through the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-37). The unnamed angel also told Joseph that this was in keeping with God's eternal plan, for **the Prophet** Isaiah had declared 700 years before that **the virgin will be with Child** (Matt. 1:23; Isa. 7:14). While Old Testament scholars dispute whether the Hebrew *almah* should be rendered "young woman" or "virgin," God clearly intended it here to mean virgin (as implied by the Gr. word *parthenos*). Mary's miraculous conception fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, and her **Son** would truly be **Immanuel... God with us**. In light of this declaration **Joseph** was not to be **afraid** to take **Mary** into his **home** (Matt. 1:20). There would be misunderstanding in the community and much gossip at the well, but Joseph knew the true story of Mary's pregnancy and God's will for his life.

Matthew 1:24

2. HIS BIRTH (1:24-25)

1:24-25. As soon as **Joseph** awakened from this dream, he obeyed. He violated all custom by immediately taking **Mary** into his **home** rather than waiting till the one-year time period of betrothal had passed. Joseph was probably thinking of what would be best for Mary in her condition. He brought her home and began to care and provide for her. But there was **no** sexual relationship between them **until** after the **birth** of this Child, Jesus. Matthew simply noted the birth of the Child and the fact that He was named **Jesus**, whereas Luke, the physician (Col. 4:14), recorded several details surrounding the birth (Luke 2:1-7).

Matthew 2:1

3. HIS INFANCY (CHAP. 2)

a. In Bethlehem (2:1-12)

Matthew 2:1

2:1-2. Though not all scholars agree on the timing of the arrival of the **Magi from the East**, they apparently came some time **after** the birth of **Jesus**. Jesus and Mary and Joseph, though still in Bethlehem, were now in a house (v. 11), and Jesus was called a Child (*paidion*, vv. 9, 11) rather than a newborn Infant (*brephos*, Luke 2:12).

The exact identity of the Magi is impossible to determine, though several ideas have been suggested. They have been given traditional names and identified as representatives of the three groups of peoples that descended from Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. More likely they were Gentiles of high position from a country, perhaps Parthia, northeast of Babylon, who were given a special revelation by God of the birth of the **King of the Jews**. This special revelation may simply have been in the sky, as might be indicated by their title "Magi" (specialists in astronomy) and by the fact they referred to a **star** which they **saw**. Or this revelation could have come through some contact with Jewish scholars who had migrated to the East with copies of Old Testament manuscripts. Many feel the Magi's comments reflected a knowledge of Balaam's prophecy concerning the "star" that would "come out of Jacob" (Num. 24:17). Whatever the source, they came to Jerusalem **to worship** the newborn King of the Jews. (According to tradition three Magi traveled to Bethlehem. But the Bible does not say how many there were.)

Matthew 2:3

2:3-8. It is no surprise that **King Herod... was disturbed** when the Magi came to **Jerusalem** looking for the One who had been "born King" (v. 2). Herod was not the rightful king from the line of David. In fact he was not even a descendant of Jacob, but was descended from Esau and thus was an Edomite. (He reigned over Palestine from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. See the chart on the Herods at Luke 1:5.) This fact caused most of the Jews to hate him and never truly to accept him as king, even though he did much for the country. If someone had been rightfully born king, then Herod's job was in jeopardy. He therefore **called** the Jewish scholars **together** and inquired **where the Christ was to be born** (Matt. 2:4). Interestingly Herod connected the One "born king of the Jews" (v. 2) with "the Christ," the Messiah. Obviously Israel had a messianic hope and believed that the Messiah would be born.

The answer to Herod's question was simple, because Micah **the prophet** had given the precise location centuries before: the Messiah would be born in **Bethlehem** (Micah 5:2). This answer from **the people's chief priests and teachers of the Law** (scribes, KJV) was apparently carried back to **the Magi** by **Herod** himself. Then Herod asked them when they had first seen their **star** (Matt. 2:7). This became critical later in the account (v. 16); it showed that Herod was already contemplating a plan to get rid of this young King. He also instructed the Magi to return and tell him the location of this King so that he might come **and worship Him**. That was not, however, what he had in mind.

Matthew 2:9

2:9-12. The journey of the Magi from Jerusalem wrought a further miracle. **The star they had seen in the East** now reappeared and led them to a specific **house** in Bethlehem where they found **the Child** Jesus. Bethlehem is about five miles south of Jerusalem. “Stars” (i.e., planets) naturally travel from east to west across the heavens, not from north to south. Could it be that “the star” which the Magi saw and which led them to a specific house was the Shekinah glory of God? That same glory had led the children of Israel through the wilderness for 40 years as a pillar of fire and cloud. Perhaps this was what they saw in the East, and for want of a better term they called it a “star.” All other efforts to explain this star are inadequate (such as a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars; a supernova; a comet; etc.).

Nevertheless they were led to the Child and going in, they **worshiped Him**.

Their worship was heightened by the giving of **gifts... gold... incense and... myrrh**. These were gifts worthy of a king and this act by Gentile leaders pictures the wealth of the nations which will someday be completely given to the Messiah (Isa. 60:5, 11; 61:6; 66:20; Zeph. 3:10; Hag. 2:7-8).

Some believe the gifts had further significance by reflecting on the character of this Child’s life. Gold might represent His deity or purity, incense the fragrance of His life, and myrrh His sacrifice and death (myrrh was used for embalming). These gifts were obviously the means by which Joseph took his family to Egypt and sustained them there until Herod died. The wise men were **warned** by God **not to return and report to Herod**, so **they returned to their homes by another route**.

b. In Egypt (2:13-18)

Matthew 2:13

2:13-15. After the visit of the Magi, **Joseph** was warned by **an angel of the Lord** to take Mary and Jesus and flee **to Egypt**. This warning was given **in a dream** (the second of Joseph’s four dreams: 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22). The reason was **Herod** would be searching **for the Child to kill Him**. Under cover of darkness, Joseph obeyed, and his family **left** Bethlehem (see map) and journeyed into **Egypt**. Why Egypt? The Messiah was sent to and returned from Egypt so that the prophet’s words, **Out of Egypt I called My Son**, might be **fulfilled**. This is a reference to Hosea 11:1, which does not seem to be a prophecy in the sense of a prediction. Hosea was writing of God’s calling Israel out of Egypt into the Exodus. Matthew, however, gave new understanding to these words. Matthew viewed this experience as Messiah being identified with the nation. There were similarities between the nation and the Son. Israel was God’s chosen “son” by adoption (Ex. 4:22), and Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Son. In both cases the descent into Egypt was to escape danger, and the return was important to the nation’s providential history. While Hosea’s statement was a historical reference to Israel’s deliverance, Matthew related it more fully to the call of the Son, the Messiah, from Egypt. In that sense, as Matthew “heightened” Hosea’s words to a more significant event—the Messiah’s return from Egypt—they were “fulfilled.”

Matthew 2:16

2:16-18. As soon as **Herod** learned that **the Magi** had not complied with his orders to give him the exact location of the newborn King, he put into action a plan **to kill all the male children in Bethlehem.** The age of **two... and under** was selected in compliance **with the time... the Magi** saw “the star” in the East. Perhaps this time reference also indicated that when the Magi visited Jesus, He was under two years of age.

This slaughter of the male children is mentioned only here in the biblical record. Even the Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 37-?100) did not mention this dastardly deed of putting to death innocent babies and young children. But it is not surprising that he and other secular historians overlooked the death of a few Hebrew children in an insignificant village, for Herod’s infamous crimes were many. He put to death several of his own children and some of his wives whom he thought were plotting against him. Emperor Augustus reportedly said it was better to be Herod’s sow than his son, for his sow had a better chance of surviving in a Jewish community. In the Greek language, as in English, there is only one letter difference between the words “sow” (huos) and “son” (huios). This event too was said to be the fulfillment of a prophecy by **Jeremiah.** This statement (Jer. 31:15) referred initially to the **weeping** of the nation as a result of the death of **children** at the time of the Babylonian Captivity (586 B.C.). But the parallel to the situation at this time was obvious, for again children were being slaughtered at the hands of non-Jews. Also, Rachel’s tomb was near Bethlehem and **Rachel** was considered by many to be the mother of the nation. That is why she was seen weeping over these children’s deaths.

See map, Jesus’ Journeys from Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth

Matthew 2:19

c. In Nazareth (2:19-23)

2:19-23. After **Herod died...** **Joseph** was again instructed by **an angel of the Lord.** This was the third of four times an angel appeared to him **in a dream** (cf. 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22). He was made aware of Herod’s death and told to return **to the land** (v. 20). Joseph obediently followed the Lord’s instruction and was planning to return **to the land of Israel,** perhaps to Bethlehem. However, a son of Herod, **Archelaus,** was ruling over the territories of **Judea,** Samaria, and Idumea. Archelaus, noted for tyranny, murder, and instability, was probably insane as a result of close family intermarriages. (He ruled from 4 B.C. to A.D. 6. See the chart on the Herods at Luke 1:5). God’s warning to Joseph (again **in a dream,** Matt. 2:22; cf. 1:20; 2:13, 19) was not to return to Bethlehem, but instead to move back to the northern **district of Galilee** to the **town of Nazareth.** The ruler of this region was Antipas, another son of Herod (cf. 14:1; Luke 23:7-12), but he was a capable ruler.

The fact that the family moved to Nazareth was once again said to be in fulfillment of prophecy (Matt. 2:23). However, the words **He will be called a Nazarene**, were not directly spoken by any Old Testament prophet, though several prophecies come close to this expression. Isaiah said the Messiah would be “from [Jesse’s] roots” like “a Branch” (Isa. 11:1). “Branch” is the Hebrew word *nesher*, which has consonants like those in the word “Nazarene” and which carry the idea of having an insignificant beginning.

Since Matthew used the plural **prophets**, perhaps his idea was not based on a specific prophecy but on the idea that appeared in a number of prophecies concerning Messiah’s despised character. Nazareth was the town which housed the Roman garrison for the northern regions of Galilee. Therefore most Jews would not have any associations with that city. In fact those who lived in Nazareth were thought of as compromisers who consorted with the enemy, the Romans. Therefore to call one “a Nazarene” was to use a term of contempt. So because Joseph and his family settled in Nazareth, the Messiah was later despised and considered contemptible in the eyes of many in Israel. This was Nathanael’s reaction when he heard Jesus was from Nazareth (John 1:46): “Can anything good come from there?” This concept fit several Old Testament prophecies that speak of the lowly character of the Messiah (e.g., Isa. 42:1-4). Also the term “Nazarene” would have reminded Jewish readers of the similar-sounding word “Nazirite” (Num. 6:1-21). Jesus was more devoted to God than the Nazirites.