CHAPTER FOUR

Reading the Gospel of Matthew

Of all four Gospels in the earliest Christian centuries the Gospel of Matthew was the most respected. The Gospel of Mark, a briefer account of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, most of which can be found in Matthew, was neglected. The Gospel of Luke took longer than the Gospel of Matthew to assume a central role in the liturgy and preaching of the emerging Christian communities. The Gospel of John was quickly adopted by Gnostic sectarians, and assumed its place as a genuinely Christian book late in the second century because of its association made by Irenaeus (c. 180) with the more sedate teaching of the First Letter of John and the identification of the Apostle John, the Son of Zebedee, as the Beloved Disciple. The Gospel of Matthew probably first appeared in its present form some time in the 80's of the first century. It was already being cited by other Christian books that may have appeared before the end of the century, or early in the second century (the *Didache*, Ignatius of Antioch). By the middle of the second century it was being cited by an increasing number of early Christian writers (Polycarp, Barnabas, Justin Martyr, 2 Clement).[1] This popularity has been sustained over the centuries.

There are good reasons for this preference. The life and practices of the Christian Church are well served by Matthew. Only Matthew provides extended teachings on Christian behavior in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). The most widely used form of the Lord's Prayer appears in Matt 6:9-13, even though a parallel, though shorter (and possibly more primitive), version of the prayer is found in Luke 11:2-4. Only in Matthew

does Jesus appoint Peter the "rock" upon which the Church was founded (16:16-18), and insist upon the teaching authority of his newly founded community (18:18-20). Other important early Christian doctrines were discovered within the pages of Matthew, for example, the virgin birth of Jesus (1:18-25) and the Trinity (28:19). This Gospel closes with Jesus' comforting promise that he would be with his community till the close of the age (28:19). From 650 to 1000 C.E. thirteen major commentaries were written on Matthew, and four on Mark.[2] In the Roman Catholic tradition, prior to the revision of the Lectionary that followed the Second Vatican Council, Matthew dominated the Sunday Gospel readings.

Matthew has long been rightly judged as the Church's Gospel.[3] Our contemporary approach to the Gospel of Matthew must ask the question that is posed of all texts that we regard as Sacred Scripture. Can this text, which was written to address a largely Jewish-Christian Church in the 80's of the first century, still be a word of life for us in the third millennium? Like the Gospel of Mark, which served Matthew as a source and model for his story of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew has its plot, designed to address a readership both in its single parts, and as a whole utterance. For the purposes of this book, the present chapter will strive to outline the theological and literary features of the whole utterance of the Matthean story of the life of Jesus. As throughout this book, and in agreement with a majority of contemporary interpreters of the Gospels, what follows presupposes that the story of the Gospel, from 1:1-28:20, has a design, a plot that communicates the author's point of view to the reader. But before turning to an analysis of Matthew's plot, there are some conundrums in this Gospel that have long bothered interpreters. Let us begin with them.

A Starting Point: Matthew 28:16-20

Strange as it may seem, all biblical scholars recognize that the most logical place to begin a search for the purpose and message of the Gospel of Matthew, its "point of view," is at its conclusion. In Matthew 28:16-20 the risen Jesus gathers his disciples on a mountain in Galilee and sends them out to the whole world. A good story often reaches its climax on the last page. The Gospels are no exception to this, as we have already seen in the literary tension generated by Mark 16:1-8 (see further, Luke 24:44-48; John 20:30-31). The Matthean community understood itself and its apostolic task in terms of a commission given by the risen Lord. This commission is explicitly stated in 28:16-20. It is so important that we will consider this text in some detail.

> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt 28:16-20).

After the Easter events (see Matt 28:1-15), the disciples return to Galilee, to the mountain indicated by Jesus (v. 16). This is not the first time that Jesus has summoned his disciples to the top of a mountain to give them important instructions. Earlier in the Gospel (5:1-7:28) he began his ministry of teaching by gathering his disciples on a mountain (see 5:1) to give them a new Law (see 5:17-20, 21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). On a new Sinai a new and perfect Moses gives a new People of God a new Law.[4] As the

situating of the giving of the new Law on a mountain was important, so is it also important for the risen Lord's commissioning of his Church.[5]

Both uses of a mountain, of course, have their origins in the importance of mountains, beginning with Sinai, in the biblical tradition (see Exod 19). We are about to witness a significant communication of God's ways and teaching to the disciples. One senses a community well-versed in, and full of respect and appreciation for, the traditional religious symbols of Israel behind these indications. Yet, as we will see, the details of the commission of Jesus to his disciples appear to contradict that respect and appreciation. The Jewish world is essential to Matthew's story, but it reaches beyond that world.

The reaction of the disciples to the sight of Jesus is ambiguous. Some worship him. The Greek verb used here (Greek: *proskunein*) is used extensively in the Gospel of Matthew to show a correct understanding of who Jesus is and how one should relate to him (see, for example, Matt 2:2, 11; 4:9-10; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9, 17). But despite the fact that some of the disciples worship Jesus, and despite the climatic significance of this final scene, Matthew still reports: "but some doubted" (v. 17). The hesitation of the disciples in the presence of the risen Lord, one of the hallmarks of each of the synoptic resurrection accounts (see Mark l6:8 and Luke 24:10-11, 13-35, 36-37), is also an important part of Matthew's theology of the Church. All the Gospels have a realistic understanding and presentation of the disciples of Jesus. They believe, yet they falter in their belief.

Jesus opens his final instructions with a declaration about himself, and then spells out the consequences of such a declaration for his disciples and their mission. The man

whom they had known as Jesus of Nazareth claims that all authority on heaven and earth has been given to him (v. 18). This is nothing less than to claim that Jesus has taken over the authority and dignity that traditional Israel allowed only to YHWH. Passages indicating this are innumerable. An example, and perhaps the most important Old Testament passage on the oneness of God and his complete authority, is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 which begins: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone" (Deut 6:4). Behind Jesus' claims to absolute authority, there is probably also a reference to the giving of all authority to the "one like a son of man" in Dan 7:14: "To him was given, dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him."

On a mountain with his hesitant disciples, Jesus claims to have been given all the authority that, according to traditional Judaism, belonged to YHWH alone. This is a bold claim. It would not have been well received by the Jews of the 80's of the first century. After the destruction of the Temple-city Jerusalem and Israel as a political entity in 70 AD, Judaism had to struggle through a period of religious reconstruction. The Jews no longer had a capital city with its Temple; they no longer had a Land. Judaism gradually established its identity after the disastrous effects of the Jewish war of 70 AD. A universal (although still varied) approach to YHWH, the unique and traditional God of Israel, was developed from the earlier Pharisaic form of pre-War Judaism. It later came to be called Rabbinic Judaism. It was broadly based on the synagogue as a place of worship and upon the Law as a way of life.

Within this religious context, Matthew's Gospel develops a very exalted idea of Jesus. Some of the exalted Christological claims of the Fourth Gospel (see, for example,

John 5:17-18; 10:30) parallel this understanding of Jesus, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given, reflected in Matt 28:17. Over against the synagogue's attempts to re-establish YHWH and his Law at the center of post-war Judaism, this Gospel presents Jesus as having been given the authority and privilege allowed only to YHWH.

Flowing from the uniqueness and universality of his authority, the Matthean Jesus then breaks through three further elements basic to post-70AD Jewish belief and practice.

1. He commands his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (v. 19a). This is in direct opposition to the belief in Israel's exclusive place among the nations of the world as God's chosen people. Once again, this would have been hard for post-war Judaism to accept. Although there had been openness to the idea of a universal salvation in the prophets (see, for example, Isaiah 2:1-4), it had always meant a movement from the Gentile world towards Sion. Here this is reversed: the new people of God, founded by Jesus of Nazareth, are to "go out" to make disciples of all nations.
2. The disciples are further instructed to "baptize" in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (v. 19b), thus introducing a new initiation rite for the new people of God, setting out on its mission. It is to replace the centrally important Jewish rite of circumcision. The Jewish tradition insisted on circumcision as the central act of initiation to YHWH's unique people. In seeking an identity, barriers that separate one group from another are important. Initiation rites are fundamental to this separation, and the traditional rite of circumcision provided it. But the Christian missionary is told to replace the initiation of circumcision with baptism.

3. As if what had been commanded so far was not enough, the final command demolishes the very basis of traditional Jewish faith, built upon the teaching and the learning of the Torah. The Torah had become even more central for post-war Judaism. Without the Temple with its priesthood and its cultic actions, Torah alone remained as the heart of the Jewish understanding of God's ways among his people and his people's approach to him. But even the Torah is replaced. Jesus uses words commonly found in passages on the importance of the Torah: "to teach," "to observe," "commandments" (see, for example, Deut 5-6, esp. 6:1, where all these terms appear) to indicate a new teaching: "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (v. 20a). No longer does the command to teach and observe look to the Torah, but to the teaching of Jesus. The Law of Moses has been replaced by the teaching of Jesus.
4. Jesus' final words are not words of departure, but words assuring that he will always be with his disciples (v. 20b). In the Gospel of Luke the idea of ascension is a pictorial image of Jesus actually leaving this earth and returning to his Father but in Matthew there is no trace of any such event. In fact, one could say that the opposite is the case. Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus' promise that he will never leave them. Of course, theologically, Luke is saying exactly the same thing through his message of a return to the Father and his eventual sending of the Spirit. But whether it is Jesus' Spirit sent by the Father (Luke) or the abiding presence of Jesus who will never leave his Church (Matthew), the message of God's purposes to found and sustain a holy people in and through Jesus rings true.

From these last few verses of the Gospel of Matthew (28:16-20) one could argue that we are dealing with a Gospel that is extremely hostile to the traditional ways of Judaism, especially as they were being forged in the post-70AD situation of what eventually came to be Rabbinic Judaism. They could be read as the charter of a Christian Church that had broken definitively from its origins in Judaism. We are clearly in touch with a community being strongly exhorted to set out on a journey away from the confines of Israel into the new world of a universal Church where Jesus, his ways and his teachings are to be the measure of one's "belonging." But from these first indications should we conclude that the traditions of Israel are now a thing of the past, valueless? This would be a partial and incorrect reading of the Gospel of Matthew as a whole.

A Strange Contradiction

Matthew's Gospel is often regarded as the most Jewish of all Gospels. How can it be that the author disregards all that is traditional and sacred to Judaism? Is Matthew's Gospel only concerned with the new? What is the author's attitude to the old, the ways of God in the history of Israel? Matt 28:16-20 is found at the end of the Gospel. Matthew's story of Jesus concludes with the sending of the disciples into the Gentile mission, a mission to all the nations. Naturally, tension between the missionary Church and the historical origins of Christianity from within Judaism will be sensed. But there is an equally important passage much nearer the beginning of the story of Jesus:

> Think not that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth

> pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matt. 5:17-18).

In the light of 28:16-20 we seem to be faced with a strange contradiction. The Gospel concluded in a way that indicated a radical breach between the Christian Church setting out on a mission to all the nations and Israel; but these words of Jesus, as he begins his preaching, mark a close bond between the Church and the Law.

The matter becomes more complex as we read further into the Gospel. On two occasions during his public ministry Jesus speaks about the exclusiveness of his mission to Israel. He similarly limits his disciples' mission to Israel alone. In the light of the universalism of the missionary command in 28:16-20 they are very puzzling. At the beginning of a long discourse that deals with the mission of the Church (10:1-11:1), we read:

> These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and into no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5-6).

Some time after this discourse, he responds to the pleas of a Canaanite woman, that he heal her daughter: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). These passages from the public ministry of the Matthean Jesus appear to limit the mission of Jesus and his disciples to Israel (10:5-6; 15:24), and exhort the followers of Jesus to live and teach the traditional law of Israel (5:17-18). How can we reconcile this with the boldness of the thrust into the Gentile mission that is at the heart of the risen Lord's closing mandate (28:16-20)?

The Gospel of Matthew is marked by two points of view. One is open and enthusiastic about the newness of the Christian Church, along with the challenge of the Gentile mission; another presents Jesus and his disciples involved in a mission limited to Israel (10:5-6, 15:24), and a perfect living of the Law (5:17-18).

Jesus among the Gentiles

The impression gained from our reflections thus far is only slightly weakened by the two miracles which Jesus performs for Gentiles during his public ministry, one of which I have already mentioned: the curing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman. In 8:5-13 Matthew reports the story of the healing of the Gentile centurion's servant. Although Jesus cures the servant of a Gentile soldier, the miracle is worked within the context of the lack of belief that Jesus finds in Israel (see 8:1-27) and is used, ultimately as a teaching for Israel:

> Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at the table of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth (vv. 10-12).

These words on the lips of Jesus formed part of the experience of the members of the Matthean community. Respectful of their roots within ancient Jewish traditions, they were now inevitably involved in the Gentile mission. In that situation their experience as Christians corresponded to what Jesus had said. Despite Jesus' personal mission to Israel alone, he had already spoken of the later experience of the Matthean Church itself: refused by "the sons of the kingdom," but sent on a mission to peoples "from east and

west." Strangely, it will be those to whom the kingdom had been given who will be cast into darkness, while many "from east and west" will be seated at the table of Abraham. The Christians in Matthew's community had experienced expulsion from the synagogue, and they were now moving into the Gentile mission. These words of Jesus gave them courage, as they wondered about their historical and religious origins within Judaism, a way of approaching God that had refused Jesus and his followers.

A similar point is made in Matt I5:21-28, the story of the "Canaanite" woman. At the end of Jesus' encounter with the Gentile woman Jesus explains why this particular woman has been granted her request: "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (v. 28). However, this point is not reached until the woman herself has placed her understanding of herself and her request within the context of Jesus' unique mission to Israel (see vv. 23-27). The greatness of her faith has created an exception that proves the rule! A Gentile is used to instruct the true Israel (the Matthean Church) on authentic faith.

A Tension Resolved

The apparent contradiction between Jesus' program to fulfill the Jewish Law found at the beginning of the Gospel (5:17-18) and its conclusion, as the risen Jesus sends his disciples to all nations (28:16-20), is reinforced by a consideration of the two miracles that Jesus performs for Gentiles (8:5-13; 15:21-28). They may be directed towards Gentiles, but they instruct Israel. Yet the contradiction is a key to understanding the situation of the Matthean community, the Evangelist's appreciation and presentation of Jesus, his mission and the mission of the Church.

An important feature of any narrative is the way Matthew uses the time-line of the story as it unfolds.[6] Generally, the events in a narrative are reported in the chronological order in which they happen in a human story. This means that the events follow one another down an acceptable and understandable time line. In more technical language, which is not hard to understand, this use of time is generally called "narrative time." In reading through narrative time, the reader moves simply from one event to another, from one day to another, one year to another, until the end of the story is reached.

But sometimes events or words are reported which look back to an earlier happening, throwing light on the story as it is being reported. Something from the past is recalled, and is drawn into the story to add meaning to the events of "narrative time" as they unfold. A well-known example of this can be found in the story in the Gospel of John that tells of a blind man (John 9). Through a series of events, following one another chronologically (narrative time), he is healed, and subsequently interrogated, until he comes to prostrate himself before Jesus and confess that Jesus is the Son of Man (see John 9:35-37). But, at the start of the story, the reader is told that this man was "born blind" (v. 1). The unfortunate past event of his being born blind enables the disciples to ask who must bear the guilt for this man's affliction. Who, in the past, committed some sin that led to a child being born blind?[7] This question gives Jesus the chance to set the agenda for the story: the man's blindness will lead to the revelation of the glory of God (see 9:2-5). This practice of looking back into a time before the "narrative time" of the regular passing of events in a story is called "analepsis."

But if clarifications can enter into the narrative time of a story by means of this looking back (analepsis), tension and interest also enters a story when the storyteller

gives a hint of something that will happen in the distant future. In all the Gospels, Jesus' predictions of his oncoming passion and resurrection (see, for example, Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:32-34) are excellent examples of this technique. As Jesus pursues his mission, he sometimes tells his disciples that he will one day be slain in Jerusalem, and he will be raised from the dead. This sort of inserted information creates a sense of expectancy in a reader, who reads on into the events reported in the narrative, waiting for the accomplishment of some future event which has promisingly (or threateningly) already been mentioned. The technical term used for these interruptions into "narrative time" is prolepsis. The general term used to refer to both of these interruptions into narrative time, looking either backwards into events happened earlier (analepsis), or forecasting future events (prolepsis), is "plotted time."

Focusing our attention on the temporal element in the passages which highlight the contradiction between the accepted ways of Judaism and the new openness to "all the nations," we notice that the passages which limit Jesus' and his disciples' activities to Israel are located at the beginning, and then during the public ministry of Jesus (5:17-18; 10:5-6; 15:24). The mission to "all the nations" is the final scene of the Gospel (28:16-20). The events of the life of Jesus follow one another in regular succession, from his birth to his death and resurrection (narrative time). But the narrative time of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus is bracketed between two crucial uses of plotted time. The passages that appear to contradict one another, Jesus' insistence upon the fulfillment of the Law in 5:17-18 and his final commissioning of the Church to go out to the whole world in 28:16-20, form this bracket.

Let us look again at the programmatic words of Jesus, found at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (5:17-18). The temporal element of these words calls for a closer examination. Although they come at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the narrative time of the story, they contain words that look outside the unfolding time line of the narrative, into the plotted time of the future (prolepsis).

> Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, *till heaven and earth pass away*, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law *until all is accomplished.*

I have stressed two different expressions in the passage: they are both references to some future "time." There is the "now" of Jesus' preaching during his public ministry (narrative time), but there is a moment "yet to come" when the present order of things will be changed (plotted time). These expressions refer to a time in the future when the perfection of the law will be completed: "till heaven and earth pass away ... until all is accomplished." When might that future time be? In the light of our general understanding of Jesus' eschatological teaching (still found in Matt 24) we are immediately led to regard these words of Jesus as referring to the end of all time. Indeed, many scholars continue to read Matt 5:17-18 as a reference to the traditional Jewish notion of the end of time.[8]

This understanding of the future events referred to in 5:17-18, however, renders Matt 28:16-20 very difficult to understand. In 28:16-20 Matthew reports words of the risen Jesus that once again use plotted time to reach outside the narrated events of the Gospel. The disciples are sent on a mission to the ends of the earth, and Jesus promises that he will be with them till the close of the age. If the future time of 5:17-18 referred to the end of all time, the command of Jesus that the Jewish Law be perfectly observed,

without changing even the tiniest detail, would still be in force in the Christian Church, as we await Jesus' final coming. But Jesus abandons the perfect observance of the Jewish Law in 28:16-20 when he sends his disciples on a mission. As we have seen, Jesus' commission to his disciples transcends much that is central to Jewish law and thought.

There may have been different points of view within the community, and some of its members may have claimed that the Church must still live under the Law (5:17-18), while others argued that they must go out to all the nations armed only with the teaching of Jesus (28:16-20). Indeed the traditions that Matthew uses to report these words of Jesus may reach back to these different points of view. But the Gospel must be read as a single utterance that made sense to an author. Matthew did not leave these contradictory understandings of the Christian Church to stand unresolved in the Gospel. The author has written a story of Jesus to resolve the seeming contradiction. Indeed, that was one of the practical, pastoral reasons for the writing of the Gospel of Matthew. An understanding of the uniqueness of this particular Gospel will show that such is the case. It is the responsibility of the interpreter to see these apparent contradictions, and to come to understand why Matthew inserted them into his well-crafted story.

Between Jesus' insistence on the mission to Israel at the beginning and during the course of his public ministry (5:17-18; 10:5-6; 15:24), and his final commission as the risen Lord to the Matthean disciples to go out to the whole world (28:16-20), something happens which dramatically changes the future roles of both Jesus and his disciples.[9] The events from the narrated time of the story that stand as a watershed between the opening of the ministry of Jesus (5:17-18), his continued insistence upon the limitation of his

mission to Israel (10:5-6; 15:24), and his final missionary command, are his death and resurrection (chapters 26-27).

The words sending the young Church out to the whole world in the service of a new universal Lord, teaching his commandments, come from the lips of the risen Jesus (28:16-20). Something happens in the Matthean story of the death and resurrection of Jesus that transforms the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. During the life of Jesus it was limited to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. However, 28:16-20 instructs the disciples, and the all subsequent followers of Jesus, forever accompanied by the risen Jesus, to reach out to all nations. Later in the Gospel, there are two events - reported only in Matthew - where there are descriptions that could be regarded as "heaven and earth passing away" (see 5:17-18). The first of these moments is at the death of Jesus:

> From the sixth hour there was darkness all over the land until the ninth hour. The veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the earth quaked; the rocks were split; the tombs opened and the bodies of many holy men rose from the dead (27:45, 51-53).

The second of these moments is found in the Matthean description of the events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus:

> All at once there was a violent earthquake, for the angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. His face was like lightning, his robe white as snow (28:2-3).

Heaven and earth are passing away. Matthew has taken some of the imagery used here from the Christian tradition concerning Jesus' death. It is found in Mark's report of the tearing of the veil, the darkness at the death of Jesus, and the whiteness of the robe of the

angel at the tomb, although he was a "young man," not an angel (Mark 15:38; 16:5). When the overall context is put together, however, it is obvious that Matthew has changed the scenario considerably. He has drawn upon some traditionally "apocalyptic" symbols from Jewish thought but has shifted their timing. The events described: darkening of the skies, splitting of the rocks, earthquakes, lightning, the rising of the dead and the appearance of angels are events which were expected to happen at the final end of all time when YHWH would return as Lord and Judge (see Amos 8:9; Jer 15:9; Ezek 37:12-13; Isa 26:19; Dan 7:9; 10:6; 12:2). Matthew indicates that these events will not only take place at the very end of history, as was held by Jewish traditions. They already have happened at the death and resurrection of Jesus.[10]

The plotted time of the prolepsis involved in the future time indicated by the words of Jesus 5:17-18 ("till heaven and earth pass away ... until all is accomplished") has now become narrated time in the actual succession of the events of the passion of Jesus. The promise has been fulfilled. Only Matthew's story of the life of Jesus makes this point. This is his way of saying that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a single event that marks the turning point of the ages. It is the paschal mystery of Jesus that alters everything. Yet, as we have seen from the Gospel itself, Matthew is anxious to show that Jesus himself lived out the perfection of the Old Law (for example, read 3:13-17 in the light of what we have just uncovered), as well as becoming, through his death and resurrection, the foundational figure of the new Law.

We would do Matthew an injustice if we did not see the great care he takes to show that Jesus does not abolish the old Law. Rather, Jesus perfects the Law, not only in what he does, but also in who he is. This is made particularly clear in Matt 1-2. The

events of the birth and infancy of Jesus, bridging the time between the former covenant into the days of Jesus are a fulfillment of the promises of old. Almost every scene in the Matthean infancy narrative indicates that the events of Jesus' birth and infancy are "to fulfil what was said by the prophet ..." (see 1:22-23, 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23). The same theme also flows into the ministry of Jesus (see 3:3; 4:6-7, 14-16). Matthew was convinced that Jesus was the perfection of all the promises of the Old Testament. The Gospel of Matthew begins in the Old Testament, through the genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17) where God's providential handling of the history of a chosen people is already obvious. Nevertheless, the promise of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the events of the birth and the public life of Jesus. Yet, Jesus appears to be extremely anxious that his life and ministry be the perfection of the Old Law. He himself attempts to live the Law perfectly, and he exhorts his followers to do the same.

However, after his death and resurrection, those same followers are instructed to reach out to the Gentile mission, commanded by a new Lord to teach a new Law, to forge a new community with a new initiation rite (28:16-20). This is possible only because the death and resurrection of Jesus are understood by the Gospel of Matthew as the 'turning point of the ages." The members of Matthew's Church are caught up in the Gentile mission. Nevertheless, they are still very aware that they are the product of the perfection of the old Law in the person and teaching of Jesus. As this is the case, the Evangelist can claim that it is his community, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who can regard themselves as the "true Israel." The synagogue-centered religion of post-war Judaism, which rejected and expelled the followers of Jesus, could not claim to be Israel. The Matthean Church was living out God's saving history, from Abraham to Jesus (see 1:1-

17) into the Gentile mission (28:16-20). The historical Israel had lost its way, and the true Israel was to be located in the missionary Church, the continuation of Jesus' perfection of the Law, transformed by the turning point of his death and resurrection.

The Matthean Literary Design and Its Theological Message

With this underlying understanding of the way God has acted through Jesus for the perfection of Israel and the bringing of Jesus' saving teaching to the ends of the earth, I will now consider how the plot of Matthew's Gospel, from 1:1 to 28:20 unfolds. The whole utterance of Matthew's Gospel can be read as a single story. It was written to communicate a point of view that is best understood through an analysis of literary design, otherwise known as its "plot." The plot of this Gospel can be described as the way the author has told the words and actions of Jesus, and the order in which they are told, so that a desired impact might be made upon the reader.

One of the features of the Gospel of Matthew is the presence of five lengthy discourses in the story of Jesus (5:1-7:28: the sermon on the mount; 10:1-11:1: the missionary discourse; 13:1-53: the parable discourse; 18:1-35: the discourse on Church life and order; 24:1-25:46: the discourse on the end of time and the final judgment). Many scholars have taken the five discourses as the main indication of the internal structure of the Gospel.[11] Such a structure, however, fails to give sufficient attention to the blending of the discourses with the narratives of Jesus' infancy, his preaching and healing, his instruction of disciples, his passion, death and resurrection.

Recent interest in the Gospel of Matthew as a narrative with an identifiable plot has shown that the discourses, although important, form part of larger narrative blocks. I

would like to propose the following design of the narrative of this Gospel, in the hope that it will serve as a guide to a more fruitful reading of the text itself.[12]

My explanation of the seeming contradiction which exists between the beginning (5:17-18) and the end (28:16-20) of the Gospel of Matthew is fundamental to my understanding of the overall theological and Christological argument of the Gospel. It leads me to conclude that this Gospel has the following major concerns:

1. Matthew wants to insert the story of Jesus into the history of God's saving plan, begun in the promises to Israel, perfected in the life and ministry of Jesus. His death and resurrection marked a turning point in that history, and from that moment on the Church has been sent out, as the true Israel, to the ends of the earth.
2. He understands and presents Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. In Matthew's story, this understanding of Jesus is rejected by traditional Israel.
3. The unfortunate rejection of Jesus by Israel leads to the establishment of the true Israel, now to be identified as the followers of Jesus, called for the first time in the Gospel of Matthew "the Church" (16:18; 18:17 [twice]).
4. But the Christian community cannot remain content with its role in salvation history as the true Israel. The risen Jesus commissions it to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.
5. At the heart of the unfolding plan and argument of the Gospel stand Jesus' death and resurrection as the turning point of the ages, and the great commission which sends the Church into the Gentile mission.

However, these theological themes are embedded in a plot, and plots are formed by a series of narrative units marked by a central scene which is the focus of the unit

(sometimes called "the kernel"), surrounded, supported and further explained by other narratives (sometimes called "satellites"). The overarching theme of each narrative unit can be gleaned from the major thrust of the key episode and the way in which other episodes flow from it, further explain it and are dependent upon it. But narrative units are never self-contained ends unto themselves. They also contain crisis moments that lead the reader further into the story. There are always hints in the unit that look forward to the end of the story. In a good story the reader is told enough to be made curious, without ever being given all the answers. Narrative texts keep promising the reader the great prize of understanding - later.[13]

On the basis of these simple principles for the understanding of the gradually emerging plot of a narrative, the story line of the Gospel of Matthew can be divided into six units.

1. *The First Narrative Unit: The Coming of the Messiah (1:1-4:16).*

The kernel of this unit is the birth of Jesus (2:1a). In a unit that makes its central theme the coming of the Messiah, his birth is crucial, no matter how briefly the event is mentioned. Indeed, the physical birth of Jesus is only alluded to, rather than described, in 2:1a. Nevertheless, it is the foundation for what precedes: the genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17) and the description of how his birth came about (1:18-25). It is also the foundation for what follows: the coming of the Wise Men from the East and Israel's response (2:2-12), the flight into Egypt, the slaying of the innocents and the return from Egypt, which leads to a further flight to Nazareth (2:13-23), the preaching of John the Baptist (3:1-12), the baptism of Jesus (3:13-17), and, finally, the

temptation of Jesus (4:1-11). This unit closes with Jesus' withdrawal to Capernaum, enabling Matthew to see this withdrawal as the fulfillment of Isaiah 8:23-9:1. Jesus enters the territory of Zebulon and Napthali, the Galilee of the Gentiles. The openness to the Gentiles that opened this section in 1:1, returns as it closes in 4:12-16.[14]

The genealogy (1:1-17) indicates that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises, and this is further strengthened in the annunciation to Joseph (1:18-25). Without this event the story cannot begin and 1:1-25 prepare for such a beginning. Although the appearance of John the Baptist (3:1-12), the baptism of Jesus (3:13-17), and the temptations in the wilderness (4:1-11) occur several years later, they depend upon Jesus' coming. Because Jesus of Nazareth has been born (see 2:23), because he has come, the question can now be asked: is he the Messiah or not? John testifies that he is (3:11, 14). God proclaims that Jesus is his beloved son (3:17). Satan tests Jesus to see if he is God's son (4:1-11).

From the beginning of the story several events foreshadow the ultimate outcome of the plot. The identification of Jesus as "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1) suggests that the Jewish Messiah will have meaning for all Abraham's children, Jew and Gentile (see Gen 12:1-4). The homage of the Magi (2:11) points to the coming of the Gentiles, as does John's warning to the Pharisees and the Sadducees that "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (3:9). On the other hand, Jerusalem's inability to accept what the Scriptures proclaim, that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem, and Herod's persecution of the infant King of the Jews prefigure the passion. Satan's messianic temptations show that Jesus'

messiahship will be misunderstood in terms of power and authority (see the mockery found in the passion story 27:39-44 where many of the terms used by Satan re-appear). Thus the birth of Jesus (2:1a) initiates a crisis in Israel that will not be resolved until Jesus' death and resurrection.

2. *Second Narrative Unit: The Messiah's Ministry to Israel of Preaching, Teaching and Healing (4:17-11:1).*

The kernel of this unit is found at 4:17, the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The arrest of John the Baptist (4:12) leads Jesus to return to Galilee and begin his mission (4:12-17), limited exclusively "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:6). No longer is Jesus a figure in the background. He is actively present to the story, preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17). This section of the Gospel contains the beginnings of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (4:12-25), the discourse of the sermon on the mount (5:1-7:28), a series of nine miracles, separated by brief episodes, all of which are related to the vocation of a disciple of Jesus (8:1-9:38), and the discourse on the mission of the disciples (10:1-11:1).

Jesus' messianic ministry of preaching, teaching and healing dominates the entire section. This theme is repeated several times in the narrator's commentaries upon his story, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the section: "And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (4:23. See also 9:35; 11:1). He preaches and teaches through the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:28) and his discourse on mission (10:1-11:1). Between the two discourses he works

a series of nine miracles to show that he is mighty not only in word but also in deed (8:1-9:38). In brief narratives located between the nine miracle stories, he associates disciples with his ministry of teaching, preaching and healing (8:14-22; 9:9-17; 9:35-38). Jesus has compassion for the crowds, "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36), and he invites his disciples to pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the harvest (9:37).

However, Jesus does not only exhort to prayer. His compassion and his concern that the Gospel of the kingdom be preached leads him to call his twelve disciples, to give them authority to do all the things which he has done so far in the story, and to send them out on a mission "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:1-15). In the discourse that follows, Jesus describes how they are to behave toward others and toward one another, as they share the mission (10:1-11:1).

This section of the plot, read carefully, shows that from its very inception, the mission of Jesus to Israel already produces crises. On the one hand the crowds are astonished at Jesus' teaching (7:28-29), and after the healing of a deaf-mute they are led to say, "Never was anything like this seen in Israel" (9:33). The disciples respond generously to Jesus' call (4:20-22), and he sends them on his mission (10:1-11:1). On the other hand, the Pharisees complain that "he casts out demons by the prince of demons" (9:34), and Jesus suggests that their ethical behavior is not in line with their teaching (see 5:20). The disciples are warned that their mission, like Jesus' mission, will cause division and hatred (10:16-25, 34-36). The mixed reception that greets the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus already tells the reader that the Messiah may be rejected.

Other events in this section foreshadow the ultimate outcome of the plot. The faith of a centurion points to the coming of the Gentiles, and leads Jesus to say: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness" (8:11-12). An accusation, leveled at Jesus during his passion (see 26:65), is aimed at Jesus for the first time when he forgives the sins of a man who is paralyzed: "This man is blaspheming" (9:3). Jesus' ministry to Israel will not be accepted.

3. *The Third Narrative Unit: The Crisis in the Messiah's Ministry (11:2-16:12).*

After the conclusion of the first phase of Jesus' ministry (4:12-11:1), John the Baptist, still in prison, sends messengers to enquire: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (11:3). This question hangs over the whole narrative unit. "The Coming One" is an expression used to speak of the Messiah (see 3:11; 21:9). Jesus uses the question of the Baptist to review his ministry so far: people are healed and the good news is preached (see 11:4-5), but John's question raises another problem that Israel must answer. On the basis of Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching and healing, now amply displayed in the story so far (especially in the previous narrative section, 4:12-11:1), will Israel recognize Jesus as the Coming One, or will Israel be offended by this activity of the Messiah?

A chain of events responds negatively and positively to the question raised by John the Baptist: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Some will decide that he is the one who is to come, while others will decide, once and for all, that they must look for another. Jesus will take appropriate action in each case. A

rift opens between Jesus and traditional Israel, while a close bond between Jesus and his disciples develops. They are the nucleus of the new people of God.

On the negative side, Jesus points to the disappointing reception his ministry has received from "this generation" (11:6-19) and from the unrepentant cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida (11:20-24). But Jesus then issues an unforgettable invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden" (11:28). Jesus offers a yoke and a burden that are easy and light, in contrast to the yoke and the burden of a people who refuse to accept their Messiah. This challenge leads to a series of episodes through which the Pharisees either question or test Jesus' authority. The relationship between Jesus and the leaders of Israel is one of anger and distrust (12:1-45), but he establishes a new family of God, not built upon bonds of blood or nation: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother" (12:50).

No longer able to speak directly to the crowds, he must turn to a parabolic form of speech, "because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (13:13). In the parable discourse of 13:1-52 Jesus turns decisively away from Israel, to make himself known to those to whom it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (13:11). After the discourse, as if in answer to his distancing himself from his own people, Jesus is rejected at his hometown, Nazareth (13:54-58).

Throughout this section, the Pharisees (sometimes with the scribes) attack Jesus for violating the Sabbath (12:1-14), for casting out demons (12:22-24), and for transgressing the traditions of the elders (15:1-2). They also demand signs (12:38;

16:1). After Jesus cures an afflicted demoniac (12:22), even the crowds ask in disbelief if Jesus can really be the Son of David (12:23).

Positively, Jesus' disciples maintain their faith. Immediately before the parable discourse, he identifies the disciples as his true family (12:48-50). In the parable discourse, he tells them: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (13:11). At the end of the discourse the disciples say they have understood all that Jesus has said, and Jesus identifies them as scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven (13:51-52). Yet even the faith of the disciples is not perfect. It is described as "little faith" (14:17). They do not understand the parable about clean and unclean (15:16), and they are annoyed by the Canaanite woman (15:23). But they still confess that Jesus is the Son of God (13:33), and they understand that the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees refers to their teaching (16:12).

A clear line of demarcation is now emerging in the narrative between Israel and its leaders who have become increasingly hostile to Jesus and the believing but fragile disciples who accept and understand him. The story has arrived at a major crisis. Israel is blind to Jesus' teaching, and the religious leaders attack him. Jesus responds by speaking in parables, a speech which Israel cannot understand. As in the narrative section which dealt with Jesus' preaching and healing in Israel, where the storyteller summarized his activity, once again, on three occasions the reader finds that "Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there" (12:15. See 14:13a; 15:21). The narrator remarks that Jesus "withdraws" himself from Israel.

A section of the Gospel (14:1-16:12), highlighted by the two bread miracles of 14:13-21 and 15:32-39, now follows. Jesus deals with his fragile disciples, and their equally fragile leader, Peter (14:22-33). He instructs and argues with the leaders of Israel (15:1-20), and feeds both Israel (14:13-21) and the Gentiles (15:32-39), who have glorified the God of Israel for the miracles he does among them (15:29-31). Jesus has not abandoned Israel and he continues to instruct and nourish the people. However, he increasingly focuses his attention upon his disciples. They are the nucleus of the new nation which will believe in him, and they must be wary of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (see 16:1-12).

As in the earlier parts of the Gospel's plot, there are further hints of the end of the story throughout this unit. Jesus is identified with Isaiah's suffering servant (12:17-21), but to the text of Isaiah 42:1-4, 9, the author adds another passage from Isaiah (11:10): "and in his name will the Gentiles hope" (Matt 12:21). Although initially refusing to reach beyond the boundaries of Israel (15:24), Jesus eventually responds to the requests of the Canaanite woman because of the Gentile woman's great faith, in contrast to the little faith of the disciples (15:28). Because Israel is blind to Jesus' messiahship and the religious leaders attack him, Jesus will turn to all disciples who believe, even Gentiles.

4. *The Fourth Narrative Unit: The Messiah's Journey to Jerusalem (16:13-20:34).*

One of the most quoted, and memorable, of all Gospel stories forms the kernel event that controls this narrative unit. The very first scene is Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi (16:13-28). In this scene:

i. In response to Jesus' question about public opinion concerning his person, Peter confesses, in the name of the disciples, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (vv. 13-16)

ii. Jesus announces his death and resurrection (v. 21)

iii. Jesus associates his disciples with his own passion (vv. 23-28).

The previous section of the Gospel (11:2-16:12) involved struggle with the question raised by John the Baptist: "Are you the one who is to come" (11:2). The encounter between Jesus, Peter and the disciples provides the answer to John the Baptist's question (11:3): Jesus is the Coming One, the Messiah, the Son of God. But this public proclamation of Jesus' messiahship is only half the story. Although there have been hints for the reader that Jesus is destined to be rejected and suffer, the scene at Caesarea Philippi explicitly opens a new direction for the narrative. "From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (16:21). The explicit linking of the proclamation of Jesus' messiahship with his suffering produces a further crisis. From this point on Jesus' disciples must decide if they can follow a Messiah who calls them to suffering and even death.

The controlling texts in this narrative unit are Jesus' predictions of his passion and resurrection. After the first of these predictions there are a further two passion predictions, strategically placed through this part of the story (17:22-23; 20:17-19). They further develop the key event of Caesarea Philippi by regularly reminding the reader of Jesus' destiny at Jerusalem. However, the reader is not only faced with the

information provided by Jesus' regular predictions of his death. The reader also responds to the reaction of the disciples in this section. Although there are encounters with the Pharisees and other characters in the story, they only serve to highlight Jesus' instruction of the disciples, as he calls them to follow their Messiah to a cross. The disciples, in turn, demonstrate that they do not completely understand the nature of Jesus' messiahship and the demands it entails.

The disciples witness, but misunderstand the Transfiguration (17:1-8) and immediately show the littleness of their faith in their inability to cure the epileptic boy (17:14-21). The second prediction of the passion re-orients the narrative towards the cross (17:22-23), and the strange story of the payment of the Temple tax associates Peter with Jesus (17:24-27). The discourse on Church order then follows (18:1-19:1). This detailed discourse on how the community is to treat the sinners and the frail within their midst is created by a question raised by the disciples: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (18:1). The Pharisees' question about divorce leads to Jesus' instruction of his disciples on the sacredness of what God has joined together (19:1-12), and the encounter with the rich young man is the springboard for Jesus' instruction of his disciples on wealth and possessions (19:16-30). Throughout, the disciples are taught that, like little children, they must be open and receptive to the ways of God (see 19:13-15).

The counter-cultural nature of this teaching is reinforced by the parable of the master of the vineyard who calls whomever he wishes to work in his vineyard, whenever he wishes to call them, and pays whatever he decides. After all, he is the Lord of the vineyard (20:1-16). The third passion prediction (20:17-19), however,

does not lead to the disciples' conversion to the way of Jesus. The sons of Zebedee, through their mother, seek positions of authority, and when the other ten hear of it, they are indignant (20:20-28). This narrative unit closes with the story of the two blind men who proclaim their faith in Jesus as he comes out of Jericho. Abandoning all because of their belief in him, "they received their sight and followed him" (20:29-34). The reader, who has followed fragile disciples through this section, learns from the blind men how to commit oneself to the following of Jesus without any conditions or expectations of human success.

Thus, the event of Caesarea Philippi confronts the disciples with a vision of messiahship and discipleship that they cannot fully integrate at this stage of the story. Nevertheless, the disciples do not abandon Jesus, and he continues to instruct them. At the transfiguration, the Father confirms that Jesus is his beloved son (17:5), and later Jesus explains that Elijah has returned in the person of John the Baptist (17:13). Jesus helps Peter to pay the Temple tax (17:24-27) and then delivers a major discourse on the kind of relationships that should mark his new community (18:1-35). Peter is able to boast that the disciples have left everything in order to follow Jesus (19:27), and Jesus promises that they will sit on "twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (19:28). The parable of the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16), which follows this promise, suggests that the disciples are among the last who will be first (19:30; 20:16).

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, two blind men call him the Son of David (20:30-31). Their confession of Jesus' messiahship, coming at the end of the unit (20:29-34), forms an inclusion with Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, which began it

(16:13-28).[15] The blind are among the insignificant people who accept Jesus' messiahship. The events of this part of the story lead Jesus to Jerusalem, the city of his destiny. The virtual elimination of the crowd, which only appears incidentally throughout this section of the story (see 17:14; 19:2; 20:29, 31), and the emphasis upon Jesus' teaching the disciples suggests that the disciples will form the nucleus of Jesus' new community, despite their inability to accept completely Jesus' way to resurrection, by means of the cross.

5. *The Fifth Narrative Unit: The Messiah's Death and Resurrection (21:1-28:15).*

The kernel event in this section of the Gospel is the cleansing of the Temple. It happens after Jesus enters Jerusalem as its messianic king (see 21:9), and as a consequence of that fact (21:1-17). The event serves as a crisis because it confronts the inhabitants of Jerusalem with the question of Jesus' person and authority. This question plays out in the rest of the story, leading inevitably to his final rejection and death on the one hand, but to his victory and resurrection as God's anointed one on the other. Only in Matthew's story of the cleansing of the Temple do the Jewish leaders question Jesus' authority for such outrageous action (see 21:15-16).

The event of the messianic purification of the Temple, powerfully commented upon by the insertion of the destruction of the barren fig tree, supplies the proximate occasion for Jesus' death. A theme emerges at the cleansing of the Temple that will be repeated on two further occasions as the account draws to its dramatic conclusion. At Jesus' trial, witnesses make the accusation: "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the Temple of God, and to build it in three days'" (26:61). During the crucifixion,

Jesus is mocked: "You who would destroy the Temple and build it in three days, save yourself!" (27:40). At his death the prophetic gesture of Jesus which began this narrative section becomes a reality: "And behold, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (27:51).

After Jesus cleanses the Temple, the chief priests and elders of the people ask, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (21:23). When the religious leaders refuse to answer Jesus' counter-question about the baptism of John, Jesus utters three parables against them (21:28-22:14). In the second of them, he announces: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it" (21:43).

After the parables, the bitter invective against the leaders of Israel continues through a series of controversies with them: with the Pharisees, over the payment of taxes (22:15-22); with the Sadducees, over the resurrection from the dead (22:23-33); and with a Scribe, over the greatest commandment (22:34-40). These debates reduce Jesus' opponents to silence: "And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions" (22:46).

As if this were not enough, Jesus next denounces the scribes and Pharisees in a series of seven woes (23:13-36) and pronounces an oracle of doom over Jerusalem (23:37-39). The old world, represented by the established authorities in Israel and the city of Jerusalem, can no longer claim the allegiance of the true people of God: "The Scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do, for they preach, but do not practice" (23:2). Having disposed of the traditional leaders of God's people, Jesus next turns to his disciples,

the nucleus of the true people of God. He warns them not to be led astray. Many things must happen before God's plan is ultimately achieved. Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple and his return as the Son of Man (24:1-51). However, between the "now" of Jesus' final days with them and the "end time" when the Son of Man will come in glory, there will be a long "in between time." This will be the time of the Church, the new people of God. Therefore, Jesus instructs the disciples to produce works of righteousness during the period of his absence (25:1-46).

The passion opens with a comment from the narrator indicating that the teaching is over, and words from Jesus that look back to his earlier passion predictions. The turning point of the ages has arrived: "When Jesus had finished all these sayings he said to his disciples, you know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified" (26:1-2). But the events of the passion of Jesus follow as a result of events initiated by the cleansing of the Temple. Anger and animosity broke out on that occasion which has gone on unabated ever since.

Rather than analyze Matthew's passion narrative passage by passage, I will limit myself to an indication of the way the main thrust of the plot is achieved through Matthew's passion. The sequence of events, and the major thrust of Matthew 26:1-27:66, matches that of the Gospel of Mark. They can be traced in my earlier summary of the Markan passion narrative.[16]

Ironically, those who condemn him to death proclaim Jesus' messianic status. This happens at the Jewish trial, where the messianic terms used at Caesarea Philippi are repeated in the question of the high priest and the response of Jesus: "'I adjure you by

the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God'. Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven'" (26:63-64). The proceedings of the Roman trial insist that Jesus is "King of the Jews" (see 27:11, 29) and "Christ" (27:17, 22).

During the passion, the people who have been passive through all the angry encounters between Jesus and the leaders of Israel, under the influence of their leaders, reject Jesus as the Messiah, and choose a false messianic pretender, Barabbas, in his place (27:15-23). Indeed, they support their demand that Jesus be crucified with terrible words indicating that the former people of God has made its choice: "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). But a Gentile soldier and those with him confess that Jesus was truly the Son of God (27:54).

In accordance with Jesus' predictions, God raises him on the third day, despite the efforts of the Jewish leaders to make "the sepulcher secure until the third day" (26:62-66). Matthew's resurrection account moves from the negative report of the guarding of the secured sepulcher (26:62-66), to the positive experience of the women who discover the empty tomb, and encounter Jesus (27:1-10), to the lies that are spread abroad when the guards report the events at the tomb to the Jewish leaders (vv. 11-15), to the final climactic positive experience of Jesus' encounter with the disciples, and their final commission (vv. 16-20). The fifth narrative unit is the climax of Israel's opposition to the Messiah. As Israel rejects Jesus, the Gentiles in the person of the Roman soldiers begin to accept him, and the risen Lord encounters his fragile, but

believing, disciples. Thus, as the plot moves towards its conclusion, the Gospel moves from Israel to the nations.

6. *The Sixth Narrative Unit: The Great Commission (28:16-20).*

This concluding scene stands alone. It is an ending that opens to the future. For the first time, Jesus allows the disciples to teach and to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles. Earlier, as we had occasion to see, he limited their mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (see 10:5-6; 15:24).

Although the story ends here, the reader knows what will take place after the great commission, thanks to Jesus' parable discourse (13:1-52) and his eschatological discourse (24:1-25:46). In these discourses Jesus tells several parables which explain what will happen in the period between his resurrection and his return as the Son of Man at the close of the age. There will be periods of persecution when many will fall away (13:21). There will be a mixture of good and bad within the Church (13:24-30). Many will grow weary waiting for his return (25:1-13), but at the end of the age Jesus will come as the royal Son of Man to judge the nations (25:31-46). Thus the great commission (28:16-20) is not an ending but a beginning that invites the reader to discipleship and to the evangelization of the nations.

The Experience of the Matthean Community

If this is the story of Jesus as it has been told in the Gospel of Matthew, one further question needs to be raised before we turn to a closer reading of the story of Jesus' birth and infancy. Is it possible for us to recapture the experience of the Christian

community for which the Gospel of Matthew was written? Given the very clear understanding which the author and his readers appear to have had of the Jewish world and its traditions, the community was obviously largely Jewish in origin. The Jewish background and religious formation of this early Christian community led its members to recognize the greatness of God's ways with his people of old. But it was not only the God of Israel who continued to be at the center of their belief; they also struggled to understand how they related to the chosen people of old, the people of Israel. In fact, one could say that the crisis which produced the Gospel of Matthew could be called "an identity crisis."

We may lose sight of how much it would have cost the earliest Christians - mostly Jewish people - to leave their traditional faith and practice to enter a Christian community, such as the one that eventually produced the Gospel of Matthew. This was a most difficult journey for believing Jews to make, even though they may have come to believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. Their faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Son of the living God (see 16:16) was causing them great suffering, as their long-time friends from the synagogue in the town (probably Antioch in Syria) could no longer abide the presence of these renegades in their community. In fact, it is possible that their old friends eventually came to pray, each day:

> For apostates may there be no hope and may the Nazarenes and the heretics suddenly perish (Twelfth Blessing of the synagogue prayer, the *Shemoneh Esreh*).[17]

To be separated from their former way of life, so closely associated with the synagogue, meant that almost every aspect of their day-to-day life was changed. They were snubbed

by their former friends from "the synagogue across the road."[18] They could no longer marry their sons and daughters within a community whose faith they shared and whose way of life they had always respected and also attempted to live. In a non-Jewish city (like Syrian Antioch), they were not able to go into the confusion of the market place and buy their food from places where they had always been welcome, and where they knew it had been prepared in the time-honored and sacred ways.

Although these practical difficulties were many, they would have labored under an even greater problem. They were now separated from what was the heart of the life of a good Jew in the time when Matthew was writing his Gospel. They were excluded from the synagogue celebration of the Torah and its authoritative transmission by the Rabbi, the teacher, the authentic interpreter of the greatest of all teachers: Moses. Cut off from the world they knew and loved so much, they had to find a new "Teacher" and a new authority. If the synagogue "across the road" possessed Moses' Law and its authentic interpreter in the Rabbi (see, for example, 19:7 and 22:24), to whom could this struggling Jewish Christian Church now turn? The Matthean Jesus provides the answer to that question:

> The Scribes and the Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses. So practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do. For they preach but do not practice. ... You are not to be called teacher, for you have one Teacher and you are all brethren. And call no one on earth your Father, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, because you have one Master: the Christ (23:2-3, 8-11).

The members of Matthew's community are further instructed that they are, in their own turn, to teach all nations to observe all the things that Jesus had taught them (see 28:20). The Gospel of Matthew exists because this particular early Christian community took those words seriously and acted upon them. Jesus was their one teacher, and they taught what he had taught them. This is the other side of the Matthean experience that must not be forgotten in reading this Gospel. As they "went out" from traditional synagogue Judaism, they found themselves immersed in a large city that was dominated by powerful Roman culture and practices.[19] This story of Jesus, as reported in the Gospel of Matthew, had to face two major environments. On the one hand, the Matthean community was located in a place where there was a strong Jewish presence, and the members of the community had to come to understand how the events of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ determined their relationships with Judaism. On the other hand, this same community had to recognize that it was now living in a world populated by people who were Gentiles, predominantly Romans, and that the message had to be preached to "all the nations" (28:19).

Conclusion

Matthew has told his story of Jesus to a community which had been forcibly separated from Judaism, and which probably had members longing for the old and trusted ways. They were hesitant, and perhaps unwilling, to go out into the Gentile mission, to cross the bridge into the Gentile world. He was aware of the fragility of his own community, some of whom were tempted to slip back into the ways of the synagogue, yet certain in his faith that God had broken into human history irrevocably in the birth, life,

death and resurrection of Jesus. To bridge the gap between the old and the new, Matthew draws out of his story his central theme: during his life Jesus lived and asked for the perfection of the old ways, and then, through his death and resurrection the turning point of the ages came to pass. The past, the present, and the future can be explained in terms of Jesus Christ.[20]

Matthew tells his largely Jewish community that despite the hostility and the ridicule of the synagogue across the road, they have lost nothing. God's ways in the world have now been fulfilled, as the Old Testament has led to and been perfected in Jesus. The old ways are now perfected further in the universal presence of Jesus, through his Church, to the whole world. For Matthew, the true Israel is not to be found in the post-War synagogue stoutly defending its traditions to maintain its identity, but in the Christian community, now irrevocably committed to the Gentile mission.

Many of the Jewish people in Matthew's community were wondering if perhaps they had lost their way by becoming Christians, but Matthew's message dispels that doubt. He builds a bridge between the Old and the New, and that bridge is the person of Jesus. The puzzled members of Matthew's Church are told that they now belong to the new and perfect Israel, which has been given its new and perfect law by a new Moses on a new Sinai (see Matt 5:1-48).

Matthew never destroys the old. He has a deep respect for 1,000 years of sacred history. In fact, he rewrites Mark 2:22 which spoke of the uselessness of the "old" wineskins. He wishes to show the ongoing value and importance of the "old," side by side with the "new."

> Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matt 9:17).

As he leads a traditional Jewish Christian community into the challenge of the gentile mission he looks back to Jesus. He tells his story so that the community might see the perfection of the old, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the newness which they are living.

The Christian Church can never evade the challenge of the risen Lord questioning us and leading us into our "gentile mission." We too face the new ways and cultures that surround us, teaching them all that Jesus has taught. In our situation Matthew's Gospel tells us that we must allow ourselves to be led into a future that only God can create. Jesus will be with us until the close of the age. We are called to leave the securities of old and safe ways, yet always respecting those ways. They came into existence as the fruit of accumulated wisdom and experience. They are not simply to be discounted, as an appreciation of them prepares us for the newness of God's plans. God does not come to us "new" in every new situation; he is always among us in a "history of salvation," however much the turns of this history may surprise us. Little wonder that Matthew described himself - and consequently all dedicated Christians - in a tiny biographical insertion which both gives his secret away and challenges all who follow him as disciples of Jesus:

> Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things both new and old (13:52).

NOTES

[1] For a thorough study of the earliest use of the Gospel of Matthew by Christian writers, see E. Masseaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus* (trans. N. J. Belval and S. Hecht; ed. A. J. Bellinzoni; New Gospel Studies 5; Macon: Mercer, 1993).

[2] For a review of this period, see S. P. Kealy, *Mark's Gospel: A History of Its Interpretation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 7-57.

[3] Among the Gospels, only in Matt 16:18 and 18:17 (twice) does the Greek word *ekklesia* (assembly, congregation, church) appear. On the origins and the significance of this expression, see E. W. Stegemann and W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement. A Social History of Its First Century* (trans. O. C. Dean Jr.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 262-87.

[4] See above, pp. 00-00.

[5] For an excellent study of the use of the theme of "the mountain" in the Gospel of Matthew, see T. L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain. A Study in Matthean Theology* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985). For a briefer, but also excellent, treatment, see D. A. Lee, *Transfiguration* (New Century Theology; London/New York: Continuum, 2005), 43-46.

[6] For more detailed discussion of the narrative theory that follows, see G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method* (trans. J. E. Lewin; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 33-85, and the excellent summary of Genette's contribution in S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New Accents; London: Methuen, 1983), 43-58.

[7] It appears strange to us that some sort of "blame" has to be laid at the feet of either the parents or even the child in the womb. But this way of thinking starts with the sound theological principle that God does not make mistakes. In John 9:3-5 Jesus points out that this birth was not a mistake, as it serves God's greater design.

[8] See, for example, the authoritative interpretation of W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; International Critical Commentary: Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-1997), 1:482-503.

[9] For what follows, on the "salvation history" perspective in Matthew, see J. P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel* (Analecta Biblica 71; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 12-25.

[10] See J. P. Meier, *Matthew* (New Testament Message 3; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980), 142-48. Notice, however, that Jesus' death and resurrection only draw eschatological events into the human story. This marks the "turning point of the ages." It

is not the end of time. The Matthean Christians were firmly located in a time and a place, awaiting the final end of all history (see Matt 24).

[11] This suggestion was first made by B. W. Bacon, "The 'Five Books' of Matthew against the Jews," *The Expositor* 15 (1918): 56-66. It has been repeated many times since then. See, for example, the valuable popular commentary of Meier, *Matthew*, vii-viii, xii.

[12] What follows depends on the rich study of F. J. Matera, "The Plot of Matthew's Gospel," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987): 233-253.

[13] These terms (kernel, satellite, etc.) have been taken by Matera (see previous note) from the influential work on narrative by S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 53-56.

[14] In this I differ from Frank J. Matera (see above, note 12) who closes the first unit at 4:11, and regards 4:12-17 as the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

[15] An "inclusion" is another literary expression. It is used to indicate a narrative, or a section of a narrative, which begins and ends in much the same way. The inclusion acts as a type of "frame" around the intervening material. In this case, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (16:13-28) as the passage opens, while the two blind men at Jericho confess Jesus as the Son of David (20:29-34). This "inclusion" closes the narrative unit by the repetition of a confession that was found at its beginning.

[16] See above, pp. 000-000.

[17] This twelfth benediction, the so-called *Birkat ha-minim*, the blessing of the heretics, has long been regarded as originating in the same post-war setting as the Gospel of Matthew, some time in the 80's of the first Christian century. For this position, and its importance for the formation of the Gospel of Matthew, see W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 256-315. However, the dating and the wording of the so-called "blessing" is now the subject of considerable discussion. See P. W. van der Horst, "The *Birkat ha-minim* in Recent Research," *The Expository Times* 105 (1994): 363-68. It should not be dated so early, and we cannot be sure of its wording, but it expresses the sentiments that the "parting of the ways" may have generated among Jews. Similar disrespect for the Jews was also shown by early Christians, and there are traces of this in the Gospel of Matthew, who claims that the followers of Jesus have become the true Israel.

[18] This expression, which helps localize the experience of the Matthean Christians, is taken from K. Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis XX; Lund: Gleerup, 1968), xi.

[19] A scholar who has done a great deal to bring discussion of the the Roman world into an understanding of the Gospel of Matthew is Warren Carter. See his important studies, W. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins. A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll:

Orbis Books, 2000), and Idem, *Matthew. Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004).

[20] As Meier, *Law and History*, 89, puts it: "It is Jesus in whom all prophecies are fulfilled, Jesus who authoritatively interprets, radicalizes, and rescinds the Mosaic Law, Jesus who by his death-resurrection brings about the turning of the ages, Jesus who now rules the cosmos as exalted Son of Man."

CHAPTER FIVE

Reading Matthew 1:1-2:23: The Infancy Narrative

The opening pages of the Gospel of Matthew report a number of "beginnings." In Matt 1:1-17, the Gospel *begins* by delving into the history that led to the birth of Jesus, the Christ. The life of Jesus *begins* with the annunciation to Joseph, explaining the divine origin of his betrothed's expected child (vv. 18-25). A double response to Jesus *begins* once Jesus is borne. In Jerusalem, he is sought out by wise men from the East and rejected by a king (2:1-12). Suffering and even death at the hands of the powers in Israel *begins* as Jesus is taken to Egypt, innocent children are slain, and Joseph must flee again, unable to return to his home, the place of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem. They must go to Nazareth (2:13-23). Matthew 1:1-2:23 acts as a classical "prologue" to the narrative. The stories surrounding the buildup toward Jesus' birth and its aftermath provide information *for the reader of the Gospel* that the *characters in the story* do not have.[1]

The Literary Shape of Matthew 1:1-2:23

Matthew 1-2 opens in 1:1, introducing and summarizing the genealogy that follows ("the book of the genealogy"). The genealogy closes in v. 17 with an inclusion, repeating the theme and the words of v. 1 ("all the generations"). The list of generations does more than provide Jesus' pre-history; it also serves to introduce the reader to the Christology of the Gospel as a whole. The data of the genealogy provided by vv. 2-17 confirms the statement of v. 1: "Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham." This story of Jesus' pre-history leads into the way Jesus was born: the description of Joseph's dilemma and decision concerning Mary's pregnancy and the dream-annunciation that concludes with Joseph taking Mary as his

wife (vv. 18-25). The story of how Jesus came to be born is closely connected to the genealogy by means of the word "the birth" (Greek: *genesis*) in v. 18. The first major section of Matthew 1-2 is thus carefully bound together (v. 1: "the book of the genealogy" [*geneseōs*]; v. 17: "generations" [*geneai*]; v. 18: "birth" [*genesis*]). A shadow of impending threat also hovers over the narrative: a threat to the continuation of the line of Israel in the genealogy (1:1-17) and the threat to Mary and her child (vv. 18-23).

A wider world and further important Matthean themes enter the narrative in 2:1-12. However, a literary link is maintained between 1:1-25 and 2:1-23 by the announcement of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. The expression "Jesus was born" looks back to the parallel expressions in vv. 1, 17 and 18. This birth brings wise men from the East seeking out Jesus. They come to Jerusalem, broodingly fearful at the news of the birth of someone "born king of the Jews" (v. 2), in Bethlehem (vv. 5-6, 8). Jesus is born in the city of David. As the Gentile visitors adore the newly born king, Herod plots his death. In vv. 13-23, Joseph experiences another dream-encounter with an angel of the Lord. He flees with his wife and Jesus to Egypt, and Herod slays the young males from the region of Bethlehem. On the death of Herod, Joseph is summoned to return to Israel, but unable to settle in Archelaus' Judea, he does not go back to Bethlehem. He and his family flee a second time, to dwell in a city called Nazareth (2:13-23). Opposition and even the threat of violent death are foreshadowed in the episodes of 2:1-23.[2]

There are two major sections in Matthew 1:1-2:23, each one articulated in two further episodes.[3]

1:1-25: *The Origins of Jesus are described: Who is Jesus?*

1:1-17: The book of the genealogical pre-history of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham

1:18-25: The divine origin of Jesus, the Emmanuel who will save his people from their sins.

2:1-23: *The destiny of Jesus is foreshadowed.*

2:1-12: Jesus, rejected by Herod, is revealed to Gentiles

2:13-23: Jesus comes from Egypt, and will be known as a Nazarene.

Matthew 1:1-25: Who is Jesus?

The Genealogy of the Son of David (1:1-17)

Biblical genealogies explain the rights of belonging to a certain family or tribe (see, for example, Gen 6:14-25), they undergird status (see, for example, Ezra 2:62-63; Neh 7:64-65), they structure history into epochs (see, for example, Gen 5:1-32; 10:1-32), and they link the personality at the center of the narrative with a significant past (see, for example, Gen 11:10-32).[4] There is a strong sense of continuation with this biblical tradition in the Matthean genealogy of Jesus. Matthew 1:1 affirms that Jesus' genealogy traces the pre-history of the Christ, the son of David, the Son of Abraham. The coming of Jesus as "Christ" fulfills Jewish messianic hopes, made more explicit in the description of the Christ as the Son of David.[5] Among the various expressions of messianic hope in Israel, one of the more important was the return of someone from the house of David, to restore God's people with the re-establishment of a royal authority, answerable only to God. The claim that Jesus is the son of David is important for Matthew's infancy story, especially 1:18-23. It is central to the annunciation to Joseph. Joseph is a son of David, and he is told that he must respond to God's design by accepting Jesus as his son (see 1:20). Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish hopes.

But Jesus is also described as "son of Abraham." Abraham (Abram), the father of Israel, is also a gift of God to all nations. The words of God to Abram/Abraham across his story, reported in Genesis, make this clear. In his call to leave his father's home to become, in his own turn, the father of a great nation, he is also promised: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; *and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Gen 12:3). Before the strange rite by which God establishes a covenant with him (Gen 15:7-20), Abram is promised: "'Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to remember them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendents be'" (vv. 5-6). In another crucial context, associated with the shift from the name Abram to Abraham, God makes another promise: "Behold my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:4).[6] Jesus' origins lie in Abraham. He is the Christ, and he fulfills the promises of God to Israel, and to all the nations. Matthew addresses one of the fundamental issues that drives his story of Jesus in the very first line of the Gospel. Jesus is heir to the promises made to David and kept alive in Judaism, but he is also heir to the wider promise of blessings made to the Gentiles through Abraham. As Jesus' Davidic origins are further ratified by his becoming the supposed son of Joseph (1:20, 24), so also is his fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham ratified by the coming of the wise men from the Gentile world of the East to pay homage to the king of the Jews (2:2, 11). Three personal names appear in 1:1: Jesus Christ, David, and Abraham. These names reappear, in reverse order, across the genealogy: Abraham (v. 2), David (v. 6), and Jesus Christ (v. 16).

Everything in the genealogy indicates that it should be read as an articulation of God's providential plan. There are three turning points in the list, and these turning points mark major moments in Israel's history. David appears in v. 6, the exile to Babylon is reported in v. 11, and the birth of Jesus, who is called Christ, is announced in v. 16. In v. 17 the genealogy closes recalling v. 1, making explicit the tri-partite structure based on three

epochs in Israel's history. In doing so, the Evangelist adds a further detail, as the number "fourteen" may have gone unobserved in a first reading: "So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations" (v. 17). The shaping of three generations of fourteen can hardly reflect the *facts of history*. Perhaps seven to eight hundred years passed from Abraham to David (fourteen generations), a little more than four hundred years from David and the Babylonian exile (fourteen generations), and almost six hundred years from the exile to the birth of Jesus (fourteen generations). Many (but not all) of the names can be traced in records of Israel's past. Material that came to him from the Old Testament and popular traditions (*historical data*) has been used by Matthew to show God at work (*theological truths*).[7]

The first period, a sacred history based upon the biblical story, leads to David (vv. 2-6a). He does not receive the seed of Abraham through the older Ishmael, but through the divinely chosen Isaac (v. 2; Gen 16-17). A similar divine action makes Jacob, not Esau, the one who continues the line from Isaac (v. 2; Gen 27). Among the twelve sons of Jacob, it is Judah who continues the line (v. 3; see Gen 49:10). Finally, within the house of Judah, it is to the least indicated but divinely chosen David that the scepter is given (v. 6; 1 Sam 16:1-13). Only a selection of the kings in the Davidic line is found in the second group of fourteen (vv. 6b-11). It closes with Jechoniah who, despite the exile, is reported at the head of the final section (v. 12) as having had a son. Thus the line passing from Abraham, through David, and eventually to Jesus, is divinely ordered. The final section (vv. 12-16) connects the end of the monarchy through a series of largely unheard of names, descendents of the biblical Zerubbabel, who rebuilt the temple in 520-515 B.C.E. (Ezra 3:2-8; Neh 12:1; Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2-23). From this line appears the anointed king, Jesus the Christ. Jesus is a

product of the action of God who has providentially directed history toward the birth of the Messiah.

Scholarly speculation upon the symbolic possibilities of the number "fourteen" is never-ending.[8] The most likely explanation for the use of fourteen comes from the fact that in Hebrew, where the letters of the alphabet also have numerical value, links can be forged between numbers and names (*gematria*). In this case, the sum of the letters that form "David" (*dalet [4]-waw [6] –dalet [4]*) is fourteen. The perfect (three-fold) repetition of a number that also means "David" produces Jesus, the anointed Messiah.

The final puzzle that has been a source of speculation across the centuries is the naming of women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus: Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), Bathsheba (v. 6a: "the wife of Uriah"). Vv. 1-17 read aloud makes it obvious that the names of the women break the typical rhythm of a genealogy, where father begets son, and son becomes father: "A was the father of B, and B was the father of C," and so on. As it is most unusual in biblical genealogies to mention mothers, long reflection upon 1:1-17 has rightly claimed that Matthew's insertion of the women's names was done for a purpose. But what was that purpose?[9] Some, following Jerome, suggest that the women in the genealogy were sinners, and their presence in the generations is to foreshadow the words of the angel of the Lord to Joseph, in explanation of the name "Jesus": "for he will save his people from their sins" (1:21; see Jerome, *In Mattheum* 9 [PL 26.21-22]). Others, following Martin Luther, point to their being foreigners, and thus their presence continues the theme, already present in v. 1, that Jesus' coming is marked by an openness to the Gentile world.

Even though the women are all associated with sexually questionable activities, they are not presented in the biblical tradition, nor in later Jewish and Christian speculation, as sinners. Their assessment as sinners is an anachronistic judgment of their roles within the biblical accounts. The second suggestion, at first sight, appears more likely, but what if one

includes the mother of Jesus among the women in vv. 1-17? The figure of "Mary, of whom Jesus was born" (v. 16) must be part of the equation. The following passage (vv. 18-23) will point to the suspicion that she was a sinner, but there is no hint that she is not Jewish. These suggestions play into the solution to this puzzle, once Mary is included among the women mentioned in the genealogy. Three features can be attributed to all five women.

1. Each of the women mentioned plays a fundamental role at turning points in Israel's sacred history. Tamar continues God's appointed line after the death of Er and Onan (Gen 46:12). Rahab, called a prostitute, is nevertheless the hero at Jericho, as Israel enters the promised land (Josh 2:1-21; 6:17-25). Ruth is the mother of Obed, the grandfather of David (Ruth 4:18-22). Bathsheba conceives Solomon by David, and with the guidance of the prophet Nathan establishes her son as the continuation of the Davidic line (1 Kings 1:11-2:9). Mary is the women "of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Matt 1:16).
2. In every case, even though not judged as sinful, there was something irregular in the sexual situation of the women. It appears odd that such people could be part of the unfolding of God's design. Joseph's resolution of his dilemma in vv. 18b-19 indicates that this is also the case with Mary.
3. Despite the surprising association of such women, with their compromising situations or backgrounds, with the unfolding of God's history, all of them, including Mary, showed initiative and courage when summoned by God to preserve the line from Abraham, through David, that would eventually lead (through Joseph) to the Messiah (v. 16). But there is more at stake than the sexual irregularities lurking behind the stories of the five women. In a genealogy that follows an accepted patriarchal transmission from one generation to another, these women emerge from the margins of society and culture to show that God works through people who are generally

denied status and privilege. Their presence shows God's working over against prevailing cultural absolutes, and each of these women, in her own way, is threatened by those absolutes.

God called all five women to play an integral role in the unfolding of the messianic promise. In the cases of the women from the pre-monarchical period, God has overcome the moral irregularity of human parents. However, in the case of Mary, something more spectacular takes place. The careful description of Mary as "of whom Jesus was born" (v. 16) detaches the maternity of Mary from the paternity of Joseph. To these three elements which all five women share, the fact that four of the women are not only associated with a dubious sexual situation, but are also from the world outside Israel, must be added. The presence of the women in Jesus' genealogy, therefore, reflects "the strange righteousness of God,"[10] and the risky consequence of responding to that righteousness. The genealogy, therefore, addresses the situation of the members of the Matthean community, composed of both Jew and Gentile. They did not share a racial heritage, but they were united by their faith in Jesus Christ, Messiah, Son of David and Son of Abraham. In his own turn, he was the perfection of promises made to both Abraham and David.[11]

How the Son of David was Born (1:18-25)

The careful description of Mary as the woman "of whom Jesus was born" in v. 16 raises a question concerning Jesus' birth which is answered in vv. 18-23. A link with the genealogy is created by means of the words, "Now the birth (*genesis*) of Jesus Christ (see also v. 1) took place in this way" (v. 18a). But the broader notion of generations narrows, to become more focused upon *how* the birth of Jesus Christ took place. The situation described in v. 18b reflects Jewish marriage practice, and Jewish law regarding infidelity. Mary is already in a situation of betrothal to Joseph, but they have not yet had sexual relations.

Betrothal could take place some time before a husband led his wife to his home. However, even in the time of the betrothal, the woman was regarded as his wife (see the use of "wife" in vv. 20 and 24), already under the jurisdiction of the man. Although not widely practiced, it was legitimate for a man to have sexual relations with his betrothed, even before he formally led her to his home.[12] Thus, if the woman had sexual relations outside the betrothed relationship, she was to be dealt with according to the legislation of Deuteronomy 22:23-25. A betrothed woman who was attacked could cry out, and be heard. If this has not happened, it is taken for granted that she has been disloyal to her betrothed partner, and both she and her male partner are to be stoned to death, to "purge the evil from among you" (v. 25). Matthew makes it clear that Mary and Joseph had not yet had sexual relations. He describes them as "betrothed" (v. 18a), reports that this was the time "before they came together" (v. 18b), and by the further clarification of the nature of their relationship in v. 25: "He knew her not until she had borne a son."

In this situation, Mary is described as "found with child of the Holy Spirit" (v. 18c). No explanation of how this situation came about is offered.[13] For Matthew, Joseph's response to the action of God is more important than Mary's experience. The action of God is indicated by the passive "she was found." No further explanation is required, except that this pregnancy is the result of the action of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit plays only a minor role in the Gospel of Matthew (see 3:16-17; 28:19), and "[t]he Spirit's role here at the origin of Jesus' life is reminiscent of the function of the Spirit in Genesis at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:1-2)."[14] A new era begins, and – as in Genesis – God is the active agent. There is no suggestion in the text that the Spirit somehow impregnates Mary. The reader, and not Joseph, is bluntly informed that a betrothed girl is found to be with child, and that God, by means of the Holy Spirit, is the one from whom this child comes. No male agent is involved in the generation of the child that Mary is carrying. Jesus is born in a way that is marked by

the continuity of the Davidic line, by means of Joseph, and discontinuity, because this child is the result of God's action in and through a virginal conception.

Joseph, who is at the center of all the action from this point on, is described as a "just man." This expression indicates that Joseph is a man who lives in an upright way, according to the Law. This description promises he will make a decision that is obedient to the Law. Joseph had the right to have Mary stoned publicly at the gate of the city (see Deut 22:24), but he decides not to shame his wife in this fashion. The point of the legislation was to "purge the evil from among you" (v. 25). This leaves open the possibility of a lenient interpretation of the law, to divorce her quietly, and in this way eliminate the evil. Joseph decides to adopt the practice of divorce as a sufficient "purging of the evil."[15]

Joseph is considering this possibility (v. 20a) when a communication from God takes place (v. 20b). Like his namesake, Joseph, known to his brothers as a dreamer, and the interpreter of dreams for the Pharaoh (see Gen 37:5-7, 9, 19-20; 40:5-19; 41:1-36), he is visited by "an angel of the Lord." An angel of the Lord is not simply a heavenly messenger, but the bearer of a communication that comes directly from God.[16] The encounter between Joseph and the angel of the Lord takes the form of an annunciation scene across vv. 20-21 (see also Gen 16:7-12 [Ishmael is announced]; 17:1-21; 18:1-15 [Isaac is announced twice]; Judges 13:3-22 [Samson is announced]; Luke 1:11-20 [John the Baptist is announced]; Luke 1:26-37 [Jesus is announced]).[17] In v. 20 an angel of the Lord appears, and the visionary is addressed by name, "Joseph." A qualifying phrase describes the visionary, "son of David." He is urged not to be afraid, as his wife is with child by the Holy Spirit. The use of the divine passive, "which is conceived" stresses that Mary's pregnancy is the result of the action of God through the Holy Spirit. Of foremost importance is the fact that Mary is carrying a child not generated by human means. The dilemma faced by Joseph, "the just man," has been resolved. The Law has not been broken. There is no need to resort to a lenient observation

of the law because God, the giver of the Law, is the source of this pregnancy. Joseph is thus free to take his wife to his home. If Joseph were to dispense with her, or even have her executed, would frustrate God's design of raising up Jesus as a Son of David (see 1:1). This possibility has been overcome by God.

The growing recognition in the early Church that Jesus was the Son of God lies behind this carefully articulated presentation of a virginal conception.[18] The annunciation experience draws Joseph into God's design. Jesus Christ has already been described as "the Son of David" (v. 1), but it is only through Joseph that Jesus can be a son of David. It is essential to sacred history that Joseph, belonging to the line of David, make his own the child at present being carried by his wife, Mary. It is through Joseph that Jesus will be known as a son of David, and will show himself to be the messianic "Son of David" (v. 20c). Thus, in vv. 18-20 Matthew tells *how* the as yet unborn Jesus is both "Son of God" and "Son of David."

The annunciation to Joseph continues into v. 21. Mary will give birth to a male child, and the angel tells Joseph he must call the child "Jesus." The Hebrew origins of the name "Jesus" means "the one who saves." Thus, his name explains future accomplishments: "for he will save his people from their sins." Jesus' future, which will be more fully developed in 2:1-23, is revealed in this name. There are already sufficient indications in the genealogy ("Son of Abraham" in v. 1, and the presence of the women in vv. 2-26), but further elements in the infancy story (especially 2:1-12) and the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection (see 8:17; 9:2-8; 26:28) will show that, for Matthew, this means that both Jews and Gentiles will be liberated from the slavery of sin by Jesus, Son of God and Son of David.

Matthew 1:18-25 draws to a conclusion with the first use of a so-called "fulfillment citation." More than any other Evangelist, Matthew looks back to the Old Testament as an explanation for what God has done in and through the person and ministry of Jesus. This is

an important indication of a largely Jewish community that looked to its Scriptures to explain the new situation in which they found themselves in their acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. Jesus Christ is the "fulfillment" of the promises to Israel. The narrative of Joseph's annunciation, with its command to take Mary to his home (vv. 20-21) and his wordless obedience to the command of the Lord (vv. 24-25), is interrupted by the citation in vv. 22-23. The passage comes to its conclusion as Matthew inserts his interpretation of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Scriptures. The formula itself is stereotypical, but makes Matthew's point well: "*All this* took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (v. 22). However, the expression "all this took place" is found in only one other fulfillment citation in Matthew (26:56). It "indicates that Matthew adduces the quotation not only for the sake of the name Immanuel but because the *entire* story of the birth announcement is important to him. ... Thus our text is for Matthew not only an explanatory note to the genealogy; it also indicates new Christological themes to be unfolded further in the gospel."[19]

The biblical citation itself is a sophisticated early Christian reflection upon Isaiah. The passage was originally directed by Isaiah to King Ahaz (ca. 735-715 BC) as a sign that God would provide if he would abandon his plan to form military alliances with Syria and the Northern Kingdom (Ephraim) in an attempt to resist Assyria. As a sign, a young woman who may or may not have been a virgin, but was physically ready to bear a child (the meaning of the Hebrew word '*almah*) would fall pregnant. This child would continue the Davidic line, but there is no suggestion that he would be an expected Messiah. The birth of the child would be a sign that there was no need to form alliances and conduct war, because God was still "with us" (Emmanuel).[20] The Greek translation (LXX) makes some important alterations to the Hebrew. The most significant is the alteration of the translation of the Heberew *almah* with *parthenos*, a Greek word that means "virgin." There can be no doubt that this was a deliberate ploy on the part of the LXX translator to render more spectacular

the sign that would be given to Ahaz. There is no suggestion in the LXX, however, of a *virginal conception.* All that is said is that a woman at present a virgin will, by the usual sexual procedures, become pregnant.

Matthew seizes upon this text. Isaiah 7:1-17 is directed to a son of the House of David (see v. 13: "O house of David!"), and the LXX introduces a virgin who will bear a son. Matthew reshapes the passage to see its fulfillment (v. 22) in "how" Jesus Christ was born (v. 18), Son of David, from a virgin mother, a child who is "of the Holy Spirit" (v. 20). The LXX tells of a virgin *who will conceive*, i.e. she will receive male seed and conceive. Matthew eradicates all possible reference to male intervention by altering the LXX to a virgin who *will be with child and bear a son.* The LXX prophesied that "you (singular = Ahaz) will call his name Emmanuel." For Matthew, this becomes "they will call his name Emmanuel." Matthew steers away from the uniquely Davidic line produced by this birth. The reference to "they" will lead directly into the story of the wise men from the East. Jesus is not only a "Son of David," and the fulfillment of Jewish hopes, but also "Son of Abraham" in whom all nations shall be blessed (see 1:1; Gen 12:1-3). Finally, the LXX offers no interpretation of the transliterated Hebrew word "Emmanuel." Matthew explains it by adding an explanation of "Emmanuel" to the passage from Isaiah 7:14: "which means God with us."

As the description of the identity of the person of Jesus continues to unfold, the reader senses climax as prophecy is fulfilled (vv. 22-23). By means of this short passage, shaped in the form of a typical annunciation from the Lord, the reader has been told and shown that Jesus is the Christ (v. 18), the Son of David (v. 20), the Son of Abraham (vv. 21, 23), the Son of God (vv. 18, 20), and the presence of God with us (v. 23). The theme of the Emmanuel will return as the Gospel closes with the promise from Jesus: "I am *with you always*, to the close of the age" (28:16). Scripture confirms the extraordinary story told in 1:18-25.

The passage closes by resuming the story of Joseph, who wakes from the sleep during which he has had his dream (v. 24. See v. 20). Described earlier as a just man, his obedience to the law is prolonged into his obedience to the word of God that has come to him from the angel of the Lord. For Matthew, the two are not at odds, as what is happening in the story of the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture (v. 22). Matthew does exactly as the angel had commanded: "He took his wife" (v. 20). Everything that has been revealed about the identity of Jesus depends upon this unconditional obedience. Joseph is able to lead Mary to his home, as the Law has not been broken. The giver of the Law is responsible for the son his wife is carrying. Once established in his home, Joseph must guarantee what has been said about the divine origin of the child. There can be no doubt about the paternity of the son that Mary will bear. Therefore, he and his wife do not have sexual relations "until she had borne a son" (v. 25).[21] The promise of the word of God, communicated by the angel of the Lord, is brought to a conclusion in Joseph's further obedient response to the design of God. He called the child by the name Jesus. All that has been promised by this name in v. 21 awaits its own fulfillment.

The Destiny of Jesus (2:1-23)

The theme of Jesus as a royal Son of David was present across 1:1-25. This becomes explicit in 2:1-23, but points beyond Jesus' beginnings toward the end of his story. The wise men come to Jerusalem, seeking "he who has been born king of the Jews" (v. 2). Herod, the king, accompanied by all Jerusalem, is troubled (v. 3) by the search for a new-born king. Herod inquires of "all the chief priests and scribes of the people" (v. 4). At Jesus' trial and crucifixion, the secular ruler in Jerusalem and "all the chief priests and the elders of the people" assemble in opposition to Jesus (27:1), and "all the people" accept responsibility for his blood (27:25). The title "the king of the Jews" will be nailed over the head of Jesus as he

hangs on a cross (27:37). Much that appears in 2:1-23 anticipates Jesus' passion and resurrection. The use of the expression "the king of the Jews" in 2:2 is the only place outside the passion narrative where it appears in the Gospel of Matthew. In 2:1-23 this king will be rejected by Herod (and implicitly by those who advise him and all the people), but accepted by the wise men. In the crucifixion Jesus dies, but is brought back to life through the resurrection. In 2:1-23 he is taken away to another land and returns. In both the infancy narrative and the passion narrative God confounds the kings and rulers who assemble against him and his Messiah.[22]

In 2:1-12, the first half of 2:1-23, the reader initially encounters the report of the experience of the wise men from the East, developed against the backdrop of troubled Jerusalem and a threatening Herod. Although the story continues against the backdrop of Herod's violence, in vv. 13-23 Joseph returns to dominate the action, as he did in 1:18-25. Not only does he reappear as the major agent in the flight to Egypt, the return to Israel, and the further decision to settle in Nazareth; he continues to respond with wordless obedience to an angel of the Lord (vv. 13-14, 19-21, 22-23), who appears to him in dreams (vv. 13, 19, 22). The figure of Joseph holds the narrative of 1:1-2:23 together although he is completely absent in 2:1-12. The figure of Herod does the same across 2:1-23. His actions, anticipated in vv. 1-12, draw Joseph back into the story in vv. 13-23. The threat of Herod lurks behind each episode (see vv. 3-6, 7-8, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 22).

There is a concentration on geography in 2:1-23 that is absent from 1:1-25. With the exception of the mention of Babylon in vv. 11 and 17, a period in Israel's history rather than a place, no geographical location is mentioned in 1:1-25. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is announced in 2:1, as wise men from the East come to Jerusalem. They are directed to Bethlehem (vv. 5-6). Jesus flees to Egypt (vv. 13-14). Herod slays the male children under two years old in Bethlehem (v. 16), and a voice is heard in Ramah (v. 18). On the death of

Herod, Joseph brings his family from Egypt to Israel (vv. 19-21), and finally locates them in Galilee (v. 22), in a city called Nazareth (v. 23). Matthew 2 opens in Bethlehem and closes in Nazareth. Across 2:1-23 Matthew uses traditions that came to him to generate a geographical journey. Matthew 1:1-2:23 has been shaped to produce a unified proclamation of Jesus' divine and human origins, his person, and his destiny.

2:1-12: Two Responses

There are two parts to vv. 1-12, each one marked by movement from one place to another, and concluding with a fulfillment citation.

1. vv. 1-6: The wise men come from the East to Jerusalem, and are directed to Bethlehem. This fulfills what was written by the prophet (Micah 5:1, with help from 2 Sam 5:2).
2. vv. 7-12: The wise men travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. There they find the child with his mother, and they worship him. The passage ends with an implicit citation of Psalm 72:10-11 and Isaiah 60:6, concerning foreigners bringing gifts of gold and frankincense to give homage to God's royal son (see Ps 72:1).

1. The Wise Men in Jerusalem (vv. 1-6)

Matthew locates Jesus' birth in a place and a time in v. 1. In so doing, he introduces the reader to the main figures in the action: Jesus (present [v. 1] but never active), Herod and the wise men. The reader is informed of Jesus' birth in the Davidic city of Bethlehem. Subtly, this continues the Christological theme of 1:18-25, where Joseph, from the line of David, must take Jesus as his son. Matthew will clarify the importance of the place where Jesus was born in v. 5, as Herod will be informed that, according to Micah 5:1, the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Jesus is born "in the days of Herod the king." Herod, known

as "the Great," ruled Jewish Palestine, in collaboration with Rome, from 37 to 4 B.C.E. Only partly Jewish (the son of an Idumean), he was a remarkable figure. He cruelly maintained his authority by violence and murder, even (perhaps especially) within the inner circle of his own family.[23] During his long rule he was supported by the Romans, yet he demonstrated an outward allegiance to the great symbols of Israel, especially by means of his famous restoration of the Jerusalem Temple.

The remaining characters, the magi (Greek: *magoi*), wise men from the East, came to Jerusalem responding to the sign in the sky and seeking information from the Jewish traditions and authority (v. 2). They worship Jesus (v. 11), and respond unquestioningly to the warning they receive in a dream (v. 12). The role of the star in the story indicates that they are to be regarded as astrologers, men who gaze into the heavens to trace indications of God's designs. Matthew's indication that they are "from the East" does not point to any identifiable place, but singles these men out as non-Jews. They are Gentiles who come to Jerusalem to find the new born "King of the Jews" (v. 2). The indication of 1:1 that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of David, has been developed in 1:1-25. Now his being the Son of Abraham, in whom all peoples will be blessed, emerges.

The question posed by the wise men from the East in v. 2 is a confession of faith that looks back to 1:1-25. They ask "Where is he who has been born the King of the Jews?" Gentiles, the wise men do not have the traditions that would lead them to the newborn king. They believe that a king of the Jews has been born, and the reader knows that this is true, as these events have been foretold in the genealogy and taken place in the description of how Jesus came to be born in 1:1-25. The wise men come to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish Scriptures, traditions and worship, seeking an answer to their question concerning the King of the Jews. The motivation for their belief that a king has been born to the Jews comes from their having seen his star. There is no indication in the text that the wise men have followed

a moving star from their Gentile world into Jerusalem. The star they have seen is to be understood in the light of the widespread idea that great people are born under a star. There are many ancient witnesses to the appearance of a star in the sky to mark significant births and events (e.g. the association of Aeneas with Rome [Virgil, *Aeneid*, 2.692-704], the fall of Jerusalem [Josephus, *War*, 6.284], the births of Alexander the Great [Cicero], Nero (Dio Cassius, 61.2,1-4) Augustus, Mithridates, and Alexander Severus [Suetonius, *Augustus*, 94.2; *Tiberius*, 14.2]). The idea that one is born under a certain star can still be found in contemporary popular myths and their expressions.[24] The wise men have come to Jerusalem to seek out the newborn king of the Jews because they saw his star "in its rising." The event of the rising of the star that marked the birth of a king of the Jews led them to Jerusalem. Their presence in Jerusalem is determined by their desire to know "where" this king was to be found. They come to the center of the Jewish world to seek knowledge from those who know Israel's Scriptures and its prophecies about the Messiah, not because a moving star has led them there.

Matthew's use of the star looks back to Numbers 23-24: the story of Balaam and Balak. The basic account is found in the Bible, but it has been used and developed by others. In Numbers 23-24 Balak, a king from the Transjordan region, seeks to destroy Moses. He enlists the support of a famous seer, Balaam, that he might put a curse upon Israel. Balaam is a non-Israelite, a visionary who practices magical rites and who, like the wise men in Matthew 2, comes from the East (LXX Num 23:7). But the plans of the hostile Balak are foiled. Filled by the spirit, no longer master of his own oracle, Balaam prophecies the future greatness of Israel, and the rise of its royal ruler. The presentation of the future leader of Israel begins in LXX Num 24:7: "There will come a man out of his (Israel's) seed, and he will rule many nations ... and his kingdom will be increased." However, the passage that impinges most upon the Matthean text is found in Numbers 24:17. A comparison between

the Hebrew text (MT) and its Greek translation (LXX) shows the direction of the reinterpretation that appears in Matthew:

I see him, though not now;
I behold him, though he is not near;
a star will come forth from Jacob,
And a scepter will rise from Israel (MT).

I will point to him, though not now;
I bless him, though he has not drawn near;
a star will rise from Jacob,
and a man will stand forth from Israel (LXX).

The background to this reinterpretation is an attempt to render more specific the emergence of the Davidic dynasty, over two centuries after Moses' time: David was the star and the scepter ruling over a united Judah and Israel. Matthew has drawn close links between the magician, Balaam, who appeared in the story of Moses, and the wise men who came to Jerusalem in search of the king of the Jews in 2:1-2. Both come from the East, see a star that hails the arrival of a messianic king, and foil the evil designs of a wicked king (Balak, Herod). Balaam tells of the future destruction of Edom, Seir, Ir and Amalek, as Israel and the house of Jacob rise (Num 24:18-19). Although not explicit in Matt 2:1-12, the threatening rejection of the newly born King of Israel by Herod, all Jerusalem (v. 3), the chief priests and the scribes (v. 4) forecasts Israel's rejection of Jesus, and reflects the hostility between Matthew and the Judaism of his time. After Balaam has acknowledged the coming king of Israel, he departs: "Balaam went off to his own home" (Num 24:25), just as the wise men, after recognizing the newborn king of the Jews at Bethlehem "went away to their own country" (Matt 2:12).

On arrival in Jerusalem, they announce that they "have come to worship him." Matthew uses the verb *proskuneō* thirteen times, more frequently than Mark (twice) and Luke (three times). He regularly uses it to indicate a correct approach to Jesus, and the action of God in and through Jesus, an acceptance of who Jesus is and does. In the episode of the coming of the wise men, Matthew uses the verb three times: twice to indicate the correct response of the wise men (vv. 2, 11) and once to show the perversity and falseness of Herod (v. 8). For Matthew, the wise men from the East are Gentile believers who have reacted in faith to the Christological proclamation of the conception and birth of Jesus (1:18-25). They fulfill the promise made in 1:1, that Jesus is not only the Davidic Christ, but also the Son of Abraham, in whom all nations are blessed. One of Matthew's major concerns, the proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles (see 28:16-20), lies behind their presence at the beginning of Jesus' story.

Herod enters the scene in v. 3. All readers of the Gospel of Matthew know of Herod. Even if they do not know his full story, they do know of his role in the execution of John the Baptist (14:1-12). In v. 3 Herod is described as "the King." The wise men have come to Jerusalem seeking a newly born King (v. 2). Before the action even begins, the reader has every reason to suspect that the suggestion of the presence of another King will lead to violence: there cannot be two Kings! Thus, on hearing of another king, Herod was troubled (v. 3a), and "the whole of Jerusalem" is troubled along with him (v. 3b). There is both irony and imagination in this presentation of the response of Herod and all Jerusalem. The verb behind the troubled response of all Jerusalem (*tarassō*) indicates a profound emotional reaction, a mixture of shock, surprise and fear. The only other occurrence of the verb in the Gospel of Matthew is in 14:26, where the frightened disciples see Jesus coming to them across the stormy waters. In their case, his appearance leads to their worship (14:33). Herod's response will be different.

It is unlikely that "the whole of Jerusalem" was privy to the question of the wise men, but Matthew draws the people into the story, along with "all the chief priests and the scribes" (v. 4). These same personalities will assemble as Jesus' enemies in the passion story (see 26:3, 57; 27:17, 27, 62). As Pilate pleads Jesus' innocence, "all the people" will accept the responsibility for his blood (27:25)), just as at his birth, all Jerusalem is deeply moved, and associate themselves with the plotting of Herod (2:3). The theme of suffering will become explicit in vv. 16-18, and Jesus' destiny will be foreshadowed there. However, it is already present in the rapid association of the wise men's search for "the King of the Jews" (2:2; 27:11, 29, 37) and the gathering of all the people, the high priests and the scribes (2:3-4; 26:3, 57; 27:17, 25, 27, 62). Herod inquired of the high priests and the scribes: "where the Christ was to be born" (v. 4b). There is reason to wonder about the motivation for Herod's search for the birthplace of the Messiah, but his inquiry to those entrusted with the interpretation of the sacred tradition of Israel renders explicit the theme of the *place* of Jesus' origins.

The *correct* answer to this question is provided for Herod. The wise men have done well to read the star as a sign leading them to Israel, to the city of Jerusalem, and to those entrusted with the interpretation of God's word. The high priests and the scribes are able to provide Herod with the answer to his question of v. 4, and, at the same time, the answer to the query of the wise men: "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?" (v. 2). Israel and its God-given traditions possess the Word of God, and thus the high priests and the scribes are able to read it correctly. This intensifies the problem of their inability to accept what that Word tells them. They have the Word of God, but they are unable to accept its promise.[25] They respond to Herod's (and also the wise men's) question about the place of the birth of the King of the Jews (v. 2), the Messiah (v. 4), by citing Micah 5:1 (2) and 2 Samuel 5:2.[26] Two important statements are made in these two citations, and both are called for. In

the first place, Micah 5:1 (2) states that one who is a ruler in Israel will come from the Davidic city of Bethlehem. The association with David is made more explicit by means of the addition of 2 Samuel 5:2: "you will shepherd my people Israel." These words are taken from a passage in 2 Samuel addressed to David who was, at that stage, the King of Judah. The tribes of Israel ask him to extend his sovereignty over them as well. The shepherd image of the 2 Samuel passage links the Davidic city of Bethlehem to the Davidic task of ruling over the whole of God's people.

However, Matthew has reworked the Old Testament texts to reflect better his understanding of Bethlehem, and the child born there, especially in the text from Micah. A comparison of translated versions of the MT (Hebrew), the LXX (Greek) and Matthew's use of the passages makes this clear.[27]

> And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, small to be among the clans of Judah;
> from you there will come forth for me one who is to be a ruler in Israel (MT: Mic 5:1).
> You will shepherd my people Israel (MT: 2 Sam 5:2).
>
> And you, O Bethlehem, house of Ephrathah, are too small to be among the thousands of Judah;
> from you there will come forth for me a leader of Israel (LXX: Mic 5:2).
> You will shepherd my people Israel (LXX: 2 Sam 5:2).
>
> And you, O Bethlehem (in the) land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
> For from you will come forth a ruler
> who will shepherd my people Israel (Matt 5:6).

Matthew has eliminated all reference to Ephrathah, and replaced it with "in the land of Judah." He has adapted the text to respond to the promise made in 1:2-3: the Messiah was to descend from Judah. There can be no suggestion (as in the MT and the LXX) that Bethlehem is a place of little significance. Jesus, the Christ, was born there. Finally, Matthew eliminates the reference to "Israel" in the Micah passage, as it appears in the closing statement from 2 Samuel. Matthew's reinterpretation of Micah, guided by his understanding of the centrality of the person of Jesus, works creatively with this Old Testament passage.[28] His reworking of the passage points to his attempt to make his audience aware of the fact that Jesus, the Christ (see 1:1, 17), was born in Bethlehem. This was the place foretold in the Jewish Scriptures (Mic 5:1 [2]) as the birthplace of the Messiah. A theme central to the Matthean Christology lies behind the author's use of Micah 5:1 (2): Jesus fulfills the hopes of Israel.

2. The Wise Men Travel to Bethlehem (vv. 7-12)

Matthew subtly introduces Herod's duplicity in the report of his encounter with the wise men (vv. 7-8). Less than honest motives appear to lie behind his summoning of them "secretly," and the verb used to speak of his questioning of them goes beyond mere questioning. It indicates a concerned careful enquiry about the time of the rising of the star. As yet, there is no suggestion of a moving star, but Herod wants to know *when* this child was born. His careful and secret investigation of the wise men will lead to his decision to destroy all the young boys "of two years of age and under" in the region of Bethlehem (2:16). They are commanded by Herod to join his concern, and to go to Bethlehem to "search diligently" for the child. Once they have discovered the newborn king, they are to report back to Herod, so that he too might come and worship him. Herod's falseness lies behind this request. He is King in Jerusalem, and he will certainly not be searching out a newborn King to prostrate

himself before him in an act of worship. There would be other motivations for such a search. The verb *prokuneō* is used by Matthew to indicate two responses to the birth of Jesus. The wise men come to worship the newborn king (v. 2), and will eventually do so (v. 11). Herod claims that he wishes to worship him (v. 8), but his request reflects his rejection of Jesus, and will lead to the murder of innocents (vv. 16-18).

The opening words of v. 9 indicate that wise men set out for Bethlehem with every intention of obeying the command of Herod. Their journey is motivated by their having been spoken to by Herod, who is able to point them toward Bethlehem in the light of Israel's Scriptures (see v. 6). Only now does the star that they had seen at its rising, marking the birth of the Messiah, begin to move. It goes ahead of them, until it comes to rest upon the place where the child was (v. 9).[29] The sight of the star, leading them to their desired goal arouses great joy in the wise men. In v. 10 Matthew uses their exaggeratedly enthusiastic expression of joy to mark the first vision of the Christ child. Up to this point in Matthew 1-2, the reader has only read *about* the child; he has never appeared in the story. Exceedingly great joy marks their discovery of the place where the child is (v. 10b). The positive outcome of the search of the wise men to find the newly born king of the Jews (v. 2) is anticipated in this expression of great joy.

In v. 11 they enter the house where the child is found with Mary his mother.[30] The mother of Jesus has played no active role in the narrative thus far. Unlike Luke 1-2, where Mary is the leading figure, in Matt 1-2, Joseph is at the center of the story. Nevertheless, the mother of Jesus was mentioned by name in 1:16 as the fifth and final significant woman in a series of women who have preserved the line of Israel from Abraham, through David, to the Messiah. Although not a major player, Matthew refers to her four times in speaking of "the child with his mother" (2:11, 13, 14, 21). These allusions serve to remind the reader of the virginal conception of the child, a divine action in which Joseph plays no role but to accept

the manifestation of God's will. The wise men fall down and worship the child. The joy of v. 10 and the act of obeisance of the wise men before the child shows they believe that they have found the royal Messiah. They recognize Jesus as the universal king, a recognition further reinforced by the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. After the genealogy (1:1-17), each scene of the narrative to this point (1:18-23; 2:1-6) has closed with an *explicit* use of the Old Testament (1:22-23; 2:5-6).

The third scene, the encounter between the wise men and Jesus, closes with an *implicit* reference to scripture. The Balaam story in Numbers acknowledges the greatness of an Israelite ruler, who is symbolized by the rising of a star. There is nothing in that episode about the offering of gifts. However, the mention of the rising star suggested to Matthew an amalgam of passages from Isaiah 60 that speak of a rising light and the bringing of gifts:

> Be enlightened, O Jerusalem, for your light has come;
> and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you (Isa 60:1).
> The wealth of nations will come to you ...
> All those from Sheba will come bringing gold and frankincense,
> and proclaiming the salvation of the Lord (LXX Isa 60:5-6).

The figure of Balaam provides background for the presentation of the wise men, responding to a star rising in the East, and this background is filled out by the implicit use of Isaiah 60. The star now moves and comes to rest over the place of the birth of the Messiah (Matt 2:9. See Isa 60:1). Representatives of the nations bring gold and frankincense to Bethlehem (not Jerusalem, as in Isa 60:1), because the light and glory of God have risen upon that place. In Jerusalem, its king and all the people have been deeply troubled by the news of the birth of the Messiah. The Davidic city of Bethlehem replaces the city of Jerusalem as the place of God's favor, despite the fact that in Jerusalem, at the heart of Israel and the bearer of its sacred traditions, the wise men discover the truth about the birth place of the Messiah,

revealed in Israel's Scriptures.[31] The Isaian reference further underlines the Gentile character of the wise men. However, the mention of Sheba in Isaiah 60:5 guides Matthew to another Old Testament passage, linking the two themes of gifts and homage:

> May the kings of Sheba and Saba bring gifts;
>
> may all kings pay homage (Ps 72:10-11).

Later Christian identification of the wise men as kings from the East shows an early awareness of Matthew's implicit use of this Psalm. The implicit use of Isaiah 60:1-6 and Psalm 72:10-11 continues Matthew's development of his Christological statement in 1:1: "Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham." In 1:22-23 his use of Isaiah 7:14 insisted upon Jesus' messianic status (Jesus *Christ*). In 2:6 he used Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2 to emphasize and develop the fact that Jesus is a Davidic king who will rule over Israel (son *of David*). The use of Isaiah 60:1-6 and Psalm 72:10-11 picks up the insistence that Jesus brings blessing upon all the nations of the earth (son *of Abraham*). The star that rose in the East was hailed by the wise men as the star that announced the birth of the king of the Jews (v. 2), but the use of the Scriptures in v. 11 shows that this king rules over all the nations.[32]

The sinister plans of Herod are thwarted, as the result of the action of God (v. 12). Throughout the narrative, God makes his design known by means of dreams (see 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22). The wise men are warned by God that they must not go back to Herod. The warning explicitly states that they are "not to return to Herod." This is a deliberate reversal of Herod's command: "Bring me the word" (v. 8), which the wise men were initially prepared to obey (v. 9). Like Joseph, they respond without question to the divine command, and "depart to their own country by another way." Within a context of widespread disturbance (v. 8) and veiled threats of danger to the newly born King (vv. 3, 7-8), Jesus Christ, son of David and son of Abraham has been identified and worshiped. Matthew has imaginatively drawn upon well-established ideas of "magi" as wise men who are able to read the signs that

manifest themselves in the skies, and described their journey, culminating in the worship of the newly born Messiah, against the rich Old Testament background of Numbers, Isaiah and the Psalms.

A Future Foreshadowed (2:13-23)

The presence of Herod across vv. 1-12 was threatening. The threat becomes reality in the remaining three sections, found in Matthew 2:13-23. Herod now seeks to kill the newly born King. But through God's intervention and Joseph's obedience, the Messiah escapes death, emerges from Egypt alive and settles in Nazareth. Each of the three sections concludes with a formula leading into the citation of Old Testament passages that focus upon a place, significant to the story of God's people, and the story of the Christian community.

1. vv. 13-15. Joseph, obedient to the word of God revealed in a dream, flees with the child and his mother to Egypt. This first scene closes with a formula, and the citation of Hosea 11:1, mentioning *Egypt*.
2. vv. 16-18. By order of Herod, the male children under two years of age are massacred in Bethlehem. The second scene closes with a formula, and the citation of Jeremiah 31:15, mentioning *Ramah* (thought to be close to *Bethlehem*).
3. vv. 19-23. On the death of Herod, again responding to a dream, Joseph returns with the child and his mother to Israel, not to Bethlehem, but to Nazareth. The final scene closes with a formula and the citation of words stemming from Isaiah 4:3 and Judges 16:17, mentioning Jesus' origins in *Nazareth*.

The close association between Moses and Jesus continues into this section of the narrative.[33] As innocent Hebrew children were slain at the birth of Moses, so also innocent Hebrew children are slain at the birth of Jesus (vv. 16-18). As Moses and the original people of God were led out of Egypt to take possession of the promised land, so also Jesus comes

out of Egypt to establish a new people of God (vv. 13-15). However, the earlier insistence that Jesus, the Son of David, was accepted by Joseph as his son (1:18-23), and born in the city of David as the King of the Jews and son of Abraham (2:1-12), belies the fact that Jesus was known as "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus' presence in Nazareth is shown to be the result of the action of God, leading him from Egypt to Nazareth (vv. 19-23).

1. The Flight to Egypt (vv. 13-15)

Matthew links the account of the journey of the Wise Men to Bethlehem with the following episode. They have already departed (v. 13a) when the events that follow take place. Repeating the divine intervention that determined Joseph's decision to take Mary as his wife, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream (v. 13b. See 1:20a). The divine command first instructs Joseph on what he must do: take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. It further informs him of the reason why this flight is necessary: Herod is planning to search and find the child so that he might destroy him. The sovereignty of God is indicated by the knowledge of future events: Herod is "about to" destroy the "other" King. As in 1:18-25, Joseph's response is immediate and wordless. Described as a "just man" the first time he appeared in the story (1:19), he continues to respond without hesitation to the revelation of God. The fact that he departs "by night" makes the point that the moment he hears the word of God in a dream, he rises. The stress is not on secrecy, but unconditional obedience to the command of God.

In response to the command of God, Joseph, the child and his mother flee to Egypt. The response of Joseph and the response of Herod and his entourage are at odds. The latter have been instructed by the Scriptures of Israel on the birth of the Messiah at Bethlehem (2:5-6), but they reject the promise of those Scriptures. This rejection will lead to the following episode (vv. 16-18), but God will have the last word. This truth is indicated by the proleptic

introduction of the death of Herod in v. 15a. Joseph, the child and his mother remained in Egypt until the death of Herod. Herod's anger will produce violence and death, but he will die, and the child will live beyond that death.

Further proof that the will of God has been done by the response of Joseph to the word of the angel of the Lord is provided by the formula that introduces the citation of Hosea 11:1. The presence of Jesus in Egypt fulfills what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. As throughout Matthew, the use of the verb "to fulfill" assures the reader that in the fulfillment of the Scriptures, God's plan is made manifest. The citation from Hosea shifts the original focus of the prophecy away from *Israel* as the "son" whom the Lord called forth from Egypt, to *Jesus* as the "son" whom the Lord called forth from Egypt. The association between the experience of Jesus and the experience of Israel under the leadership of Moses has been introduced into the text. The people of Israel, under the leadership of Moses, came from Egypt. The citation of Hosea promises that a new "son" comes from Egypt, a "son" whose life, death and resurrection will establish the new people of God, and thus bring to perfection the promises of God. This is the first time that Jesus has been called "son" in Matthew 1-2. His divine origins have been indicated by the virgin birth, and thus the expression is fitting. The Lord summoned *Israel* from Egypt into the freedom of the promised land as an expression of the relationship that existed between God and the people. How much more so is this the case for the relationship between God and the person who "will save his people from their sins" (1:21). The theme of the sonship of Jesus is certainly present, but it will not reach its complete articulation until later in the narrative. At Jesus' baptism the voice from heaven will announce: "This is my beloved son" (3:17).

2. The Slaying of the Innocents (vv. 16-18)

A close link with the response of the wise men to the warning not to return to Herod opens vv. 16-18. Herod moves on Bethlehem and its neighboring regions when he finds that he has been mocked and thwarted by the wise men (v. 16a). The same word is used in Exodus 10:2. God promises Moses that the threats of Pharoah will be thwarted. "The verb will appear again in Matt 20:19; 27:29, 31, 45. When Herod is *mocked,* death follows. When Jesus is mocked, death and life follow."[34] The angel's prediction of v. 13 is fulfilled. In the light of his question to the wise men in v. 7 (at what time the star had appeared), he calculates the possible age of the infant King. As the wise men were exceedingly joyful at the sight of the newborn Messiah (v. 10), Herod is exceedingly angry (v. 16a) because his plans have been frustrated. The reader knows, in the light of the dream warning of v. 12, that God has frustrated his plans. There is no other evidence, outside of vv. 16-18, for the senseless slaying of "all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under" (v. 16b). But it is perfectly in character with Herod's performance in his final years.[35] What is more important for an appreciation of Matthew's message, however, is the parallel between the story of the slaying of the male children by Pharoah at the birth of Moses, and Moses' escape in Exodus 1-2. Herod's final years were filled with violence. The slaying of innocent males at the time of the birth of Jesus, paralleling the slaying of innocent male Hebrew children that accompanied the birth of Moses, could easily be attributed to Herod.

Another biblical theme is introduced by means of the fulfillment formula and the citation of Jeremiah 31:15 in vv. 17-18. Matthew, reflecting an already established biblical tradition, mistakenly associates Ramah with Bethlehem. Genesis 35:16-19 and 48:7 say that Rachel died "on the way to Ephrathah" and Ephrathah is linked with Bethlehem (see Micah 5:1 [2]),[36] but the more likely location for Ramah was near Bethel, about eleven miles north of Jerusalem, mentioned by Jeremiah as a marshalling place for exile to Babylon (Jer 40:1).

Jeremiah 31:15 addresses the weeping of the mother of the nation (Rachel) as Israel was led off, past Ramah, into the Babylonian captivity. However imprecise the geography may be, the introduction of the text from Jeremiah extends Matthew's background beyond traditions associated with Moses. It points to the Exile, a theme already exploited in the separation of the generations that led to the birth of the Messiah in 1:2-12. As at the Exile, Rachel wept for her lost children, she weeps again as the children of Israel suffer persecution. But, just as God broke the power of the tyrants who persecuted Israel – first in Egypt, and then in the Exile – so will he also frustrate the designs of Herod. Jesus, who is to save God's people (1:21), relives two watershed moments in Israel's sacred history: the Exodus and the Exile. Matthew's use of Scripture leads from Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Messiah, to Egypt, the land from which God led Moses in the Exodus, to Ramah, the mourning place of the Exile. "Just as Jesus sums up the history of the people named in his genealogy, so his early career sums up the history of these prophetically significant places."[37]

The Return to Nazareth (vv. 19-23)

The promise of v. 15a is fulfilled in v. 19a. Herod died in 4 BC. Matthew situates the following episodes in a historical setting in which they are possible. At the death of Herod, his kingdom was divided between his three sons. Archelaus, ruler of Judea, Idumea and Samaria, proved to be so cruel that he was denounced to Augustus, and exiled to Gaul (France) in 6 AD.[38] It was therefore a prudent decision not to return to Bethlehem in Judea, where a tyrant still ruled, but to go to Nazareth, a village in Galilee ruled by Herod Antipas, a foolish but more benevolent younger brother of Archelaus who ruled from 4 BC – 39 AD In the end, however, he too was exiled to Gaul.

The stereotypical account of a dream appearance of the angel of the Lord appears for the third time (v. 19).[39] The words in the account are exactly the same as those of v. 13,

except the names of the places are different. It is now time to return: "Rise, take the child and his mother" (see v. 13). But they are not to flee to Egypt: "Go to the land of Israel" (v. 20). In Exodus, the Pharoah was the enemy of Jesus; in Matthew it is the King in Israel. In Exodus, Moses fled for safety *out of Egypt*, and returned only to lead his people into the promised land. In Matthew, Jesus is taken *into Egypt* for safety. The rejection of Jesus by the leadership of Israel, so important in the passion narrative, has shaped this rewriting of the Moses traditions in this reversal of the location of hostility to God's design. But Jesus will return to Israel, a new Moses, perfecting the original exodus from Egypt to Israel for the foundation of a new people of God. The intended link with Exodus is made clear in the use of the plural in v. 20b. In v. 19 the death of Herod was announced, but in v. 20b the angel tells Joseph: "for those who sought the child's life are dead." Matthew depends upon Exodus 4:19: "The Lord said to Moses: Go back to Egypt, for all those who were seeking your life are dead." This close parallel points to the link between Jesus (2:19-21) and Moses (Exod 4:19-20) that is so important for the Christology of the Gospel of Matthew.

	Matthew		*Exodus*
2:19:	But when Herod died,	4:19	After these many days
			the king of Egypt died (LXX).
	the angel of the Lord appeared		The Lord said
	in a dream		
	to Joseph in Egypt.		to Moses in Midian
2:20	saying, "Rising, take the child		
	and his mother		
	and go		Go back
	to the land of Israel.		to Egypt

	For those seeking		for all those seeking
	The life of the child		your life
	Have died		have died.
2:21	Rising, he took	4:20	Moses, taking
			his wife
	the child and his mother		and his children,
			mounted them on asses
	and went unto		and returned to Egypt
	the land of Israel		(MT: the land of Egypt)

The reader is not surprised to find that Joseph, the "the just man" (see 1:19), responds without a word to the divine command, issued by an angel of the Lord. The words used in the command of the angel in v. 20 are repeated in the description of the response of Joseph in v. 21.

As we have already seen, the description of the political situation in Judea in v. 22 is accurate. Joseph is described in v. 21 as taking the child and his mother back *to Israel*, in accordance with the command of the angel, again recalling God's leading the people to the promised land by means of the Exodus (see Exod 25; Num 32:9; Deut 4:21) and after the Exile (see Ezek 20:36-38). However, guided by a final dream warning, he avoids a return to his hometown of Bethlehem, in the region of Judea, governed by the tyrant Archelaus. He returns *to Galilee*. More than geography, politics and prudence are involved here. Not only does this journey *to Galilee* set the scene for Jesus' dwelling in Nazareth, and the further indication of the fulfillment of the Scriptures in v. 23, but it keeps Matthew's insistence before the reader: Jesus is the son of Abraham. Reliving Israel's experience under the guidance and leadership of Moses, Jesus is to go *to Israel* (vv. 20-21). But, more

specifically, he is to go "to the district of Galilee" (v. 22). This region was called "Galilee of the Gentiles" by Isaiah (9:1-2), a citation to which Matthew will return as he closes his Prologue (see 4:14-16). The return *to Israel* (vv. 20-21) and the further specification of that return *to Galilee* (v. 22) continue Matthew's argument. Jesus is divinely directed to the two groups that formed part of the Christian community to which the Gospel was directed: Jews and Gentiles.

Joseph responds to God, and his response leads Jesus from one place to another, until "he dwelt in a city called Nazareth." In v. 23a Nazareth is given a title that hardly befits its status. It is a "city." This city becomes the place of Jesus' *permanent residence*. What is more important than the status of Nazareth, however, is the fact that Jesus' dwelling in Nazareth, the end of a long journey that has led from Bethlehem to Egypt to Israel to Galilee, fulfills the Scriptures. This final indication of the fulfillment of God's promises in the infancy narrative, however, differs from all other fulfillment formulae in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' settling in Nazareth fulfills what was spoken – not by any single prophet – but *by the prophets*. Due attention must be given to this use of the plural, as scholars have long pondered *which particular passage* from the prophets is fulfilled by the fact that "He shall be called a Nazarene" (v. 23b).[40] Bringing this section of the Prologue to a close, Matthew has recourse to a number of passages in the Old Testament, and to the life of Jesus. They all play their part in understanding how Jesus' being known as a Nazarene fulfills "what was spoken by the prophets."[41]

a) Jesus was, in fact, from Nazareth. The narrative that tells of Jesus' infancy ends at the place where he will begin his ministry (see 3:13).[42]

b) In several places in the Old Testament the figure of a *Nazir* appears (see especially Judg 13:2-7 [Samson], 1 Sam 1:11 [Samuel]. See also Luke 7:33, with reference to John the Baptist). The *Nazir* was a person consecrated at birth to

God, and made holy for God by means of a vow. There are two Old Testament passages that seem to have been formative of Matthew's claim that Jesus' being called a "Nazorean" fulfilled *the prophets*. Isaiah 40:3 ("He who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called *holy*) and Judges 16:17 ("I have been a *Nazirite* to God from my mother's womb" [Samson's explanation to Delilah]).

c) A further biblical text that plays into the Matthean use of "Nazorean" as a fulfillment of the prophets is Isa 11:1: "There will come forth a shoot from the root of Jesse (David's father), and from his roots, a branch (*Neser*)" This passage referred to a future Davidic king in Isaiah 11, but it was a text used by later Judaism as the promise of a future Davidic Messiah.

The Matthean infancy narrative began with an exalted Christological confession in 1:1. It closes with another in 2:23. Jesus' settling in Nazareth is the result of God's design, and all three possible backgrounds for "He shall be called a Nazoreon" (v. 23) play their role, as these words fulfill "what was spoken by the prophets" (v. 23a).[43] The man from Nazareth can be known as a "Nazorean" (v. 23b). But this expression also singles him out as a *Nazir,* a holy person set aside for God's service from his mother's womb and the *Neser*, the blossom from the Davidic branch of Isaiah 11:1. The Prophet Isaiah served Matthew when he wished to describe Jesus in the first fulfillment passage of 1:23: "They shall call his name Emmanuel" (Isaiah 7:14; 8:8-10). Isaiah is again called upon in this final fulfillment passage in the infancy story: "He will be called a Nazorean" (the *Neser* of Isa 11:1). The first citation brings to a close a narrative that dealt with the conception, birth, and identity of the promised child (1:1-23). The second concludes a narrative rife with hints of his mission and destiny (2:1-23). Joseph did what he was commanded by the angel of the Lord: he called the child

by the name "Jesus" (1:18-23). The infancy narrative closes with Joseph's further act of obedience: he brings the child to Nazareth, so that he may be known as a "Nazorean."

Conclusion

Matthew 1-2 has provided the reader with the full identity of the son of David, the son of Abraham, the Son of God, the Emmanuel, known as "Jesus the Nazorean." It has also provided paradigms of true faith in Jesus in the figures of Joseph (from Israel, a descendent of David) and the wise men from the east (representing the Gentile world), side by side with characters who initiate the rejection of Jesus, Herod and Israel's leadership. The Christology and the contrasting responses to Jesus, the Christ, the Son of David and the Son of Abraham, will be played out until they are resolved in Jesus' death and resurrection, and his final commission to his fragile disciples. He will be with them till the end of the ages.

NOTES

[1] For more detail on the function of a prologue to a Gospel, see above, Chapter Three: Reading Mark 1:1-13: A Prologue to the Gospel.

[2] On the threatening nature of these passages, see B. R. Gaventa, *Mary. Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Studies on Personalities of the New Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 30-32.

[3] The overall division of the material, and the suggestion that 1:1-25 deals with the questions of who Jesus is, and how he came to be born, and that 2:1-23 focuses upon the question of where Jesus is born and foreshadows his destiny, depends upon the epoch making study of R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah. A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New updated edition; Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 48-54.

[4] See R. R. Wilson, "Between 'Azel' and 'Azel.' Interpreting the Biblical Genealogies," *Biblical Archeologist* 42 (1979): 11-22.

[5] Various "messianic expectations" can be traced in first century Jewish thought. There was no standard "messianic hope." See J. J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star. The Messiah of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1995).

[6] The change to the name "Abraham," in fact only a dialectical variant of Abram (meaning "the father is exalted"), is an exercise in popular etymology to associate artificially the new name to the Hebrew for "father of a multitude."

[7] As J. P. Meier, *Matthew* (New Testament Message 3; Wimington: Michael Glazier, 1979), 3, remarks: "The genealogies in Mt and Lk are to be understood as theological statements, not biological reports."

[8] For a survey, see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (3 vols.; International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-1997), 1:161-64.

[9] For a detailed presentation of these suggestions, see Brown, *Birth*, 71-74.

[10] E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1975), 25.

[11] Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:188.

[12] For a summary of this situation, admittedly based upon later rabbinic documents, but reflected here and elsewhere in biblical passages, see Brown, *Birth*, 123-24.

[13] Unlike Luke, where Mary's co-operation with God's design is described (Luke 1:26-38).

[14] D. Senior, *Matthew* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 41.

[15] The text says that Joseph decided to divorce her "quietly." What that means is hard to understand, as the pregnancy could hardly be kept "quiet." Following Brown, *Birth*, 128, and Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:204-205, Joseph must be understood as interpreting Mary's pregnancy as the result of infidelity, and acting according to that judgment he applies the law as leniently as he can.

[16] The "angel of the Lord" is a figure who appears regularly across the Old Testament. The angel has no personal identity or significance, but bears the message of God, and is almost interchangeable with God. See C. A. Newsome, "Angels," *ABR* 1:248-53. She writes: "Yahweh's authority and presence in these encounters is to be affirmed, but yet it is not possible for human beings to have an unmediated encounter with God" (p. 250).

[17] For a detailed comparative study of the annunciation stories in both the Old and the New Testament, see Brown, *Birth*, 155-59.

[18] See Brown, *Birth*, 133-38.

[19] U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (trans. W. C. Linss; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 1:121.

[20] An attentive reader will note that in my citation from Luz (see above note), the name was written "Immanuel," while I use "Emmanuel." This word is transliterated from the

Hebrew word meaning "God with us," and both transliterations are possible. I personally prefer "Emmanuel."

[21] Matthew's purpose is clear: there can be no shadow of doubt that Mary's child is not the result of intercourse between Joseph and Mary prior to the birth of the child. That is all the text wants to say. The Roman Catholic tradition concerning the perpetual virginity of Mary is often questioned by the use of this text. On the history of the interpretation of the passage, see Luz, *Matthew*, 1:124-25. Its most obvious meaning is that they had normal sexual relations after the birth of Jesus. However, it is not the only meaning possible. For a full discussion, see Brown, *Birth*, 132. He rightly concludes: "As for the marital situation after the birth of the child, in itself this verse gives us no information whatsoever." Such matters were not Matthew's concern.

[22] See Brown, *Birth*, 183.

[23] Josephus (*Antiquities* 15-17) reports his atrocities. His most violent reactions were against those whom he suspected were a threat to his authority. He killed the only wife he appeared to have loved, Mariamne, as he suspected that she was maneuvering her Hasmonean sons into a position where they could restore that line. He also executed several of his own sons (Alexander and Aristobulus in 7-6 B.C.E.), as he suspected they were becoming a threat to his authority.

[24] In English, one of the best-known witnesses to the idea of being born under a star is found in the song from Rogers and Hammerstein's musical, *Paint your Wagon*. The hero (famously

recorded in the gravelly voice of Lee Marvin) sings: "I was born under a wandering star." For a survey of suggestions that have been made to explain the star as a natural phenomenon that occurred ca. 4 B.C.E., see Brown, *Birth*, 171-73. There is every likelihood that the memory of a phenomenon in the skies that took place at roughly the time when Jesus was born has been used in the Matthean tradition to develop this account. See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:235.

[25] An important Matthean theme emerges. The Christian community looks back to the Old Testament as a vital element in God's revelation. Israel was entrusted with this revelation, however difficult the relationships between the Matthean community and the Jewish community in Antioch may have been. See Brown, *Birth*, 182-83.

[26] The addition of (2) to the citation of Micah 5:1 is to indicate that in the MT the passage is found at 5:1 while in the LXX it is found in 5:2.

[27] For the following, including the translations, see Brown, *Birth*, 184-87.

[28] Matthew's reinterpretation is so pronounced (only eight words out of twenty-two found in the LXX remain) that some suggest he must have had a different Greek version. See the remark of Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:242: "The differences are in fact sufficient to tempt one to speak of an 'interpretation' rather than a 'quotation' of Scripture."

[29] Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:246, list biblical and secular examples of heavenly bodies that move and direct wanderers. Meier, *Matthew*, 12, suggests that the pillar of fire that led Israel during the Exodus may be background to the moving star.

[30] In Luke 2:1-7, the child is born in a manger as Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem for the census of Quirinius. In Matthew, Jesus is born in the home of his father, Joseph of the line of David. For Luke, Jesus is born on a journey, in a resting place by the side of the road. For Matthew, Jesus is born in the home of Joseph, a descendent of David, in Bethlehem, the city of David.

[31] See the important remarks of Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:238: "Jerusalem is, in the first Gospel, the stronghold of Jewish leadership, and, despite its being 'the holy city' (4:5; 27:53), it represents corrupt political power and corrupt political authority. ... Jerusalem does not stand for the entire Jewish community. Instead she represents those in charge, the Jewish leadership (cf. 2:4)." Matt 2:1-12 is not focused upon a Gentile/Jewish contrast, but more upon a powerful/powerless contrast.

[32] For more detail, see Brown, *Birth*, 187-188.

[33] See W. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins. A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 81-82, for a list of contacts between this passage and the story of Moses.

[34] Carter, *Margins*, 86.

[35] His last years brought to a culmination a reign of bloodshed (see Josephus, *Antiquities* 15-18). There are many accounts of innocents being slain (*Antiquities* 15:5-7, 50-87, 173-78, 232-36, 247-52, 260-66, 289-90; 16:361-94; 17:42-44, 167, 182-87). Five days before he died he had one of his sons (Antipater) executed, and ordered that, on his death, a large group of imprisoned leaders in society should be slain. Josephus reports the motive for this command: "So all Judea and every household weep for me, whether they wish it or not" (*Antiquities* 17:6,5-6). Happily, this mass slaughter was avoided (*Antiquities* 17:8,2).

[36] The identification of Bethlehem as the burial place of Rachel continues in the location of the modern site for Rachel's tomb, just outside Bethlehem.

[37] Brown, *Birth*, 217.

[38] See Josephus, *Antiquities* 17:342-44. It is not correct to call Archelaus a "king." He was an "ethnarch" (see Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17:317; *Jewish War* 2:93). The same problem emerges in Matt 14:9, where Herod the tetrarch is called "king." Matthew continues with the expression "king" because he "wishes to continue the theme of the conflict of kings" (Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:273).

[39] For a presentation of stereotypical "dream visions," see Brown, *Birth*, 108.

[40] For a survey, from the patristic to the modern era, see Brown, *Birth*, 208-9.

[41] For what follows, see the more extensive treatment in Brown, *Birth*, 209-13.

[42] The Greek expression *Nazōraios* does not translate to "Nazarene," but rather to "Nazorean." But, in popular etymology, the word is close enough to be read as referring to the city of Jesus' origins. It is also open, however, to be understood as a reference to the *Nazir* and the *Neser* (see below).

[43] See Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Sacra Pagina 1; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 46: "It is likely that the readers were expected to keep all three connotations in mind rather than one alone. The latter two derivations would qualify the expression as a biblical quotation, and the first would tie them into the place where Jesus lived."