

Christmas In the Book of Matthew

Observing Chapters One & Two

I. MATTHEW'S OVERARCHING INTENT: PRESENTING THE MESSIANIC-KING

The primary purpose of the Book of Matthew is to demonstrate that Jesus was the Israelite Messianic-King promised to Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). The narrative is strategically focused on this theme, prioritizing the gospel of the physical kingdom for Israel over a universal gospel for all humanity at this stage.

This Israel-centric focus is supported by several key passages:

- **The Kingdom Gospel:** Matthew 4:17 emphasizes the proclamation of the physical kingdom of God specifically to Israel, a distinct focus compared to the universal message found in passages like John 3:16.
- **The Disciples' Mission:** In Matthew 10:5-6, Jesus explicitly instructs his disciples to go only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel."
- **John the Baptist's Ministry:** The ministry of John the Baptist, as detailed in Matthew 3:1-17, was directed specifically to the Israelite people in preparation for their King.

II. ESTABLISHING CHRIST'S CREDENTIALS: FIVE CORE FAMILIARITIES

A. Genealogical Familiarity: The Royal Lineage: Matthew begins by establishing Jesus's physical genealogy, tracing his lineage through key figures in Israel's history to prove his rightful claim to the throne.

Ancestor(s)	Scripture Reference	Significance
Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob	Matthew 1:1-2	Connects Jesus directly to the physical promises given to the patriarchs of Israel.
Judah	Matthew 1:3	Establishes Jesus's connection to the tribe specifically associated with the Messiah (Genesis 49:10).
David	Matthew 1:6	Links Jesus to the royal lineage, confirming his status as a rightful heir to the throne of Israel.
Joseph and Mariam (Mary)	Matthew 1:16	Grounds Jesus in a physical, human birth through his legal and maternal parentage.

B. Historical Familiarity: The "Scarlet Thread" of Prophecy: Matthew meticulously structures Jesus's genealogy into three distinct historical epochs, each comprising fourteen generations. This careful organization demonstrates God's sovereign hand throughout Israel's history, leading directly to the Messiah. This lineage is described as the "scarlet thread," symbolizing God's faithfulness in preserving his promised seed.

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The three historical periods are:

- **Abraham to David:** From the patriarchs to the establishment of the kingdom.
- **David to Deportation:** From the height of the kingdom to Babylonian captivity.
- **Deportation to Messiah:** From captivity to the arrival of the promised King.

Historical Connection	Prophetic Connection
Abraham (Isaac & Jacob)	Genesis 15:1-21, 17:21, 28:13-16
David	Second Samuel 7:12-16
Deportation	Jeremiah 29:1-14
Messiah	Isaiah 9:6; Daniel 9:25

C. Cultural Familiarity: The Betrothal of Joseph and Mary: Matthew's account is deeply embedded in the Hebrew culture of the time. In Matthew 1:18, he states Mary had been "betrothed" to Joseph. The Greek word used, *mnēsteuō*, refers to a promise of marriage. In the Hebrew culture, this period of engagement, known as the *eyrusin*, was as legally and socially binding as marriage itself. This context is essential for understanding Joseph's subsequent distress and decision-making upon learning of Mary's pregnancy.

D. Divine Familiarity: The Nature and Origin of Jesus: While establishing Jesus's human lineage, Matthew simultaneously makes a profound claim about his divine origin.

- **Conception by the Holy Spirit:** Matthew 1:18 stated that before Joseph and Mary "came together," Mary was "found to be with child by the Holy Spirit." This statement is critical, indicating that Jesus was not a "mere man" born of conjugal interaction but was uniquely both divine and human in nature.
- **Angelic Confirmation:** An angel appears to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1:19-21), confirming the divine origin of the child. The angel instructs Joseph, a "righteous man," not to disgrace Mary but to take her as his wife. The angel also reveals the child's purpose in his name: "you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

E. Prophetic Familiarity: The Fulfillment of Scripture: Matthew explicitly connects the events of Jesus's birth to the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy.

- **The Virgin Birth:** In Matthew 1:22-23, he quotes Isaiah 7:14: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translates to "GOD WITH US." This connection underscores the doctrine of the incarnation: God conceived through human means, dwelling with humanity as a man. For the Israelites awaiting Immanuel, this was a powerful declaration.
- **Identity of the Magi:** The term *Magi* (Greek: *magos*) originates from the Hebrew *rab-mawg'*, which referred to soothsayers or magicians from Babylon who served as divine advisers in the courts of Babylonian, Persian, and Median kings (Jeremiah 39:3, 13).

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- **The Royal Inquiry:** The Magi, who were Gentiles, arrive in Jerusalem asking, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2). This title, *basileus tōn Ioudaiōn*, is used in the Gospels by Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus. Their knowledge of the timing of this birth was likely calculated from prophecies in the book of Daniel (cf., 9:25).
- **Converging Prophetic Knowledge:** Herod, threatened by a potential rival, consults the chief priests and scribes, who identify the prophesied location of the Messiah's birth as Bethlehem, citing Micah 5:2. This creates a critical distinction: the Gentile Magi knew *when* the Messiah would be born, while the Jewish leaders knew *where*, yet it was the Magi who acted on this knowledge.
- **The Guiding Star and Worship:** The star that guides the Magi behaves uniquely, moving and stopping over the house where Jesus was. This celestial event underscores the divine significance of the birth. Upon finding Jesus, the Magi "fell to the ground and worshiped Him," presenting him with kingly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:10-11).

III. CONCLUSION

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 9:1-5, later acknowledges this intimate connection, affirming that from the Israelites "is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever." This confirms the theological thrust of Matthew's account.

In summary, Matthew's telling of the Christmas story is a dense, evidence-based argument that weaves together genealogy, history, prophecy, and divine intervention. Each detail is purposefully included to demonstrate to an Israelite audience that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of all their hopes—their Messiah and their King. Therefore, an important aspect of Christmas is to recognize that the Messiah was not only given to the world but was also given specifically to Israel as their appointed