

LEARNING BASIC BIBLE STUDY METHODS

An Inductive Guide to the Bible Study Using the Book of

MATTHEW

Lesson 1

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Matthew 1:18-25

The Book of Matthew begins with a genealogy tracing the line from Abraham (to whom the promises were made), through David (who became the first king in the line of the covenant promises), to Jesus Christ. This genealogy shows that the family of Joseph was in the line of the kings--that Jesus was the “son” of David. Accordingly, Matthew will present Jesus as the promised King--the Messiah. But we will begin our study with the first narrative paragraph.

Note of clarification: The word *christos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *mashiah* (pronounced *mah-she-ack*), which means “anointed one.” It is a description of a king. “Christ,” then, is a title indicating that Jesus is the anointed king, the promised Messiah.

The Reading

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

²³“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”-- which means, “God with us.”

²⁴When Joseph awoke, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

²⁵But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Initial Observations on the Reading

It is helpful to read through the passage several times and make a number of observations about the text. Most of the observations will raise questions that you will try to answer (Bible study involves learning what kind of things to look for, what kind of questions to ask). But spend as much time as you can observing what the text is saying, how it says it, what it is not saying, what it is emphasizing, and the like.

For example, the passage says nothing about the difficulty of the situation for Mary and Joseph and their family, which must have been considerable. But that difficulty may be the reason that an angelic revelation was required. Whenever something like this occurs, something so removed from human experience, there is usually some revelation from God that will set their hearts at ease and encourage their faith response. And besides this, Mary herself had received an angelic visit (Luke 1:26-38) with the same message, and that revelation was confirmed for her by the response of her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). When you gather together the accounts of the announcement of this supernatural birth, it is easier to understand the straightforward compliance of Joseph and Mary.

Now then, we need to look at how the narrative is constructed. The passage has a little introduction telling us that this is how the birth came about. If you read through the passage again and make a note (mental, if not literal) of the story line, you will see how our study will proceed. The main clauses tell that Mary was pledged to be married, she was found to be pregnant, and Joseph was planning to divorce her, albeit in a kind way. But a revelation from God explained her condition, and so he completed the marriage agreement, but did not have sex with her until after the birth of Jesus. This is a short passage, and so the story line is easy to identify.

Two things in the narrative give it all the meaning that it needs. The first is the quotation of what the angel said. Without that nothing in the story could be understood. And so a lot of attention will be focused on the revelation about the birth of Jesus. The second thing that is added to the story that is essential to the interpretation is the editorial explanation that Matthew makes in

verses 22 and 23, telling us how this was all a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. No doubt Mary (and Joseph) understood this connection in due course, but perhaps not at the time of the event. The explanation is put in for the readers of the account that this supernatural birth is a fulfillment of a prophecy from God. This too will have to be studied.

So then, identifying the quotations and the comments in the narrative that explain the story line will direct us to what is most important in understanding the story. We still have to make sure we understand the story line, but these things will lead us to the full meaning of the event.

The Subject Matter of the Story

This account, as its heading says, is about the birth of Jesus the Christ. If we had to identify a principle actor in the narrative, it would have to be the Lord, moving behind the scenes to bring about the birth of Christ. Mary is found to be with child (the verb is passive, and so the story is not emphasizing anything she did). Joseph is about to act, but is prevented from doing so by the Lord through a dream. His actions are in response to the revelation from God. But it is God who is at work in the narrative: God the Holy Spirit brings about the conception in Mary, the angel from God reveals the mystery to Joseph and gives him the instructions, and all of this is a fulfillment of what God had prophesied hundreds of years earlier.

With the emphasis being on the work of God like this, the birth can only be seen as supernatural. This is the tone that Matthew wants to set at the outset of his gospel--there is nothing purely human about this Jesus. The birth was of God, explained by God, in fulfillment of a prophecy by God. God planned it, God carried it out, and God made sure the main participants understood it (as much as they were capable of understanding). The whole thing was supernatural.

Identifying the subject matter and the main “character” in the story helps us stay close to the point of the story, or at least to do justice to the tone of it.

Cultural Aspects of the Story

It will be helpful to deal with the cultural aspect of marriage at this point since it comes up so quickly in the story line. Joseph and Mary were engaged to be married, betrothed as some versions translate it. In that culture the betrothal was tantamount to being married, except that they waited for a period of about a year before they actually consummated the marriage. This was to show that the couple remained pure until they were united. If there was a violation in that period--as this appeared at first to be--then it would take a divorce to end the engagement-marriage. For more on the subject of marriage and betrothal you can read relevant discussions in the Bible dictionaries. A good general work to look for (it may be temporarily out of print) is the work by Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (published in paper back in two volumes by McGraw-Hill; one volume on religious institutions and one on social institutions--like marriage).

Another subject you may wish to think about, if you have time, is the importance of dreams in the Bible as a means of divine revelation. Here too you can start with Bible dictionary discussions. Dreams given to Israel in the Bible usually have verbal revelation at the center; dreams that concern the nations often are symbolic and require an interpreter, usually a Hebrew

(like Joseph or Daniel). The dreams at the birth of Jesus are clearly revelation. In other words, these dreams are not ordinary dreams capable of various interpretations. They bring a clear word from God. And the people knew about such things because the Old Testament had a good number of them in the revelation of God's program.

The Meaning of the Names

There are not a lot of words in this passage that need defining. But at the heart of the revelation is the giving of the name "Jesus." Here too you could get help from a good Bible dictionary. But to cut the process short I will summarize what you would find. This is a good Hebrew name very similar to the Old Testament name "Joshua." The Hebrews loved to give names with meaning; and the meaning usually involved some word play on the name. The word play with this name is on the verb "to save." That verb in Hebrew is *yasha* ' . Names like Hosea, Isaiah, and Joshua, to name but a few, are all based on this verb. The name "Jesus," like the name "Joshua," would mean "the Lord saves," or shortened would mean "he saves." This is why the significance of the name is then explained, "For he shall save his people from their sins."

This latter clarification was necessary because in the Old Testament the verb "to save" is most often used for physical deliverance--saved from enemies, from disease, from oppression, from death. It is also used in the sense of salvation from sin, but folks would probably think of other types of salvation first. In fact, the followers of Jesus often thought more in the sense of a national deliverance from Rome than in a spiritual salvation from sin. The word from God makes it clear from the outset that the salvation Jesus will bring will be a salvation from sin. Once sin is dealt with, then the results of the sin can be taken care of as well (and there will be deliverance from the problems that sin has caused).

The Angelic Revelation

Since we are considering the giving of the name, we might as well deal with the whole revelation through the angel at this point as well. The core of the revelation is that "what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." This is completely supernatural, of course, and beyond any human comprehension. The point is simply made that Jesus was born of Mary and without a human father.

The genealogy in the chapter prepared us for this: verse 16 said, "and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

It does not list Jesus as a son of Joseph. He was born of Mary.

We will come back to this when we discuss doctrinal meanings based on the text. But at this point we should simply recall how Jesus so often said things like "I am from above, you are from below," or that "God sent His Son into the world." There was a birth in Bethlehem to be sure. Jesus, the human, was born of Mary; the child was conceived supernaturally in her womb by the Holy Spirit. But the Son, the divine Son, was sent into the world from heaven by the Father. And the person of Jesus Christ has these two natures, the earthly human and the eternal divine, supernaturally united in Him.

The point of the supernatural birth, the revelation about it, and the giving of the name, follows a long tradition of such things in the Old Testament. It all underscored that this one would be a child of destiny, a Godsend as it were. But all of those provisions of children of destiny were mere shadows in comparison to this one, the coming of the Son of God into the world. The body of Jesus was specially prepared by God the Spirit for the Son who came into the world.

The Fulfillment of the Prophecy

Now we need to study the other clarifying section of the passage, the note that this was a fulfillment of the prophecy by Isaiah. This will be a little more involved because most Christians are not that well-versed in Isaiah and may find it a little complicated to sort through. Any time there is a mention of a prophecy that was fulfilled you must go back and read it in the Old Testament within its context in order to understand the prophecy, and then see how it was fulfilled in the New Testament.

Here is where a good commentary on the Bible would save you some time; you could read the chapter in Isaiah and then the chapter's commentary to give you an idea of what is going on. But I shall cut the process short here by summarizing what it is going on in Isaiah 7 and how it points to this amazing birth. But you should read the chapter in Isaiah.

The setting. The setting for the chapter was an impending invasion about 734 B.C., just a few years before the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed (722). The threat was from an alliance being made between the king of Damascus (Rezin) and the king of Israel (Pekah) against the king of Judah in Jerusalem (Ahaz). To put it in understandable terms, it would be like modern Syria joining with the people of the West Bank (which is the heart of Samaria/Israel) against Jerusalem--except that in those days the people in Samaria/Israel were Israelites. The troubling alliance sought to remove the king in Jerusalem and replace him with a puppet king, the son of Tabeel.

The prophet was called to go and meet the king as he checked the water supply for the siege. The word from God was that there was no reason to fear these two northern kings--they were smoldering brands or stumps of wood. The invasion was not going to happen. The word of the Lord was that in a few years the whole northern territory would be destroyed and taken into captivity and Judah would survive.

But the message to the king demanded faith if he was to have a part in the future program of God: "If you do not believe, you will not be confirmed" (v. 9). In modern expression we would say that Isaiah told the king that God had a future planned for the kingdom of Judah, but he was not a part of it. Isaiah knew that this king was not going to trust the Lord.

In fact, the prophet offered a sign to the king. To guarantee the reliability of the word from the prophet, the king could have asked for any sign, no matter how strange or how supernatural. But this put him in a dilemma. You see, he was not a believer, not by any means (read 2 Chronicles 28). So, he did not want to submit to the prophet's advice or call for faith; but he did not want to appear as an unbeliever before the people. So, he pretended piety and refused to ask for a sign, saying he did not want to test the Lord.

This angered the prophet (and the Lord) and so a sign was given to the House of David (in general, not to this king) anyway. The sign was that there would be a birth that would guarantee the future of the dynasty. War was coming; extinction was possible; but God was guaranteeing a future for the royal Davidic family by an unexpected birth: a virgin would conceive and have a son. The Davidic Covenant would remain in place--but Ahaz would have no share in the future.

The prophecy. Biblical scholars have different interpretations on how this prophecy worked, and you can spend a lot of time sorting them out if you like. Some argue that because this is such a special prophecy it has only one fulfillment, the birth of Jesus. But a careful reading of the passage indicates that some partial fulfillment or application of the words was expected in their lifetime, for things would be happening before the child reached a certain age. It seems more likely that there was a birth in the days of Isaiah, not an actual virgin birth, but an unexpected birth of a young prince to a woman in the royal family, a woman who was a virgin at the time. The unexpected birth would be seen as a Godsend because it was a sign that the royal family would continue. It would tell them that God was with them.

The Hebrew word translated “virgin” essentially means a young woman who is mature enough, or ripe enough, for marriage. But this context would require the connotation of “virgin” since this was a birth of a prince in the royal family, but more importantly it was a sign from God.

Some scholars have suggested it looks to the birth of the good king Hezekiah. Others suggest it is a prophecy of Isaiah’s own son recorded in similar terms in Isaiah 8. But the text does not say; it is simply the oracle given in anticipation of the birth.

We do know that the prophecy has its fullest meaning, and its divinely intended fulfillment therefore, in the birth of Jesus. The Davidic royal family was almost non-existent (Herod was not even a Jew); Rome was completely dominating the political scene. And in the middle of all this a sign was given, which was a fulfillment of the ancient sign of Isaiah: there would be an actual virgin birth in the lineage of David. Any partial fulfillment in Old Testament times would merely have been a foreshadowing of the true fulfillment in Jesus. We shall see this pattern of the way prophecy works again and again.

Please note: the doctrine of the virgin birth does not depend on the etymology of the Hebrew word for “virgin” or “young woman.” The doctrine is clearly taught in the Gospel accounts. But the word for “virgin” has its very specific nuance in reference to the birth of Jesus.

The context in Isaiah. Now, one further thing is necessary for understanding the announcement of this prophecy--its context. Isaiah 7--11 is called the Book of Immanuel. Let me walk you through it so you can see the significance of the section from which this prophecy comes. In chapter 7 the sign of an extraordinary birth is announced, ultimately a virgin birth, and the one born will be known as Immanuel, God with us. In other words, the birth would be evidence of God’s presence with his people. In the Old Testament, that presence could be felt in a number of ways. But in the New Testament, in the incarnation, Jesus was fully “God with us.” The sign was that the Davidic family would continue and would have a future; but sharing in that future required faith.

Then in chapter 8 Isaiah the prophet lets people know that Immanuel, this king, will be either a stumbling stone or a foundation stone, depending on whether they believe in him and make him their sanctuary or not. If they do not, if they continue to go after spiritists and necromancers and the like, they will find no answer. Why should they seek the answer among the dead? They should seek the living God. (The angels in the garden tomb used this line: Why do you seek the living among the dead?).

Then in chapter 9 Isaiah identifies this wonder king, Immanuel, and gives him throne names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. He will reign with peace and righteousness. Amazingly Isaiah says that a child will be born, a son will be given. The fulfillment in Christ shows how precise this distinction would be.

And then according to Isaiah 11, Isaiah says that this king will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring about universal changes in all creation.

So the announcement of the supernatural birth of Messiah is in a context filled with descriptions of this coming king. He is, to say the least, much more than a mortal king. He is supernatural in every sense of the word. And from that context the New Testament writers knew that this Jesus, born of the virgin Mary, was the fulfillment of the prophecy given some 700 years earlier. They may not have always understood it, but they soon came to realize that Jesus was indeed God with them, in the flesh (incarnation). When Matthew explains that the verse in Isaiah 7 finds its fulfillment in the birth of Jesus, he is also saying that everything in Isaiah 7--11 that describes the one born of the virgin applies also to Christ.

New Testament Correlations

The better you come to know the New Testament the easier it will be for you to make the connections to related passages. At this point you can use dictionaries and concordances. Once you know how to describe what the passage is about--the incarnation, the supernatural birth of Jesus, the virgin birth--then you can look these up in Bible dictionaries and they will include references in the Bible in their discussions. Or, a commentary you might be using should have some cross references as well.

Gospels. It will be easy to look at the other Gospels to see what they say about the birth of Jesus. I have already mentioned the account in Luke 1. There the annunciation to Mary described Jesus as “the Son of the Most High” and “the Son of God.” And it declared that he would reign forever. Obviously the passage is not talking about just another king. This one is special. This one is divine.

But John offers some more clarification. He describes Jesus as the “Word,” the complete revelation of the Godhead. This Word, Jesus, is the creator of all things (1:3). And this Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us (1:14). And John said that they beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten Son. His description of Jesus as the “only-begotten” is crucial (I think the NIV has made the translation very weak). The verb “beget” (unlike verbs such as create or make) can only mean that the one begotten shares the nature of the father. If Jesus shares the nature of God the Father, it means that Jesus is divine and therefore eternal. There never was a

time that he did not exist. Therefore, the word “begotten” must not be understood to mean that he had a beginning, but that his nature is divine. And John does not mean “divine in any watered-down sense of “godlike”; rather, he means that in this aspect Jesus is truly unique. So he adds the word “mono-” to the front of the Greek word “begotten” -- “the only begotten Son.” There is only one in the human race that is truly divine. The historic creed of the church got it right when it wrote that Jesus was “begotten, not made.” Jesus is God manifested in human flesh.

There are two supernatural signs that speak of Jesus’ nature. The first is the supernatural birth that shows he was not born as we are. The other is the resurrection, that shows that he is not limited to this world’s experiences as we are. He is above it all. Both signs attest to the fact that He is the Son of God.

Epistles. There are many passages in the apostles’ writings that address the birth and what it signified. Two stand out above the rest. The first is Galatians 4:4, which says “In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.” It was on time because God prophesied it; it was a birth through a woman, without a human father, and it was for the purpose of redemption. If Jesus had had a normal birth with a human father, he would have been totally human, and a sinner like us. Redemption required the work of someone different, someone above it all, from on high, sinless and supernatural. Without this description of Christ our salvation would be without any foundation.

Philippians 2:6-11 should also be read. This tells how He did not cling to his lofty position and power in heaven but laid aside his privilege of divinity and took on the form of a servant, born in human likeness. He humbled himself, even to the death of the cross. Therefore, God the Father has highly exalted him in glory, and someday everyone will exalt and praise him. Someday everyone will acknowledge that Jesus Christ was not simply a good man from Nazareth, not simply a teacher or a prophet, but God in mortal flesh.

Applications and Conclusions

The passage is clearly written to inform the readers, us, that Jesus Christ came into this world supernaturally. The child Jesus was conceived by the Spirit of God in the womb of Mary. We do not know how that was done. But we do know from the rest of Scripture that this was only the human part formed in the womb--the divine Son was sent into the world.

The natural response to this is that it is incredible, incomprehensible, impossible, amazing. Of course, once one actually believes in God, nothing is impossible for God. But unbelief has trouble accepting something like this. So we are not surprised to see skeptics trying to explain it away. In fact, there is some evidence that even in the time of Jesus people considered his birth “troubled”: John 8:41 records the enemies of Jesus saying, “We are not born of fornication,” possibly hinting at some question about his birth. But Jesus’ response to them was that He was from above, and they were from below, from their father the devil.

So, the first response we are to have to the passage is to consider what it is asking us to believe. The Old Testament prophecy, the angelic revelations, the account of the event, and the other witnesses and explanations of it, all declare that the birth of Jesus was completely

supernatural, because He is not a mere mortal. While some might balk at this at first, as the chapters unfold in the Book of Matthew it will become clear that no one could do these things if merely mortal. So if at the outset this is hard to grasp, continue through the book and see how the works of Christ attest to His nature. After all, it took the disciples a long time to come to grips with this.

The natural corollary to this response is then to consider what we should do in response to the revelation of the passage. Other passages in Matthew will spell out the application--give to the poor, give thanks to God, pray, or a number of things like that. This one does not so specify. But the natural response would be one of adoration and worship. If this child born of Mary is indeed who Scripture says He is, then He deserves our devotion. And it begins with our faith response to Him as the Messiah sent from Heaven.

This has been the theme captured by so many of the writers of carols celebrating the birth of Jesus. Consider this most popular one:

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee to-night.
For Christ is born of Mary; and gathered all above
while mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering love;
O morning stars! Together proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King and peace to men on earth.
How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven;
No ear may hear His coming ; but in this world of sin
where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.
O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in--be born in us today!
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell--
Oh come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel.

So Matthew sounds the note from the very beginning. God has visited this planet in order to redeem people from their sins. It all began with the extraordinary birth through a virgin, Mary, which had been foretold centuries earlier. Everything about this incarnation was to be supernatural, or it would not work. And so from the outset we are confronted with the divine nature of Jesus the Messiah, and with the purpose of his coming into the world.

As Isaiah said, this would all be a stumbling block to some, but a foundation stone to those who believe. Whether people believe this first sign or not, the point is clear as to what the Word of God is clearly saying about Jesus. Matthew will now build on this introduction through the chapters.

Now if you were organizing this little section for a Bible study, it can be outlined rather neatly. The first few verses would cover the situation, the unexpected pregnancy and Joseph's response to it (vv. 18,19). Then, the next few verses explain the pregnancy (vv. 20-23): the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and would be the Savior of the world, and this child would be Immanuel, the wonder king prophesied by Isaiah. The final section would then report the obedience of Joseph in marrying Mary and naming the child "Jesus."

In addition to the main idea of the revelation about Jesus Christ, the passage also illustrates a practical principle for God's people that would be applicable in many other situations. The works of God are always supernatural, and so the revelation about His works must be studied in order to discern what the divine plan is and how it should be embraced by faith. Those who believe in the Lord will receive His Word and obey it.