

Israel's Promised Messiah

Incarnate: Why the Manger Matters

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The Opening Crawl

When you read a book, do you generally read the preface first? Or do you skip the preface and just go straight to the first chapter? Maybe you think the preface is boring or you simply want to get on to the action. But the problem with that is, most good books put critical stuff in the preface—things that help you understand the author's goals, their organization, their main thesis, etc.

Or maybe you don't read much and so this example's lost on you. But what about movies? Most of you here have watched at least the first Star Wars movie. Do you read the opening crawl at the beginning of the Star Wars movies?

You know what I'm talking about. The opening crawl starts with glowing blue print that says, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." And then the music kicks in and it says Star Wars in big yellow block letters. Then the opening crawl begins. In the first movie, it says, "Episode IV: A New Hope." Then it goes on; the first paragraph of the crawl says, "It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire."

Do you read this preface? Or do you kind of check out until the action starts, with the first imperial star destroyer emerging somewhere in space? If you skip the opening crawl, you will certainly miss the context for the film. The first thing we read in the first movie is the title, *Episode IV: A New Hope*. Right away, we know there's a backstory. And that backstory will inform the meaning or the significance of the movie. You can't be a good Star Wars nerd and skip the opening crawl.

Did you know that the Christmas story has a preface? It has an opening crawl. And you can't understand the Christmas story if you skip it. Please open your Bibles to Matthew 1.

In Matthew 1, the Christmas story begins in verse 18. "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way..."¹ But before the Christmas story begins in earnest, Matthew gives us a seventeen-verse genealogy. It's basically Jesus' family tree. In verse 1 we read, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham."

The genealogy has three parts. It begins with Abraham in verse 2. Then it moves to David in verse 6. Then to the deportation in verse 12. Then in verse 16 it says, "Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ."

Many find genealogies boring or they simply don't understand what they mean. And so they skip them. But like any good book, the preface is the key to understanding an author's goals. So we can't really skip the preface. We can't skip this genealogy, if we want to know what Matthew's trying to communicate with the Christmas story.

And what are Matthew's goals? What's he trying to communicate? One of the main things he wants us to see in this genealogy, and really in the whole birth narrative, is that Jesus is the fulfillment of

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

the promises God made to his people in the Old Testament. Or as our Statement of Faith says, Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah.

There are some popular preachers today who are questioning the importance of the Old Testament. They're saying that if you want to understand the main message of Christianity you don't need the Old Testament. Some are even questioning the truthfulness of parts of the Old Testament. They're saying people just need the simple good news about Jesus. And I understand their heart. It's a heart to reach people, to not get bogged down in difficult or possibly offensive stuff. It's a heart to just get to the essentials about Jesus in the New Testament.

But the challenge is, when we turn to the very first book of the New Testament and the very first chapter before we even get to the birth of Jesus, we're given a very long genealogy that refers to large swaths of the Old Testament. The genealogy basically says Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the promises made to the people in the Old Testament. And you can't truly understand who Jesus is or what he came to accomplish if you don't understand the back story, if you don't understand the context of his coming. You can't understand the New Testament without some understanding of the Old Testament.

The preface to Matthew is basically saying the coming of Jesus is Episode IV of an old story. It's called A New Hope. But if you want to understand why it's a new hope, you have to know at least something about Episodes I-III.

So what we're going to do this morning is walk through three big episodes in Israel's history that are outlined in this genealogy. And then we'll see two major ways that Jesus is the fulfillment to the promises made in the first three episodes. Then at the end, we'll look at Matthew 28 to see how we should respond to the birth of Jesus.

THE STORY

Let's begin with the story outlined in Matthew's genealogy.

Episode I

Episode I begins in Genesis. In the beginning God established his kingdom among Adam and Eve. Kids who have gone to kids camp know what the kingdom of God is. God's kingdom is God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing.²

Adam and Eve were God's people living in God's place in the Garden of Eden. They were living in relationship with him. Or as the Bible says, they walked before him. And that relationship with God involved living under God's rule (or his authority) and blessing. They were also called to expand God's kingdom. They were created in God's image and they were called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. They were called to spread his image and his kingdom to the ends of the earth.

But God's people rebelled against God's rule. And so God banished them from his presence in the Garden of Eden. Instead of experiencing God's blessing, they were cursed.

But God made a promise to his people, as he was sending them out from his presence. He promised that one day a Savior would come. That Savior would come through the *offspring* of Adam and Eve.

² Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*; Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture*.

And so the offspring of Adam and Eve is traced throughout the rest of the Old Testament. In my Bible it traces their offspring over about 950 pages or 925 chapters. It's a long story. And it contains many genealogies that follow the offspring of Adam and Eve.

How many of you are familiar with P.D. Eastman's book, *Are You My Mother?* At the beginning of this book, a baby bird is separated from his mother right after he hatches from his egg. And so he sets out to find his mother. But he's never seen his mother and so he doesn't know what she looks like. And so he goes to a hen and asks, "Are you my mother?" And the hen says, "No." Then he comes to a dog. And he says, "Are you my mother?" To which the dog replies, "I am not your mother. I am a dog." He does this many times. He goes to a kitten, a cow, a boat, an airplane, and eventually a large crane. It's clear on each page that none of these are his mother. Eventually the crane takes him back to his nest where he at last finds his mother.

The Bible is kind of like this book. There are many people that come from the offspring of Adam and Eve, but none of them are the Savior that was promised.

But as the story continues, the Bible gives us more clues as to the identity of this coming Savior. It shows us just what the Savior will be like, like the characters in the story showed the bird what his mother would be like.

The first big clue comes when we're introduced to Abraham in Genesis 12. When God appears to Abraham, he promises that he'll make him into a great nation. Israel would become the people of God. And God promises that he will bring Israel into the Promised Land; he will establish a place for them to live in relationship with him. But not only that. He also promises Abraham that through his offspring all of the families of the earth would be blessed.

So God's word to Abraham begins with narrow promise—that he will bless Abraham's family, the nation of Israel. But then it expands into a very big promise. He says that through his offspring all of the families of the earth will be blessed. He will bless the nations. That's a promise of universal blessing.

God also called Abraham and his offspring to walk before him and to be blameless, like Adam and Eve. That is, he called them to live under his rule. But as we trace Abraham's offspring, we don't see his offspring walking before him and being blameless. His family tree was marked with more of the same—with sin and rebellion.

Episode II

That family tree leads us all the way to David. And David marks the beginning of the second episode in Matthew's genealogy. David gives us a clearer picture of what the Savior would look like. God did bless Abraham. He did make him into a great nation. And David became the king of that great nation.

In 2 Samuel 7, after David was made the king of Israel, he asks God if he can build him a house (referring to the temple). But God said no to his request; he said Solomon would build the temple where God would dwell among his people. Instead God promised he would build a house for David. He promised that he would build a royal dynasty for David.

God promised that from his offspring would come many kings. There would be no break in David's royal lineage. And one day, there would come a king from David's line whose kingdom would have no end.

So God promised Abraham that universal blessing would come to all of the nations of the earth. And God promised David that a universal rule would extend to the ends of the earth for all time. God's kingdom would be fully established through his king.

But like those before him, God also called David to walk before him and to obey him. He said that if he or his offspring after him didn't walk before him that he would remove them from their throne, but he wouldn't do away with the dynasty. His kingdom was secure. And that leads us to the third episode in Matthew's genealogy—the deportation.

Episode III

God was fed up with David's offspring. The Davidic kings didn't walk before God. And so God sent the Babylonians into Israel, who destroyed the temple and took Israel off into exile. God no longer dwelt among his people.

At that time, God made a promise in Ezekiel 34. He promised that he would do what David's offspring had failed to do. He would be the shepherd of his people. But at the end of Ezekiel 34, he said that he would also set up a Davidic king over the house of Israel. That was a somewhat confusing promise. God said he would be king. But he also said that he would send a new Davidic king.

And the Israelites were left wondering how this strange promise would be fulfilled. They waited a long time to see it come to pass. Five hundred years of waiting. Waiting for the promises made to Adam and Eve to be fulfilled that a Savior would come from their offspring. Waiting for the promises made to Abraham to be fulfilled that all the nations would be blessed through his offspring. Waiting for the promises to David to be fulfilled that a king would come from his offspring to establish a universal reign. Waiting. Waiting. And more waiting.

Episode IV

But eventually all of those promises were fulfilled when Jesus was born. He was *the* promised offspring of Abraham, the offspring of David. At the end of forty-two names, we read, "Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ." Who is called the Messiah. Who is called the Savior!

So that's the story. Hopefully you see now how critical Matthew's genealogy is to understanding the significance of the Christmas story. Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah. He is the fulfillment of all of the promises made in the Old Testament. But how is Jesus the fulfillment to these promises?

THE FULFILLMENT

I want to highlight two ways Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah.

Universal Rule

First, Jesus brings universal rule. Verse 17 highlights the number 14. There were fourteen generations from Abraham to David. Fourteen from David to the deportation. And fourteen from the deportation to Jesus. Why is this significant? Well Hebrew numbers were often represented by adding together Hebrew letters. It's a method called gematria. And the number 14 in Hebrew was made by putting together the Hebrew letters DVD. And that doesn't stand for digital video disc. It stands for David. Jesus was Israel's promised Davidic king. The Messiah. The Christ.

Jesus is the king promised in 2 Samuel 7. And he is also God, who came to shepherd his people, as promised in Ezekiel 34.

One of the first things Matthew says about Jesus in his birth narrative is his name shall be called Immanuel which means God with us (1:23). In chapter 2, when the wise men from the East are looking for Jesus, they tell Herod that they're looking for the Messiah prophesied in Micah. "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" (2:6). Here is the one whose kingdom shall never end! Jesus is the king who establishes God's universal rule, the King of kings. Finally, the promise was fulfilled.

Universal Blessing

Second, Jesus brings universal blessing. Jesus is the offspring of Abraham. Galatians tells us quite plainly that he's the offspring through whom all the nations will be blessed (3:7-9, 16). So we shouldn't be surprised that the first people to come and adore him were wise men from the east—people from the nations. Although the Messiah came from one nation, *from* Israel; the blessings he brought were *for* all nations, for all peoples.

But how does Jesus bring blessings to the nations? When the angels appear to Joseph, they tell him that they are to call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins (1:21). The blessings, or grace, that Jesus brings to all peoples is forgiveness.

In our sin, we're separated from God and banished from his presence. But Jesus was born in a manger so that he could die on a cross to save his people from their sins. He was indeed the Good Shepherd in the line of David. But the shepherd became a lamb. And he laid down his life for the sheep so he could bless them. He sought them and bought them with his redeeming blood. And he brought them back into relationship with God.

These are the realities Matthew wants us to see in his genealogy. His preface to the birth narrative shows us—Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah. He's the long-expected Jesus, born to bring universal blessing and establish his universal rule.

What a grand entrance Jesus made in Bethlehem. The Old Testament creates a lot of space of expectation and anticipation. Jesus fills up all that space. He's the fulfillment of all of the promises made to Israel.

THE RESPONSE

But what does all of this mean for us? Hopefully I've shown what it meant for Israel. But one of the marvelous things about Jesus is that he's not just for Israel. He is *from* Israel. But he's *for* the nations. He's for you and me. If you place your faith in Jesus, you can be forgiven of your sins. You can become sons and daughters of the family of God. You can become citizens of the kingdom of God.

That's the good news of Christmas. And so the first way to respond is to receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Receive his blessings and submit to his rule.

But if you have already received Jesus, what's your response to this passage? To answer this question, I want to turn our attention from the first chapter of Matthew to the last chapter of Matthew. Matthew 28 is intentionally linked to Matthew 1. The grand entrance of Jesus leads to the Great Commission of Jesus. Chapter 1 tells us what is true of Jesus; chapter 28 tells us what to do.

So what I want to do with the rest of our time this morning is to look at a number of parallels between Matthew 1 and Matthew 28 and draw a few points of application.

In Matthew 28:16, the disciples come to a mountain in Galilee. Jesus has already died on the cross and he's been raised from the dead. And the risen Jesus now appears to his disciples on the mountain. What do they do, when they see the risen Christ? They worshiped him! This is the exact same way the first people who encountered the baby Jesus after his birth responded to him. The wise men from the East worshiped him as well.

Jesus is God with us. The Son of God. The first and fundamental response to Jesus is to worship him. O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

After this, Jesus spoke and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus is basically reiterating what we learned in Matthew 1. He's saying, "I'm the king. I'm the one who rules over all things in heaven and on earth. You were created to worship God and to live in relationship with God under his rule and blessing. I am the Son of God. So you're to worship me and live under my rule and blessing."

In our sin we rebelled against God, but those who have been saved from their sin are now called to live as citizens of the kingdom of God. We're called to live under the rule of King Jesus. And as we live under his rule we experience his blessings.

And what is the first thing he commands his disciples to do? He commands them to "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." He calls us to do what he called Adam and Eve to do and what he promised Abraham and David would happen—to multiply and fill the earth with those who are being transformed into the image of God and who glorify God. No longer is it a call to multiply by having a bunch of babies, although that's fine too (or at least in my case, I hope it's fine). It's a call to multiply disciples in the earth who will live under God's rule and blessing.

Then Jesus makes a promise. He promises that as we do this work of making disciples, as we're used by him to expand his kingdom that he'll be with us until the end. The one who is Immanuel, God with us, in the manger, is still with us through the Spirit even now. He's with us, transforming us and enabling us to live as citizens of the kingdom, as sons and daughters of the King. So, let the Spirit work in you.

All of this should give us, a new hope. A hope that is grounded in the one who was faithful to his promise to Adam and Eve and to Abraham and David and the prophets. The one who sent Jesus at Christmas, he will be faithful to his promises to us. As we carry out the Great Commission we can have hope that the gospel will be proclaimed in all the earth before the end comes. That's a hope for the future that should drive us forward even in the present to do what he has called us to.