

The Adoption of Jesus On Matthew 1:1-25

By Ra McLaughlin

Matthew 1:1-25 is often mistaken as the genealogy and birth narrative of Jesus. Check the header in your Bible — what does it say? My NIV and ESV summarize this chapter as “The Genealogy of Jesus Christ” and “The Birth of Jesus Christ.” My NKJV describes it as “The Genealogy of Jesus Christ” and “Christ Born of Mary.” My NRSV has “Genealogy and birth of Jesus the Messiah.” And my beloved NASB identifies this chapter with the words “Genealogy of Jesus” and “Birth of Jesus.” Could all these Bibles be wrong? Well, of course they can! But are they wrong? Let’s just say that, in my opinion, they miss the main point.

The Incarnation

Let’s start with a bit of background, beginning with what may be a shocking proposition: The Son of God had no inherent right to be the Messiah. I’m going to define what I mean with care, but I don’t want to blunt the force of that statement. By “Son of God,” I mean the Second Person of the Trinity, who became incarnate by the Virgin Mary. I mean God himself, the sovereign ruler of the universe, who possesses both a divine and human nature. By “Messiah,” I mean the anointed king over God’s people, the one whom God had promised would rescue and rule his kingdom forever. And by “inherent right,” I mean native authority, authority that one possesses by virtue of his existence, character or position. In summary, my proposition is this: God had no right to become Israel’s human king. I am not saying that anything prevented him from obtaining this right. I am merely saying that even though he was the ultimate sovereign of the universe, he could not merely take on flesh and assume the throne.

The problem, or “obstacle” if you prefer, was that God had made a covenant with David specifying that one of David’s descendants would sit on Israel’s throne forever.¹ In that covenant, God voluntarily obligated himself to abide by the terms of the covenant. Apart from that covenant, God certainly would have had the right to take on flesh, whether by normal generation through a human woman or simply by creating it out of nothing, and to have assumed any human throne he chose, including the throne of Israel. But in the face of this covenant, the one throne he could not seize permanently was Israel’s. Only a descendant of David could sit on that throne forever. God had always been

¹ 1 Kings 8:24-26; 2 Chron. 6:14-17; Ps. 89:2-3

Israel's savior,² and he had always been its great king.³ But once he made this covenant with David, only a man could be Israel's Messiah because only a man could sit on David's throne.

All evangelical Christian traditions recognize that the incarnation is indispensable to salvation. But they often miss a big part of the picture when it comes to talking about why the incarnation is indispensable. Now, by no means do I mean to reduce the importance of the incarnation to this one matter. I simply want to point it out because I think it is often overlooked. And the reason is not to downplay the significance of Christ's divinity, or to challenge God's unlimited sovereignty. After all, it was God's sovereign choice, informed by his omniscience, to make the covenant with David in the first place. Rather, the reason is to point out that God sometimes does big things — huge things, immeasurable things — through what the *Westminster Confession of Faith* calls the contingency of second causes,⁴ which includes the things that individual human beings choose to do every day.

The Carpenter

In Matthew 1, we find what would seem to be a fairly little thing done by a man of fairly little consequence in the grand scheme of things.⁵ He was a man that none of the Bibles on my shelf saw fit to mention in their headers, and who is generally not the focus of attention when we read and teach this chapter. But he's a man whose obedience or disobedience was the domino that that once stood between heaven and hell for you and me. Had he pushed it the other way, we would not and could not have been saved. Of course, I'm talking about the carpenter Joseph, son of Jacob.

Most of the time when people read Matthew 1, they focus on Jesus, and rightly so. Sometimes we look at all the interesting people in his genealogy. Sometimes we talk about the miracle of Jesus' virgin birth. Sometimes we talk about the fulfillment of prophecy. Sometimes we talk about the wonder of having God present with us on earth. But as true as those topics are, none of them is the focus of this chapter. Jesus isn't the main character in the story — he isn't born until the last verse, and he doesn't do anything even when he's mentioned. Mary isn't the main character either — she's talked about, but she doesn't really do anything either. The main character in this story is actually Joseph. It is his genealogy Matthew provides in verses 1 through 16; it is he who receives the

² E.g., Deut. 32:15; 2 Sam. 22:47

³ E.g., Num. 23:21; 1 Sam. 8:7; Ps. 47

⁴ WCF 5.2

⁵ There is some indication that many people couldn't even remember his name, although they seem to have known everyone in his family (Matt. 13:55).

angelic message; it is he who takes Mary as his wife; and it is he who names the Lord “Jesus.”

The Genealogy

Matthew begins his genealogy by claiming that it tells the heritage of “Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.”⁶ So, right away we should recognize that this genealogy is supposed to prove something, namely, that Jesus is the son of David and Abraham. And the summary⁷ of the genealogy confirms that this is the point of the genealogy, mentioning both David and Abraham again. So, in one sense, we can defend the idea that this section is about the genealogy of Jesus. But we should also look beyond these introductory and summary lines to find the larger meaning of the entire chapter.

The summary also sets out a numeric parallel between Abraham, David, the exile, and Christ. These four temporal markers are each separated by fourteen generations.⁸ And the markers are significant. The first national covenant that established Israel as God’s nation was made with Abraham.⁹ The covenant with David added the stipulation that only a human descendant of David could be the Messiah. The exile displaced the people from the Promised Land and interrupted the chain of Davidic kings that had reigned with sovereignty from David to Jeconiah,¹⁰ who was taken into captivity, beginning the Babylonian exile.¹¹ Against this backdrop, the importance of the last marker, Christ, is that he is the one who will restore the kingdom to Israel, so that the nation once again has a Davidide on the throne, one who will reign forever.¹²

In fact, in the first century it was widely understood that the Messiah was to be a Davidic king, so much so that the phrase “son of David” had become a messianic title.¹³ So, any argument that put forth Jesus as the Messiah was rightly responsible for demonstrating that he had a legitimate claim to the throne as David’s descendant. This is why Matthew began his gospel by establishing

⁶ Matt. 1:1

⁷ Matt. 1:17

⁸ The generations are not counted in a precisely similar fashion — Jeconiah is counted twice. This is not inappropriate given that it is primarily a literary device intended to highlight the four markers. Moreover, Jeconiah rightly belongs in both groups: in the first group, he is in a line of kings; in the second group, having been deposed, he is merely counted as a man.

⁹ Gen. 15

¹⁰ A.k.a. Jehoiachin

¹¹ 2 Kings 24:15

¹² Isa. 9:7

¹³ E.g., Matt. 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30,31; 21:9,15; Mark 10:47,48; Luke 18:38,39; etc.

this critical point; it's the goal of the chapter to establish that Jesus is the Davidide.

But notice that this is not the genealogy of Jesus; it's the genealogy of Joseph.¹⁴ Joseph didn't beget Jesus, and he wasn't his legal father either — at least not at first. Joseph was merely betrothed to Mary, the woman who was pregnant with Jesus. But that wasn't good enough. Jesus could not claim the right to sit on David's throne as a son of Mary. The right to the throne had to be traced through men. The problem was that no man connected Jesus to David's family tree. The link that Mary provided was sufficient to gain citizenship in Israel for Jesus, but not to give him access to the throne. Mary's fiancé Joseph, however, had that access. But again, Joseph wasn't Jesus' father.

The Adoption

This brings us to the point in the narrative where the Bible headers point us to Christ. "This," they say, "is the story of the Savior's birth." And of course, they're right. But that's not all it is. In fact, it's not even primarily what it is. Yes, this is the story of how the incarnate God became the Messiah in order to save his people from their sins. But remember, even God could not have been the Messiah if he were not also the son of David. The real point of this story is to establish a link between Jesus and David, which Matthew did by explaining how Joseph extended his genealogy to Jesus through adoption. Jesus was not *born* a son of David, but he *became* a son of David because Joseph obeyed God.

This passage divides into four essential steps. There are many ways we might label each step, but I have chosen to highlight Joseph, since he is the main character who performs the actions in the story:

1. Joseph's Righteousness (Matt. 1:18-19)
2. Joseph's Dream (Matt. 1:20-21)
3. Joseph's Purpose (Matt. 1:22-23)
4. Joseph's Obedience (Matt. 1:24-25)

Joseph's Righteousness

This section sets the stage and introduces the problem: Joseph and Mary were engaged, but they had not consummated their marriage yet. Then Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant. Imagine how he must have felt — his bride was pregnant by another man. He had no knowledge of the way Mary had conceived this child. Even if she had told him, why should he have believed her? Her story was preposterous. He must have been crushed.

¹⁴ Matt. 1:16

Old Testament law said that Mary was liable even unto death for her transgression.¹⁵ And what court would not have convicted her? I certainly would have found her guilty of a crime. What more proof do you need that she has been unfaithful than that she turns up pregnant? Of course, Judah lacked the right to enforce the death penalty, but other options were legally available. At the very least she could have been excommunicated.

But Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. And what's the proof of Joseph's righteousness? He seeks to divorce Mary quietly, so as not to cause a scandal, and so as to save her from punishment by the courts. Notice what the righteous man does in the case: he doesn't marry the woman. It wasn't that Joseph's heart was hard;¹⁶ it was that Joseph knew and loved God's law. And notice something else about Joseph: he sought to put away Mary with kindness, mercy and graciousness. He sought to spare her from the disgrace and even the criminal punishment that might befall her if it became known that she was both engaged and pregnant. Of course, people would find out soon enough that she was with child, but to be unchaste was a lesser crime than to be unfaithful.¹⁷ Joseph sought justice in releasing Mary from the contract, and mercy by doing it quietly. Later, he would show great faithfulness in taking Mary as his wife.¹⁸ Is it any wonder that the child of this righteous man later preached that justice, mercy and faithfulness are the "weightier provisions of the law"?¹⁹

Joseph's righteousness created a problem, however: the son of God would not be a son of David. And because he would not be a son of David, he could not be the Messiah. And because he could not be the Messiah, he could not save his people from their sins.

Joseph's Dream

Joseph's judgments and actions were righteous; no one can fault his reasoning or his motives. But the fact of the matter is that Mary had not been unfaithful. She really was a virgin. And it was imperative that Jesus be a son of David. So, God intervened by sending his angel to Joseph in a dream. The angel informed Joseph that Mary had really been faithful to him, and that the Holy Spirit of God had conceived the child within her. She was still a virgin, and without blame! Now the righteous thing to do was not to put her away, but to marry her.

¹⁵ Deut. 22:23-24

¹⁶ Matt. 19:8

¹⁷ Deut. 22:28-30

¹⁸ Matt. 1:24

¹⁹ Matt. 23:23

But the angel did more than save Joseph's marriage. He also gave Joseph an instruction and an explanation. The instruction was this: Joseph was to name the child "Jesus." The explanation was this: the child was to save God's people from their sins. How does that explain the instruction? In two ways: First, simply enough, the name "Jesus" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Joshua," which means "The Lord [Yahweh] saves." This is a memorial name praising God for many types of salvation. In this case, however, the salvation in view was the redemption of God's people from their sins — the greatest salvation imaginable. This much is commonly taught, but it isn't nearly as important as the second point: naming was an act of authority.²⁰ By naming Jesus, Joseph would take authority over Jesus, adopting him as his child, and thereby extending his Davidic genealogy to the incarnate Son of God.

Joseph's Purpose

By "Joseph's purpose," I mean God's purpose for Joseph, the reason God wanted Joseph to do this. Matthew explains this purpose with an authorial comment on "all this," probably referring to Matthew 1:18-21. Here's where people usually get sidetracked: they get wrapped up in the "virgin with child" and "God with us" bits. Commonly, they think that the prophecy to which Matthew referred is "the virgin will be with child," and they think "God with us" means "God coming to earth as a human baby." Both these ideas are mistaken. When these verses are read properly, they point to the restoration of the Davidic throne.

First, the passage Matthew quotes is Isaiah 7:14. But the "prophecy" in that verse is not that the virgin will be with child. Rather, that is simply the sign that proves the prophecy is true. There is an important distinction between a "prophecy" and a "sign." A prophecy is the prophet's message, such as an exhortation, or prediction, or teaching. A sign is a special demonstration that proves that the prophet's message is true. We often read about "signs and wonders" in Scripture that validate a prophet's message.²¹ In Isaiah 7, the "prophecy" is that Judah's enemies (i.e., Aram and Samaria) will be destroyed. The "sign" that proves that Judah's enemies are doomed is the birth of the child by the virgin. This is easy to see in the dialog between Isaiah and Ahaz in Isaiah 7:5-16:

Isaiah: Aram, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has planned evil against you... Thus says the Lord God: "It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass... If you will not believe, you surely shall not last... Ask a sign

²⁰ Cf., e.g., Gen. 2:19-20, where Adam names the animals as part of his role as ruler (Gen. 1:28) over the earth.

²¹ E.g., Matt. 24:24; John 4:48; Acts 14:3; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4

for yourself from the Lord your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

Ahaz: I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!

Isaiah: Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good. For before the boy will know *enough* to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.

Notice what happened in Isaiah 7. Isaiah prophesied to Ahaz, king of Judah (the "house of David"²²), that God would not allow Aram and Samaria to carry out the evil they had planned against Judah. Then Isaiah told Ahaz to pick any sign he wanted, and assured him that God would perform the sign as proof that Judah would not be destroyed. Ahaz did not believe Isaiah, and did not want to be even more accountable to believe the prophecy, so he refused to choose a sign. Because of his unbelief, God himself chose a sign that would prove to Ahaz that Aram and Samaria would not destroy Judah: the virgin would be with child.

Now, in order for this sign to mean anything, the child had to be born before Aram and Samaria were thwarted, that is, during the reign of Ahaz. And in fact, the child was born way back then.²³ His memorial name was to be "Immanuel," meaning "God with us," not because he was God incarnate — most assuredly, he was merely human, being the son of Isaiah and the prophetess — but because his birth was proof that the prophecy was true. It was proof that God was "with" Judah, that is, that God was "on their side." God was their warrior king who would lead them into battle and gain victory over Aram and Samaria.

So, when Matthew said that Jesus was the Immanuel child, born of a virgin, he meant that Jesus was the sign that proved that God was on the side of his people. But instead of conquering Aram and Damascus, this time he would conquer the greatest enemy of all: sin.²⁴

Isaiah prophesied God's victory over Aram and Damascus, which rescued the house of David in the day of Ahaz. The original sign and prophecy came to pass during that time. But Matthew understood that salvation as a type of the

²² Cf. Matt. 1:9 — Joseph was a descendant of Ahaz

²³ Isaiah 8:1

²⁴ Matt. 1:21

salvation that God brought through Christ. So, the virgin birth of Christ, and the salvation from sin that Jesus brought, typologically “fulfilled” or “repeated in kind but to a greater degree” God’s sign, prophecy and action from the Old Testament. In the past, God gave the sign of the virgin-born child to prove that he would destroy Judah’s enemies and preserve the kingdom. In Joseph’s day, God repeated the sign²⁵ and the prophecy that he would save his people.

	Type in Isaiah 7–8	Fulfillment in Matthew 1
Prophecy	God will rescue Judah from Aram and Damascus, and preserve the House of David.	God will rescue all his people from sin, and reinstate the House of David.
Sign	The virgin will be with child.	The virgin will be with child, after having virginally conceived.
“Immanuel”	God will defeat Aram and Damascus.	God will defeat sin.
Virgin	Isaiah’s wife, the prophetess ²⁶	Mary
Child	Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz ²⁷	Jesus
Outcome	Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz was born, and Aram and Damascus were defeated before the child was weaned; ²⁸ the Davidic throne was preserved.	Jesus was born, and sin was defeated; the Davidic throne was restored.

Joseph’s Obedience

We don’t know whether or not Joseph understood the same significance in the details of Jesus’ birth that Matthew noted. In all probability he did not. During Jesus’ life on earth, even the apostles seem to have been slow to pick up on the connections between Jesus and the Old Testament types that prefigured him. It does seem likely, however, that he understood that his son would be the Messiah, the king who would restore the throne to the House of David. And at the very least, he understood the role he was to play in God’s great plan: he was to marry Mary and to adopt Jesus.

So, when Joseph awoke, he did as the angel had commanded. He took Mary home as his wife, though he still did not consummate their marriage until

²⁵ Again, to a greater degree. The “virgin” in Isaiah 7–8 did not virginally conceive; she was merely a virgin until she consummated her marriage to Isaiah, at which point she conceived.

²⁶ Isa. 8:3

²⁷ Isa. 8:3

²⁸ Isa. 7:15-16

Jesus was born. He does not seem to have hesitated to obey the Lord. My guess is that he was so relieved to learn of his bride's faithfulness to him, and so excited to hear the news that he would be the father of the Messiah, that he wasted no time in reconciling with Mary. But whatever the case, he remained faithful to the Lord's instructions so that, when the child was born, Joseph adopted the baby as his own, symbolized by the act of naming, thereby ensuring that Joseph's Davidic genealogy was also Jesus' genealogy.

You see, as is often the case in literature, the point of story is summed up in its final words. Usually, I don't hear people talk about them extensively. In many commentaries, they go without significant mention. But they are some of the most important words in the chapter: "He called his name Jesus." Joseph named him, therefore Joseph adopted him. And by that act, the Son of God became the son of David, giving him the covenantal right to sit on David's throne, and thereby enabling him to save his people from their sins.

Now, chances to impact history as greatly as Joseph did come around only once every few thousand years, and even then they are given to very few people indeed. But God is always working, even when he's not doing things as dramatic as taking on flesh. He is always working to build his kingdom, and to save his people from the presence and effects of sin. And people always play a big role in what God does. Joseph wasn't anyone special, at least not before God chose him to be the father of Jesus. He was just a carpenter, a blue-collar guy who loved a girl. But he was also righteous; he was just and merciful and faithful. And he obeyed God's will to the best of his understanding of it.

We owe Joseph our thanks. His small obedience made our salvation possible. Nobody who reads these words will ever do anything as significant as what Joseph did, at least not from a broad perspective. But we all do things every day that impact history. We have no idea which things those are, or what their outcomes will be. But if we are righteous, if we dedicate ourselves to justice and mercy and faithfulness, we can be the type of people who recognize God's will when we see it, and who make the right decisions for the benefit of the kingdom of God.

As I said in the beginning, we serve a sovereign God. But he often works through the contingency of second causes. That's where we live. We are second causes, and our choices are contingencies. God uses us to build his kingdom, to carry out his work, to bring salvation to the world. He is doing big things — huge things, immeasurable things. And he is using us to do it. God had a specific purpose for Joseph, and he has one for you. If you dedicate yourself to righteousness, you'll probably recognize your purpose when you see it. And when you do, choose wisely, because like Joseph you are God's instrument, and your choices really do make a difference.