

**INTRODUCING JESUS  
THE INFANCY NARRATIVES**

**Matthew 1:1 - 2:23**

## Introductory Comment

The opening two chapters of Matthew have no parallels in the other gospels and provide an important clue to Matthew's special interests. In them Matthew uses *midrash*, a literary style familiar to his largely Jewish audience. The ordinary people of Jesus' day could not speak Hebrew, the classical language of their sacred writings. During the period of Persian rule (538-333BC), Aramaic had gradually taken over as the common language of the region. To make the Hebrew Bible accessible to the people, those preaching in the synagogues would select texts and weave them into a story, spoken in Aramaic, that would appeal to their listeners and help them focus on the theme being developed. This kind of storytelling was called 'midrash', from the Hebrew word for 'search'. The homilist would search the Scriptures for texts that shed light on the situation upon which he wished to comment; or, alternatively, having read from the sacred text, he would search his situation to see how the text might be applied.

Drawing on years of reflection on Jesus and what it was that Jesus revealed about God and about the human condition, Matthew, too, searched the Scriptures for texts that would enable him to demonstrate who Jesus really is and the nature of his mission. The prologue is basically an exercise in storytelling. The aim is to delight, but also to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfilment of the history of Israel and the one for whom the whole world has been waiting.

If we search these first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel for information about Jesus' childhood, we will be disappointed. Matthew may well have known no more than that Jesus was the carpenter's son, that his mother was called 'Mary', and that his 'hometown' was 'Nazareth' (see Matthew 4:13 and 13:54-55). Matthew's aim in the prologue is not to satisfy our curiosity by revealing further biographical details. Rather, it is to reflect on the profound significance of the person he is about to present, and to do so by presenting him as the fulfilment of the promises and spirituality of the sacred writings of his people.

The first part of the prologue focuses on Jesus' person. Matthew presents him as the 'Messiah' (1:1,16,17,18), the 'son of David' (1:1,20), the 'son of Abraham' (1:1), 'conceived from the Holy Spirit' (1:20), to be named 'Jesus', because 'he will save his people from their sins' (1:21). Matthew wants to present Jesus as the one in whom 'God is with us' (1:23).

The second part of the prologue focuses on Jesus' mission. Born in the city of David, he is to be the 'king of the Jews' (2:2). He is also to attract the 'wise men from the East' (2:1) and thus enlighten the Gentile world as well. He is to fulfil the destiny for which Israel was called out of Egypt (2:15). The offering of myrrh (2:11) and the weeping of Rachel (2:18) prepare us for his suffering. Matthew writes so that his readers may penetrate the divine mystery revealed in Jesus who captured hearts and minds with the wonder of his person and of his preaching.

## Jesus the Messiah, Son of David, Son of Abraham

In choosing to translate the two opening words of Matthew's gospel (Greek: *Biblos geneseôs*) as 'An account of the genealogy', the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) seems to be too restrictive. This introductory sentence while introducing the genealogy which follows, seems to function also as an introduction to the whole of chapters one and two; indeed, to the whole of the gospel.

It is quite likely that Matthew is alluding to the book of Genesis itself, and is presenting his gospel as the account of the new creation which God had promised and which was realised in the coming to be and the mission of Jesus. 'A book of the genesis' would capture this wider meaning better.

Paul speaks of the 'new creation' (Galatians 6:15; 2Corinthians 5:7) and of Jesus as the 'last Adam' (1Corinthians 15:45; compare Romans 5:12-21). John opens his gospel with the first two words of the Book of Genesis. It is likely that Matthew is making a similar allusion.

Matthew's gospel is about Jesus. It is about Jesus as the Messiah: that is to say, God's anointed king. As the son of David, he will achieve the hopes of the people by establishing the kingdom of God. As the son of Abraham, he will fulfil God's promises to his chosen people: promises that affect all the nations of the world. From the opening verse we are placed in the context of the call of Abraham:

The Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

– Genesis 12:1-3

The 'great nation' is that of Israel; but through Abraham, 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (compare Sirach 44:19-21). Matthew is presenting Jesus as the one through whom this promise is fulfilled.

**<sup>1</sup> An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.**

<sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah *and his brothers*, <sup>3</sup> and Judah the father of Perez *and Zerah by Tamar*, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, <sup>4</sup> and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup> and Salmon the father of Boaz *by Rahab*, and Boaz the father of Obed *by Ruth*, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of King David. And David *was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah*, <sup>7</sup> and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, <sup>8</sup> and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup> and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup> and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup> and Josiah the father of Jecho-niah *and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.*

<sup>12</sup> *And after the deportation*

compare Luke 3:27-34

## Jesus' genealogy

David has a pivotal place in this genealogy (1:1,6,17). The number fourteen, highlighted in the final verse, is a further connection with David, it being the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew letters in his name. Joseph's ancestry is traced through the ruling line of Solomon (1:6-12). Matthew wants to highlight the fact that in Jesus is fulfilled the following promise made to David, and the associated Messianic hopes:

When your days are fulfilled to go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me.

– 1Chronicles 17:11-13

These opening verses of Matthew recall the history of Israel and God's fidelity to his promise from generation to generation through all the vicissitudes of human history. The chanting of these verses echoes the cry of gratitude of Psalm 89, which, having recalled the promise made to David, continues:

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones ... I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him; my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him ... My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn shall be exalted. He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!' I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth.

– Psalm 89:5,20-27

There had been no king ruling in Judah since the beginning of the sixth century BC. Matthew is reminding his community that at last, in Jesus, all these hopes have finally been realised. He is inviting those Jews who have hardened themselves against their Christian brothers and sisters to look again at Jesus and to see in him the promised Messiah.

The fact that the promise made to Abraham was to extend to the non-Jewish nations is reinforced by the presence of non-Jewish women in the kingly line. Tamar (1:3), probably a Canaanite, was remembered in Judaism as a model of fidelity, because it was her action that ensured the continuity of Judah's posterity (see Ruth 4:12; 1Chronicles 2:4). This, in spite of the fact that she deceived Judah, her father-in-law, into having a child by her, thus going against the laws forbidding incest (Genesis 38:1-30).

Rahab (1:5) was a Canaanite who put her faith in the God of Israel (see Hebrews 11:31), and so ensured entrance into the promised land (Joshua 2:1-21; 6:17,23,25; see James 2:25). Ruth (1:5) is another outsider, from Moab, whom God chose to be the grandmother of David (see the Book of Ruth).

The wife of Uriah the Hittite (1:6) ensured Solomon's kingship (2Samuel 11-12; 1Kings 1:11-40), even though David's union with her was a sinful one. Indeed the accounts of many of the kings mentioned in the genealogy provide ample proof of the sins from which Jesus came to save his people (1:21). The family to which Jesus is connected through Joseph is certainly not pure.

The fifth woman in Matthew's genealogy is Mary (1:16). At this point the genealogy takes a dramatic and totally unexpected turn which will be explained in the following passage. Instead of the expected 'Joseph was the father of Jesus by Mary', we have 'Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born' (1:16).

From the following passage it will become clear that Matthew wants to make the point that while Jesus does belong to the Jewish people and does fulfil the promises made to them, he does so in the providence of a God of surprises in a totally unexpected way. Jesus belongs to the Jewish people, but at the same time mysteriously transcends them. He is a new creation, coming into the world through the power of God's creating Spirit.

<sup>1</sup>Africanus claims that Matthew gives Joseph's biological parent, whereas Luke gives his legal parent. Matthan's wife, Esther, also married Melchi, so that Jacob and Heli were half-brothers. Heli died childless and Jacob had a son for him, Joseph, the father of Jesus (Eusebius HE 1.7).

*to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel,<sup>13</sup> and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor,<sup>14</sup> and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud,<sup>15</sup> Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob,<sup>16</sup> and Jacob the father of Joseph<sup>1</sup> the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

*<sup>17</sup> So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.*

compare Luke 3:23-27

## Jesus, the Son of God, the Saviour, God-with-us

**<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.**

**<sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.**

**<sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'**

Here is our first example of *midrash* as explained in the introduction to Part One of this prologue. The key to unlocking the intention of the creators of *midrash* is to see how they use the text from Scripture around which they weave their story. The text quoted by Matthew (1:23) is from Isaiah 7:14. We will first examine its meaning in its original context, and then see how Matthew chooses to use it in this passage.

The original text takes us back to the first year of the reign of Ahaz, king of Judah (735BC). The Assyrian army under Tiglath-Pileser III was moving rapidly towards Syria and the northern kingdom, Israel. The rulers of Syria and Israel tried to depose Ahaz and to place on the throne of Judah someone more amenable to joining their alliance against Assyria (Isaiah 7:1). Ahaz was understandably afraid (Isaiah 7:2). However, Isaiah encouraged him, telling him that he would endure only if he placed his trust in God (Isaiah 7:9).

He then offered the king the sign quoted by Matthew. The Greek text of Isaiah, from which Matthew is quoting, uses the word 'virgin' (*parthenos*), though the Hebrew speaks only of a young woman of marriageable age ('*almah*'). Isaiah's point seems to be that a young expectant mother (Isaiah's own wife perhaps, see Isaiah 8:18) will name her child in such a way as to express trust in God's presence protecting his people. Moreover, as the text in Isaiah goes on to say (Isaiah 7:16), the child will not yet have reached maturity when the two kings of whom Ahaz is afraid will have been swept aside.

Matthew's interest in quoting the Bible, here and throughout his gospel, is not in the meaning of the text for those to whom it was originally addressed. He believes that the word of Isaiah is inspired by God. He believes also that God's mysterious design, expressed in many ways in the Scriptures, is revealed clearly only in Jesus who is the fulfilment of God's word (note the use of 'fulfil' in 1:22).

Only in Jesus, therefore, do we find the key to understanding the deep and hidden meanings of the sacred text. By naming her son 'Emmanuel', the young woman of the eighth century BC was giving expression to her trust that God was indeed with his people in spite of the difficulties they were undergoing. Matthew wants to present Jesus as the one in whom this belief has been fully realised. The word 'virgin' which he found in the Greek text enabled Matthew to highlight the special wonder of God's relationship with Mary, already named in the genealogy as the mother of the Messiah.

A study of the announcement of the birth of Isaac (Genesis 18:9-15), of Samson (Judges 13:2-7), of Samuel (1Samuel 1:9-18), as well as the text from Isaiah which Matthew quotes (Isaiah 7:13-19), shows that Matthew has created his midrash according to a classical pattern. The initiative comes from God and is mediated through an angel in order to emphasise God's transcendence. A situation requires a special divine intervention (usually the woman is unable to have a child; here she is a virgin). Then a sign is offered and indications are given concerning the mission of the one to be born.

We learn that this child is 'from the Holy Spirit'. This is the same Holy Spirit that brought about creation (Genesis 1:2), the Spirit upon whom every living thing depends:

All look to you ... When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

– Psalm 104:27-30

This is the same Spirit who brought back to life those who were languishing in exile (Ezekiel 37:1-14) and who inspired the prophets to strengthen the faith of the people in the promises that are now being fulfilled. Joseph is not presented as having doubts concerning Mary's virtue. Matthew has already told us that Mary 'was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit'.

**<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:**

**<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'**

**<sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.**

It is assumed that Joseph recognises that he is in the presence of a sacred mystery. His problem was that he had not been given a mission by God that would involve him in it. He therefore seeks for a way to step back from the sacred love-encounter between his betrothed and God. Being the 'righteous man'(1:19) that he is, he decides to follow the law and arrange a divorce, but, in view of the extraordinary circumstances, to do so 'quietly'.

However, Joseph son of Jacob (1:16) is well named. The original Joseph son of Jacob, is a 'man of dreams'(Genesis 37:5,9,19). Mary's husband too is told by God 'in a dream' that he has a role to play in God's design. Jesus' life comes from God. Mary, the mother, is to provide the womb in which Jesus is to be conceived. She is a virgin who gives her first love to God, and it is out of this divine embrace that her child is conceived. Joseph, the father, is to give God's Son a name and a place among the people of the promise (see Matthew 1:1-17). The purpose of the dream is not to inform Joseph, but to commission him. He is told to 'take Mary as your wife'. To do so in the circumstances would appear to Joseph's contemporaries to run counter to God's will. Being a 'righteous man' this would have faced Joseph with a conflict between the law and his conscience. He followed his conscience, and carried out the commission given him.

The women in the genealogy introduced us to a righteousness that transcends the law. Joseph also chose to act in a way that was in accordance with God's will, but that ran counter to the words of the law. When we consider that it would have been Joseph who introduced Jesus to the law, we might have some insight into the origins of Jesus' own understanding of the law, as an essentially limited expression of God's will and as always requiring discernment rather than blind compliance.

The name he is to give the child is significant. He is to be named 'Jesus', the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Yêshûa*, meaning 'The Lord saves'. Matthew makes this more precise by adding that he will save his people (the people to whom he belongs through Joseph his father) 'from their sins'. This introduces another key theme of Matthew's gospel. The word 'sin' is a translation of a Greek word, *hamartia*, which literally means 'missing the mark'. One thinks of an archer unable to hit the target. We are reminded of the oracles of the prophets, continually accusing the people of failing to live up to their covenant with God, of continually 'missing the mark', and the consequent suffering that they experienced. Jesus is given this name by God because it will be his mission to redeem his people and to 'save them from their sins'(compare 26:28).

Another of Matthew's key themes is introduced when he highlights the fact that 'Emmanuel' means 'God is with us'. He will conclude his Gospel on this note when the risen Christ promises: 'I am with you always'(28:20). The presence of God in Jesus and Jesus' presence in the midst of the Christian community is something to which Matthew will return again and again throughout the Gospel.

Those who will recognise the presence of God among them in Jesus are 'all the families of the earth' spoken of in the promise made to Abraham (Genesis 12:3): the Jews and Gentiles in Matthew's growing Christian community.

Matthew's focus in this *midrash* is not biological or psychological, nor is he interested in giving us an intimate insight into the relationship between Mary and Joseph her husband. His focus is on the relationship of Mary and Joseph to God, and on the 'genesis'(1:1,18) of Jesus. Mary is referred to as a virgin, here, and in the tradition of the Church, primarily to highlight the special relationship that existed between Jesus and God whom he called 'my Father'. She is also a model for the disciple who is to give his or her first love to God. The 'until' of 1:25 does not imply anything about Mary and Joseph's relationship after the birth of Jesus.

In the understanding of the time, the father was thought of as the sole source of the life of a child. The mother was simply the garden in which the seed was sown as it were. Mary and Joseph each have their role to play, but Matthew wants us to know that Jesus' life comes from God, so that we will expect to see in Jesus the image and revelation of God his 'Father'.

The danger of failing to understand the literary form in which this passage is composed, and so of failing to grasp Matthew's intention, is that we take this scene out of Matthew's context into one of our own making, and seek to find in it information that will relate to questions that it was not designed to answer. The result is that Mary and Joseph are imagined as so different from ourselves, and their situation so unlike anything we might experience, that they become people to admire rather than imitate. This is not Matthew's intention.

Mary gave her first love to God. We are invited to do the same. Joseph did not presume to be part of the sacred mystery which he witnessed unfolding before his eyes. He waited on God, and obeyed the word which he received. We are invited to do the same. The whole of the gospel and the faith-tradition of the Christian community recognises the mysterious uniqueness of Jesus, but it was not a uniqueness that exempted him from being 'descended from David according to the flesh'(Romans 1:3). Though 'without sin'(Hebrews 4:15), he 'had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect'(Hebrews 2:17).

Every child is conceived through the creating power and love of God's Holy Spirit. Every mother is asked to give her first love to God, and only in that love to cherish her husband and her children. Every father is to step back humbly before the wonder and miracle of life, the sacredness of the mystery that unfolds in the womb of his spouse, and to wait on God and act only in obedience to God's word. Matthew wants all his readers to stand before Jesus whom he is about to present in his Gospel with the same awe as Joseph.

**<sup>1</sup> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'**

**<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'**

**<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.**

### **Jesus, born of the royal house of David, destined to bring joy to the whole world**

The key to this, Matthew's second midrash, is, as in the previous passage, to be found in the scriptural text around which he weaves his story. It is found in the scroll of the prophet Micah. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, living when the whole land, except for Jerusalem, collapsed before the invasion of the Assyrian army (late eighth century BC). The passage quoted by Matthew expresses the prophet's confidence that the Davidic line will not fail; but it must not forget its humble origins in Bethlehem.

Matthew is appealing to his Jewish brothers and sisters to see in Jesus God's fulfilment of the promise he made through Micah:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

– Micah 5:2-5

Matthew's addition of 'by no means' to Micah's text registers his conviction of the truth of Micah's words, more than fulfilled in Jesus. Micah's oracle goes on to allude to the prophecy of Isaiah which formed the centrepiece of Matthew's previous scene. She who is in labour has brought forth in Bethlehem. Now is the time for the whole of Israel to come together in acclaiming Jesus as its Messiah.

The wise men from the East were renowned in the Greco-Roman world for their knowledge of astronomy, and so for their ability to interpret what the heavens reveal about God's design in the world. Matthew's community itself is living proof of the fact that non-Jews, too, could recognise Jesus as the 'king of the Jews' and come to Jerusalem to pay him homage.

This is how God said it would be:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

– Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew's midrash is rich in allusions to the sacred writings. We recall the oracle declared by Balaam to Moses in the desert:

A star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.

– Numbers 24:17

Matthew is presenting Jesus as the one through whom the Gentile world is blessed, in accordance with the promise made by God to Abraham:

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

– Genesis 12:3

Isaiah expresses the same faith:

Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ... O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! For you have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob.

– Isaiah 2:3,5

There is a stark contrast between the joy experienced by the Gentiles as they bring their riches to Jesus (2:10-11) and the fear experienced by the Jews (2:3).

**8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'**

**9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.**

**10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.**

**11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.**

**12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.**

## The wise men

Matthew is preparing his readers for the ominous statement made later by Jesus to the Jews:

I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

– Matthew 21:43

As the wise men ‘pay him homage’, we are reminded of God’s call to the Gentiles:

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.

– (Isaiah 45:22-23)

Recognising the presence of God in Jesus and paying homage to him, the wise men acknowledge him as the goal of their search for wisdom. The Queen of Sheba came to Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-13), whose ‘wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east’ (1 Kings 4:30). There is ‘something greater than Solomon here’ (12:42).

The wise men acknowledge Jesus as the wisdom for which they have been searching, and they enter the ‘house’, Matthew is inviting the Gentiles of his own day to come into the Christian community (they gathered in house churches) and to find Jesus there. Matthew includes in his midrash an offering of gifts. The allusion is to Psalm 72 - the origin, incidentally, of our habit of portraying the wise men as kings:

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

– Psalm 72:10-11

Gold represents kingship. They are acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah. Frankincense represents worship. They are acknowledging Jesus as the one in whom God is with us. Their humble adoration is beautifully modelled by Mary his mother with whom they found the child. She is mentioned in every scene of Matthew’s prologue. Then there is the ‘myrrh’, the perfume associated with burial (see John 19:39). Already Matthew is preparing his readers to see the divinity of Jesus revealed not, as perhaps we would expect, in resplendent power, but rather in self-giving love manifested in the midst of the suffering. He can be our Messiah, he can be God with us, because he shares our human condition.

We are invited to look for the star that rises in our hearts and that beckons us to leave where we are and journey to where Jesus awaits us. No journey is without danger. In English the ‘per’ in ‘peril’, is the same root as the ‘per’ in ‘experience’ and the ‘far’ in ‘farewell’ and ‘thorough-fare’. The experience of a journey always contains some peril. There is always a risk in leaving the familiar behind and following our ‘star’. We are encouraged by the overwhelming joy experienced by the wise men when the star stopped and they saw Jesus, the goal of their travels. That joy, however, was reserved for the end of the journey and it did not make it any shorter or less perilous. The journey is a journey for life; it calls on all our faith, all our hope and all our love (see 16:24-26).

## Jesus relives the exile in Egypt

This *midrash* is built around a text from Hosea. Jesus is fulfilling in his person the history of Israel. Just as the people of God experienced exile in Egypt, so does Jesus. Just as God called Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land, so is it for Jesus.

The text from Hosea, the opening words of which are quoted by Matthew, speaks tenderly of God's love. The prophet complains of the people's repeated rejection of this love. Matthew presents Jesus as a faithful son, revealing God's love and revealing also how we are to respond to it:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. ... How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

– Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9

Since Matthew wishes to present Jesus as the new Moses, leading not only the Jews but the Gentiles as well to the Promised Land of God's love, there are echoes in the passage also from the life of Moses. The threat to Jesus' life from Herod parallels the threat to Moses' life from the Egyptian Pharaoh:

Pharaoh sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian.

– Exodus 2:15

<sup>13</sup> Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'

<sup>14</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,

<sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

**16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.**

**17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:**

**18 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'**

### **Association with Jesus brings suffering**

Matthew now turns to Jeremiah, the prophet who lived through the destruction of Jerusalem and the cruel torments of those who were herded into camps in Ramah awaiting the long trek into exile in Babylon (Jeremiah 40:1). Rachel, the wife of Jacob and so the mother of the people of Israel, is weeping over her children (Jeremiah 31:15).

Matthew's community already knew the experience of persecution (27:25). From the time of Stephen (see Acts 7:58-60), many innocent people had lost their lives because of their association with Jesus.

Jeremiah's lament is not without hope:

With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born ... Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord: your children shall come back to their own country.

– Jeremiah 31:9,15-17

God is faithful and God's promises stand. Those who place their trust in God are never without hope. Matthew's community too will experience suffering, but God is faithful and so Matthew is assuring them that God will achieve his will in and through them if they follow Jesus faithfully.

As in the previous scene there are echoes of the Exodus story. Herod's cruelty reminds us of that of the Pharaoh:

Pharaoh commanded all his people, Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile.

– Exodus 1:22

## Jesus of Nazareth

This time Matthew does not select for his *midrash* a specific text from the Scriptures, but speaks in general terms of ‘what had been spoken through the prophets’. He may want to draw attention to the similarity between ‘Nazarite’ (a holy man) and Nazareth (in which case there may be an allusion to Isaiah 4:3). Or he may be alluding to the Hebrew word for branch (*neser*) and be referring to Isaiah 11:1.

Nazareth is a small town in Galilee which Matthew will call later, quoting Isaiah, ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’ (4:15), as it was the point of intersection of the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. ‘He will be called a Nazorean’ may be Matthew’s way of summing up the recurring oracles of the prophets that spoke of God’s universal call reaching out to all the nations of the world. We have already referred to a number of allusions to the Gentiles in the commentary on 2:1-12.

There is another echo of the story of Moses and the Pharaoh:

The Lord said to Moses in Midian, ‘Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead’. So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt.

– Exodus 4:19-20

Jesus returns from Egypt to Israel to redeem the people from the slavery into which they have sunk: the slavery of sin, the slavery of ignorance and idolatry, the slavery of not knowing the true God who is to be revealed by Jesus as his Father and the Father of all who would belong to the community of his disciples, the renewed Israel.

Matthew’s prologue is about the real Jesus of history. His interest in these two chapters, however, is not biographical. Rather he wants to place Jesus in the context of the history of Israel and of the promises made to Israel by God, the better to prepare his readers for the significance of the one about to be introduced by John the Baptist.

**19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,**

**20 ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’**

**21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.**

**22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.**

**23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’**