

Light of the World - Chapter 4

The Gifts of the Gentiles

Text: Matthew 1:18-2:15

“The Gospels of Matthew and Luke are documents of literary genius. Each presents the story of Jesus’ birth in its own way, and each offers a narrative that challenges, that provokes, that shocks, and that makes readers want to hear more.”

Many of the central elements of Luke’s account are absent in Matthew: the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary’s encounter with Gabriel, her visit with Elizabeth, the Magnificat, the census, the journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus in the stable, the angelic choir, and the visit of the shepherds. “Matthew has none of this!”

Instead of focusing on Mary, Matthew tells the story from Joseph’s perspective. Instead of shepherds, Matthew presents Magi; instead of a census that brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, Matthew begins in Bethlehem and then recounts their flight to Egypt. Matthew depicts Jesus as the new Moses.

The Genealogy of Matthew demonstrates the embeddedness of Jesus in the Jewish tradition: “Jesus as son of David inherits the throne of David; Jesus as son of Abraham continues the promise made to the ancient patriarch.” Jesus the Messiah will preserve the ancient traditions, even as he offers his own interpretations.

The mention of four women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—demonstrates that women contribute to salvation in unexpected ways and that the birth of Jesus is good news to the gentiles as well as the Jews.

Joseph and the virgin birth: When Joseph discovers that his bride-to-be is pregnant he decides to call off their engagement. However, an angel appears to him and tells him the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit and he should name him Jesus (name comes from Hebrew root meaning “to save”).

Reference to Isaiah 7:14: In the Hebrew, there is no mention of a virgin. The text simply states, “a young woman is pregnant.” When the Hebrew text was translated into Greek the term *alma* (“young woman”) became *parthenos*, which can mean “virgin.” The Greek translation also changed the Hebrew adjective pregnant to a future verb “will conceive” leading to, “the virgin will conceive.”

The Magi and their gifts: Matthew tells us that a star guided the Magi to Jerusalem, and then from Jerusalem to Bethlehem until it stopped over the place where the child was. They entered the house and fell to their knees and honored him, giving gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Early Christian writers interpreted the gifts as having symbolic purposes: “the gold represented Jesus’ royal status; the myrrh was to anoint his corpse and so to show his humanity; the frankincense, which was burnt on alters, symbolized his divinity.”

Jesus as the new Moses: “Attentive readers immediately note what Matthew is doing; Matthew is connecting Jesus to both the story of Israel and, more particularly, to the story of Moses. Like Moses, Jesus escapes the slaughter of children; like Moses, Jesus will leave Egypt and move to Israel; like Moses, Jesus enters water and experiences a life-changing event; like Moses, Jesus spends forty segments of time in the wilderness; like Moses, Jesus ascends a mountain and delivers instructions on how to live. Jesus does not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them as the new Moses.