

Before moving on to Matthew's rendition of Jesus' life, it is important to note that, as Luther emphasized, the birth of Jesus points to the fact that God "saves" by coming to us in the weakness of our human nature. He is born a vulnerable child who, as we shall see, faces significant threats to his life. Moreover, as the story unfolds, we see how God, in his Son Jesus Christ, takes on himself the suffering, the sinful behavior, and the consequent threat of "nonbeing" (death). God does not "save" his people by coming in glory, with great power and overwhelming acts of violence that undo the evil regimes of this world. In other words, he does not "save" us by directly overcoming the evils of the world and plucking us out of our deadly predicament. Had he done this, he would be no different than the sinful empires he intended to replace with "the Kingdom of God."

Rather, God chooses to overcome evil, sin, and death by actually suffering through them--by allowing them to do their dirty work on him. But the power of evil and death cannot destroy him, as it seems to do. Rather, after unleashing its full furor on him, he simply rises again in victory, thereby neutralizing the threat. This he does "in himself." (Luther)

However, his aim in doing so has nothing to do with self-interest. There is nothing in this for himself. He doesn't need to be saved. He is already the eternally ruling sovereign of the universe. Rather, he does all this on our behalf. He does it for us so that we might inherit this victory of love and life as a gift of grace. Why else would God bother to take on weak human flesh and suffer innocently because of the sin of others? And why else would he die a miserable death as a condemned criminal? With nothing in it for himself, there is no other explanation than that he did it for us. This is the definition of divine love: to act and die for the sake of our benefit so that we might have eternal fellowship with God.

Thus, the story of Jesus' birth embodies, for the eyes of faith only, a unique story of God's grace, different from any other in human history. As the story unfolds, we will see how the threats of an evil world unfold against him. We will see how a man who lives in union with God responds to this evil and we will see how those who believe in him must follow, taking up their own cross on the way to redemption. As I said, it goes without saying that these reflections on the meaning of Jesus' story are not open to public debate. They are discernable as true only to those who have received the gift of faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that confers the gift of Jesus' love and life on us.

Chapter two opens with the story of the wise men. How many there were, Matthew does not say. The tradition that there were three is based on the three gifts they bring. Gold, a precious metal symbolizing, in my humble opinion, that this was a precious child born to be a king. The other two gifts were used to prepare a body for burial—a prophetic act, pointing to Jesus' destiny.

What Matthew had in mind here is not clear. Most people assume that the coming of these gentiles points to the fact that gentiles are included in Jesus' promise of redemption.

Because they come at the behest of a star probably means they were astrologers. Astrology was widely practiced and believed in. They were wise in the sense of being learned in the art of reading the stars, an art whereby, it was thought, the future could be reliably predicted. In any case, their coming serves Matthew's greater purpose of showing the ways in which Jesus' life mirrors that of Moses.

The wise men consult with King Herod, the King of the Jews up to his death in 4 BC. Herod, sometimes called "the great" because of his impressive building projects (including the Jewish temple), was anything but "great." In fact, he was a paranoid leader who executed anyone he suspected of disloyalty, including his wife. Caesar Augustus, by whose permission Herod ruled, once said he would rather be Herod's dog than a member of Herod's family. For then, you would be more likely to survive his paranoia.

Because the wise men mention the birth of a king, Herod becomes alarmed that his rule is at stake. While he asks the wise men to tell him where the child is located so that he too might worship him, his real intention is to kill the child. The wise men, being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, leave him wondering how to deal with this threat. Here again we see God's providence at work, seeing to it that his promises are fulfilled.

Herod's plan? Massacre all the infants in and around Bethlehem—just to be sure he snuffs out the right one. However, God's angels are still busy talking to Joseph in his dreams. They warn him of the threat, whereupon he escapes with Mary and Jesus in tow to Egypt. Why Egypt? Because Moses too, in the midst of a general infanticide, comes from Egypt and returns from Egypt to the promised land.

What's this all about? Aside from the fact that the story is a good illustration of God's gracious providence, and aside from the fact that this gives Matthew an opportunity to quote various prophecies to show that Jesus fulfills the Torah, it is a perfect mirror in which to see the life of Moses reflected in the life of Jesus. Fulfillment of Torah, the life of Moses; this is most definitely the Jewish Messiah. We will say more of this as we read through the narrative.

Contrary to the Fox News celebrity Bill O'Reilly, who included this incident in his book, Killing Jesus, we have no independent historical confirmation that this ever took place. That doesn't mean it didn't. It just means we can't say with certainty. However, asking the historical question --did this happen?—misses Matthew's point. As an editor of the life of Jesus, Matthew desires us to know that Jesus was the promised Messiah from Jewish scripture. So, he edits the story in this way.

The gospel of Matthew is not intended to be a historical document or a biography written so that our interest in the first century history might be addressed. Like the other gospels, Matthew is an evangelical witness to Jesus Christ, and as such it was written to open the eyes of faith. Because Matthew was writing his gospel for Jews, some believers, some non-believers, he needed to tell the story so that it would address their concerns. This he does in an artful and beautiful way.

Chapter 3 opens with the story of John the Baptist. This is most definitely historically confirmed by Jewish historian Josephus. John was an apocalyptic prophet who proclaimed that God's Kingdom was at hand. God's rule was about to break into human history and therefore it was time to prepare for judgment. The only way to prepare for God's coming rule was to submit to that rule now. Therefore, John warned, it was necessary to "repent" (change your mind) and bear fruits of righteousness—deeds that are consistent with God's will.

John is not impressed with the elites of the time—the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were "a breed of vipers" because they believed that having been born a child of Abraham was enough to be considered among the people of God. This, of course, is a sham—a way of trying to "escape the wrath to come." John's baptism was a ritual act meant to describe the fact that a person had cleansed themselves inwardly through repentance and a reformed life. It was not the same thing as what would come to be regarded as a "sacrament" in the Christian faith.

John also proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. According to biblical promises, the Spirit of God will be poured out on all people of faith at the inauguration of God's rule. Up to the time of the Messiah, God's rule was expressed through the law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. With the advent of the Messiah, God's rule will change. Under the law, we struggle with the sin that binds us. We see in the law what God's will for our lives looks like. However, the law cannot change hearts. The law tells us to love and serve God with our whole being. Our hearts pull us in other directions. We try to please God in our attempts to overcome the temptation and desire of a heart that is not centered in God's love. And we find that in our very attempt to obey the law, we are driven deeper into sin. For God does not want us to please him in order to win his love. He wants us to love him above all things. Such attempts therefore ultimately lead to despair.

There is hope. The Spirit does not function like the law. The Spirit does not make demands. It does not prescribe things that the human heart is in no position to conform to. Rather, it changes the heart. As we will shortly see, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love that binds the Father and the Son together. The Spirit is love. When the human heart receives the Spirit, it receives the very thing we need to grow in our love for God. It frees the heart from its bondage to idols and the temptations that pull us away from God. For the Spirit is God's love for us. Receiving the Spirit of God's love for us enables us to love God in return. And not only that, the Spirit is also the Spirit of life. Its renewing influence on us provides us with new life and ultimately overcomes the power of death so that, as reborn children of God, we become inheritors of eternal life.

But what triggers this outpouring of the Spirit on us? What is the sign that points to the coming of the Spirit?

At this time, Jesus also came to John to be baptized. This startles John. He wonders, "Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you." But Jesus insists. "This will fulfill all righteousness," he responds. But what could he mean by this?

Righteousness comes from God. It is the gift of a right relationship with God. It is the ability to love God and one another. This ability will be a gift of God's grace. Jesus therefore joins in on the baptism of sinners, identifying with us in our sin so that he can in turn give us his righteousness. This is the sign that the Spirit will come and fill us with God's love, that is, it will give us the gift of Jesus' righteousness. In him is a great exchange. He takes on our sin and gives us his righteousness. The sign that this will happen begins with his baptism. And God reveals that this is so because, when Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends on him, and a voice comes from heaven. "This is my son with whom I am well pleased." (3:17)

This is the last verse in Chapter 3. Jesus' purpose has been revealed. He was sent by his Father to seek and save sinners, to bring to those who are lost to God the gift of righteousness. This is the message embedded in the fact that he identifies with sinners by submitting to a baptism of repentance.

Also, in and through this act, God has confirmed that Jesus is his Son. It might be helpful to say a few words about what this means in a biblical context.

As Christians who have been raised in the faith long after it underwent centuries of theological development, when we hear that Jesus is "God's son," we think in what are essentially Greek terms. Recall, Christian creeds and theology were shaped in the context of the Hellenistic culture that existed among gentiles in the Roman world. Therefore, the theology behind our understanding of what it means to be "God's son" is ontological. This simply means that we assume divine sonship refers to Jesus' being. Because he is God's son, his nature is divine. He came from God as a divine figure every bit as much "God" as God the Father. This mode of thinking also shaped John's gospel, and that's why John's gospel had the greatest influence on Christian doctrine.

However, Matthew is thinking as a Jew who has been shaped by Hebrew culture. In ancient Israel, when someone was referred to as "God's son," this meant that they were chosen by God for a special purpose. Jews did not think in ontological categories of thought. They thought in more relational terms. And so, in ancient Israel, at times the King was referred to as "God's son" because he was chosen to rule for God. Also, the prophet Hosea referred to Israel as a people as "God's son." (See Matt. 2:15) so, while Matthew does think that Jesus is divine in some sense, having been conceived by the Holy spirit, he does not think in terms of Jesus' being and nature when he calls him "God's son." He is thinking in relational terms that Jesus was chosen by God to be the Messiah. This points to one of the difficulties the church has faced when trying to communicate what the Bible means in the language and concepts of another culture.

Back to our story. As Jesus was baptized, he was anointed with the Holy Spirit. This is crucial to understanding the story of redemption because this anointing by the Spirit marks the beginning of the coming of God's rule into human history. It begins with Jesus, and because Jesus has been anointed by the Spirit, he has been empowered to introduce God's rule through his ministry. Signs of God's rule that come through the power of the spirit include the healings, the exorcisms, the teaching with authority, and the complete obedience of Jesus to God's will. The beginning of the outpouring of the spirit is this anointing of Jesus during his baptism.

*This endeth Chapter 3.*