



# ADULT STUDY

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## PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 2

# Christmas Accounts in the Gospels: An Adult Advent Study

*Christmas at Matthew's House*

## Introduction

There are some homes where everywhere you look there are family photos. In bookcases, on tables, even on top of the piano: in some homes, there are photos everywhere. Or perhaps there is a long stairway leading up from the entryway to the second floor, and all the way up, as far as the eye can see, there are pictures of smiling family members. The clothing gets more and more dated the farther up you look. Perhaps the quality of the photographs change; some colors fade with time. But there they are: a steady march of faces through time receding up the staircase. Pictures of extended family in our homes are precious because they link today with yesterday, and as we teach younger family members the names that go with the faces, we lay a foundation for years to come.

This Advent season, we are imagining each Gospel as a home we visit for Christmas. Today, we come to Matthew. The house that Kevin Burns and I have imagined is a big, rambling Victorian. It is both welcoming and a little scary. This is a house with a past. Several generations have occupied this house in the past, and multiple generations live here today. There are photos and even a few portraits on all the walls. In this house, every Christmas ornament has a story—who bought them or made them, where and when, and who that person was

and how (in a rather convoluted way) they are related to you. There is a party in full swing at Uncle Matthew's house; lots of folks are there, but frankly, a few of them are a little strange. You get the feeling they're not from around here. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

## Jesus' Beginnings

The beginning of the Gospel of Matthew starts: "An account of the birth [literally the "genesis"] of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers . . ."—all the way to King David. Then the names continue down to the exile in Babylon, and after the exile to Joseph, the husband of Mary.

Right away, we can tell that there is something a bit odd about this. This is not exactly an Ancestry.com version. It is theologically driven, not data driven. In the first place, Matthew makes everything neat: fourteen generations. In the Hebrew way of thinking, seven was the perfect number (think days of creation plus the day God rested). This ordering of generations is thus "perfection times two." In order to make this work, Matthew has taken a few liberties with the listing of kings found elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Second, we would expect such a recounting of generations to stick to the “great men” of the past. Indeed, that’s how it begins: Abraham, the father of Isaac; Isaac, the father of Jacob; Jacob, the father of Judah. But then the patriarchal list is interrupted. First, there is Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, whom he takes to be a prostitute but who eventually gives birth to two sons (see Genesis 38). Then there is Rahab the prostitute, who hid the Israelite spies as they attempted to infiltrate Canaan. Then Ruth of Moab (Israel’s neighbor and sometime enemy) who pledges covenant loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi; immigrates with Naomi back to Bethlehem; and eventually becomes the grandmother of David (see the book of Ruth). Bathsheba is not mentioned by name, but she is there too. Her first son (born after the murder of her husband, Uriah) died, but her second son was David’s greatest heir, Solomon (see 2 Samuel 11 and 12). All these amazing women play key roles in Israel’s story and thus in the story of Jesus. Embedded in their stories are important virtues. These women demand justice. They are courageous and loyal, and without them, the story does not go forward.

On these journeys to the homes of the four Gospels, we are asking: Where does each author think that the good news begins? Mark begins with John the Baptist, the herald or messenger who announces the arrival of Jesus, God’s Messiah. For Matthew, the beginning (the genesis) of the good news is Abraham. Where does Jesus come from? Matthew’s answer is from ancient Israel. He is a child of Abraham, born to the covenant God made long ago. Jesus is also descended from King David, son of Jesse. Israel had been waiting for centuries for a new leader, a good, just, and upright leader who would restore the nation and help the people return to God. Jesus is the “son of the covenant” and the “son of David.” He is part of what God has been doing all the centuries. You can see the family resemblance in all those photos hanging around the house.

But there’s more than a genealogy. As Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth, he wants us, his audience, to remember many other parts of the biblical story. First of all, there is Joseph, the espoused husband of Mary. He was a dreamer. Four times in this story, he is visited by an angel, a messenger of God. The angel tells him that Mary’s unexpected child is God’s own doing. Joseph is to name him “Jesus,” which means “God saves,” because that is Jesus’ vocation and destiny. Then later,

the angel warns Joseph to take mother and child and flee to Egypt to escape King Herod’s murderous decree to kill any supposed pretenders to his throne. After some years in Egypt, Joseph is advised in a dream that it is safe to return to Israel. One last dream sends them farther out of harm’s way, to Nazareth. Matthew’s first audience, a largely Jewish Christian community, immediately thinks of another Joseph—one of the sons of Judah, the dreamer with the coat of many colors whose dreams made his brothers so angry that they sold him into slavery in Egypt. But once there, Joseph was able to interpret his dreams and the dreams of others and soon became an adviser to the pharaoh. He eventually used this ability to save the whole region from famine.

Matthew also wants his readers to remember Moses. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt, Pharaoh ordered all male infants born to Israelites to be put to death. Moses was rescued by his mother and sister; his life was preserved from a tyrant’s rage, just like Jesus’. Later, of course, it was Moses who led his people out of Egypt from slavery to freedom; Jesus was brought home from Egypt to fulfill his destiny.

In all of this, Matthew is pointing to all those pictures that line the walls and saying, “See, Jesus comes from us! He is one of us! Our story is his story! Jesus has more than a family resemblance to Israel. Our whole history is right there in his own young life.” To drive the point home, five times in these first two chapters Matthew says that something happened “in order to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet.” This isn’t “proof-texting” so much as it is embedding Jesus in the story of Israel.

And so who is Jesus? In the words of Isaiah, to whom Matthew appeals, he is “Immanuel”—literally, “God with us.” The God who has been with us since Abraham; the God who spoke to Joseph the dreamer; the God who heard our cry in slavery and sent Moses to lead us to freedom; the God who has been with us all the way down that long line of photographs on the wall: that same God is with us here and now in Jesus, Son of Abraham, Son of David, Son of Mary, Son of God. God has not forgotten us; God is with us.

## Outsiders?

So far, this is an inspiring family story. Through tragedy and triumph, disaster and delight, high moments and terrible loss: through it all, God has kept God’s prom-

ises to the family of Abraham. But then there are these other folks who have come to the party. We know who they are, but what exactly are they doing here? In a big family where everyone is related to everyone else, some of these are pretty clearly “outsiders.” So what do we make of them?

First of all, there are the women. The most striking thing about Matthew’s list of Jesus’ ancestors is that any women are mentioned. In a traditional, patriarchal culture, women are by definition “outsiders.” But the truly surprising thing is that Matthew mentions these women in particular. At least two of them, and probably three, are not Israelites; they are not daughters of Abraham and Sarah. Rahab is a Canaanite; Ruth is from Moab; Bathsheba is the wife of Uriah the Hittite. From one way of looking at covenant history, we say that these women do not belong. They are not Israelites. But they nevertheless play a vital role in God’s promise-keeping. Startling as their presence is, it is evidence of God’s covenant promise to Abraham: through him, all the families of earth will be blessed.

The other outsiders, of course, are the magi. This is the part of Matthew’s Christmas story that we know best. From literally out of nowhere, “wise men from the east” appear in Jerusalem saying that they are following a star that is the sign of the birth of a king of the Jews. In the world of Jesus’ day, it is likely that they were from Persia (modern-day Iran). Despite the Christmas carol, these are not kings; they are astrologers. Like many ancients, they thought that the movement of the planets and stars could reveal the future. In a way, they were early scientists, but theologically their ideas had no place in the thought-world of Israel. God made the stars; they were God’s creatures, just like human beings. Stars don’t hold the key to the future, Israel says; the Creator does. But here are these magi, convinced that something they saw portended a great, new thing. They have come not as curiosity seekers but as worshipers. Whatever this portent is, it is of God, and their goal is to bring offerings and bow in wonder.

## Conclusion

Christmas at Matthew’s house is a huge gathering of extended family. But it is also a home where those who

would otherwise be seen as outsiders are not only welcome but have pride of place. Their pictures are also on the wall. They belong here along with all the rest. When we say that Jesus is Immanuel—“God with us”—it turns out that “us” is not just the extended family or the ones who share a birthright. The “us” is *all of us*: the whole human family. And whenever we sing “for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given,” it’s not the “little us”—the people just like us—it’s the great, big “us.”

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This is what we learn at Matthew’s house: God’s promise is indeed for Israel, but (as God promised Abraham and Sarah) it is for so many, many more. God’s vision encompasses both those to whom God has revealed Godself and the whole world and all who are made in God’s image. God’s promise is indeed for those of us who find our heart’s true home in Jesus Christ. But it is also for the whole world that God loves so much. This is a day to sing, “Joy to the *world*, the Lord is come!”

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The Gospel of Matthew presents the Jesus who fulfills Judaic prophesy. It acknowledges the great ancestors of the Jewish faith but alludes to the violence and conflict of its historical context. This house needed to be traditional but mysterious. Everybody can remember that house in your neighborhood or town that was beautiful but a little scary. I was drawn to the image of a gothic-revival house that I remember walking by when I was younger. Just looking at it from the outside, you knew there could be secret rooms and forgotten memories deep inside the building.