

Matthew 1:18-25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 1 verses 18 to 25 All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel which means God with us When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son and he called his name Jesus

Matthew chapter 1 proceeds to recount the birth of Christ Whereas in the Gospel of Luke, the narrative focuses upon the character of Mary and the story of the nativity around her perspective In Matthew, it is Joseph who is front and centre And Joseph faces a problem He is betrothed to a woman who is found to be with child before they come together Joseph is a righteous man and his intention seems to be to quietly divorce Mary so that she will not be openly shamed There is an element of mercy here seen as part of his righteousness That the righteousness exemplified by him is not going to the full measure of what was allowed to him by the law He could have put her to an open shame, but he did not want to But yet, while he is considering these things An angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and assures him that the child is not a result of unfaithfulness but that he should marry Mary The child that has been conceived being from the Holy Spirit She will bear the son, but he will name the son The son will be identified as his son The son will have the status given by his genealogy The son is being given not just to Mary alone, but to the couple And in the Gospel of Matthew The prominence of Joseph as a character emphasises this fact That the child belongs to Joseph And the child is a child that he has the privilege of raising as his own son The fact that the child is conceived and born prior to any sexual union between Mary and Joseph is important The child does not come from them The child comes from God It's conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit within Mary This child to be born is a sort of new creation A child born apart from human relations A child that is given to humanity in the fullness of time The one who fits into this genealogy that we've read in the beginning of this chapter but one who comes apart from the genealogical processes of procreation

He takes up this legacy of a messy genealogy and all the baggage that comes with it and he comes into it to bring salvation from the sins that this genealogy might bring to our mind Joseph is addressed not just as someone who must passively assent to what is happening He should take action He should take Mary as his wife and he should later name the child Jesus He's given that responsibility towards the child and the responsibility that he's given is also to bear a knowledge of the destiny of this child and to ensure that it is realised In the chapter that follows we see Joseph playing this part He is addressed by angels on a couple of further occasions and is responsible for the safety of this child God has committed an important task to Joseph's hand and he is a faithful and righteous man who will complete it At this point Mary would probably have been a young teenager and Joseph just out of his teens

Their marriage would have been arranged by their parents but with their consent Their situation would not have been particularly unusual There would have been many other couples in a similar sort of situation The angel's appearance to Joseph is also important because Joseph now can bear witness to Mary's faithfulness and to the origin of Jesus Both of them have independently received messages from God concerning the identity of the son that Mary is bearing It doesn't rest upon Mary's word alone or upon Joseph's word alone Both of them have this truth and they will bear it together as they hold together in raising this son as faithful parents and as a faithful couple The child is to be given the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins The name means Yahweh saves It connects with the name of Joshua in the Old Testament and the connection between Jesus and Joshua is one worth reflecting upon

[5 : 19] Joshua takes over from Moses on the banks of the Jordan and leads the people into the promised land Jesus is the one who takes over from John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan and will lead his people into salvation You can also think about the relationship between Elijah and Elisha Elisha, God saves, God is salvation is another name that seems very close to the meaning of Jesus in its significance And as in the case of Jesus from John the Baptist and Joshua from Moses Elisha takes over the ministry of Elijah having crossed over to the far side of the Jordan These characters then I think have very similar patterns to their lives Jesus is the one who will save his people from their sins Jesus comes from heaven but he does not just come down out of the blue into the middle of history as one who's an alien to it Rather he's the one who takes up a history himself He takes up a people and he identifies with those people

He comes as the heir of a great legacy of failure and sin and covenant breaking and he holds that history as his own and will bring salvation into that situation All of this we're told is in fulfilment of what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah In chapter 7 verse 14 of the book of Isaiah he speaks of a young woman who will conceive and bear a son and whose name will be Emmanuel Now many have debated about the meaning of this text Within the Septuagint the Greek translation of the Old Testament it invited the reading as a virgin whereas in the Hebrew it could just be a young woman more generally Such a young woman might commonly be presumed to be a virgin but that would not necessarily be the case So to see this verse as an Old Testament prediction of the virgin birth is maybe to stretch the meaning of that original text which presents a problem for us What is Matthew doing with this text?

He presents it as being fulfilled in Christ and references the virgin conceiving which is an over-reading of the text as we find it within the context of Isaiah What's he doing?

Well it seems to me that Matthew uses the Old Testament not just in a way that has a this-means-that relationship where there's an Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfilment Rather there's more logic of fulfilment as a filling out a bringing of the text to a greater and higher expression of its meaning So whereas in the original context it may have been referring to Ahaz's son Hezekiah as the fulfilment of that prophecy initially there is a fuller fulfilment which we see in Christ in which case the meaning of the Septuagint becomes more foregrounded This is a virgin that's going to give birth and it's a fuller realisation of the meaning of the original text Now when the New Testament authors use the Old Testament they want us to go back to the Old Testament and pay attention to the context In that original context a reluctant Ahaz who's not really going to listen much to the advice of the prophet does not really want a sign but God gives him a sign anyway and this child will be born and before the child comes of age there will be this deliverance that God will come and be present to his people but there will also be judgement and in that historical situation the child is a sign of God's presence

God's presence in blessing and in judgement it's a harbinger of what's going to happen in the future Christ's birth then is a similar sort of thing God is coming, being present to his people and things are going to change The miraculous birth of this child is a sign that God is with his people and that things are going to change there's going to be blessing and there's going to be judgement God is about to come near to his people in this child and as in the days of Ahaz people need to brace themselves A question to consider Why do you think that God told Joseph after Mary had been found to be with child that the child was from the Holy Spirit rather than beforehand when Mary was told?

[9 : 42] Why do you think that God is so■■■■