

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 1:18-25

Year A - Advent 4, Text: Matthew 1:18-25
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Some Introductory comments on the genealogy in Matthew 1:1-17.

In the opening verse of his Gospel, Matthew states (NRSV translation):

“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

This translation refers to Jesus as “the Messiah.” The terms “Christ” and “Messiah” are not names; they are titles — the first based on a Greek word, the second on a Hebrew word. Jesus is indeed “the Christ,” “the Messiah,” “the Anointed One.” In tracing Jesus’ origins back to Abraham and David (Matthew 1:1), his message is that in Jesus, God is making a new beginning to the “chosen people,” Jesus is a descendant of Abraham, the first of the original chosen people.

But Matthew places the name of David before that of Abraham. He does this to emphasize the fact that, in Jesus, the Jewish people are at long last getting their kings back. Jesus is above all a descendant of David from the tribe of Judah — not of any of those upstart Maccabees (descendants of Levi) who ruled from about 164–63 BC.

The Jewish people had lost their kings when both Jehoiachin and Zedekiah were taken into exile in Babylon — Jehoiachin in 597 BC and Zedekiah in 587 BC. In 1:1, the NRSV refers to Jesus as “Messiah” — the message being that, in the Person of Jesus, the long-expected Messiah (a descendant of David) has come and the Messianic Age has broken into history.

The first two sections of Matthew’s genealogical table (1:1–6a; 1:6b–11) are drawn from Ruth 4:18–22 and 1 Chronicles 1–3. In section two, Matthew omits the names Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah (and Athaliah, a woman who grabbed the throne of Judah after Jehu killed her son Ahaziah, 2 Kings 11). In Matthew’s third section (1:12–16), the only known names are Jechoniah (or Jehoiachin, 2 Kings 22, 23), Shealtiel

(Ezra 5:2), and Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:2). The five women listed (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary) bore sons in a rather unexpected manner — Mary’s Son by a creative act of God. The name Immanuel is used in the opening chapter of Matthew’s Gospel (1:23), and echoed in its closing verses (28:19–20).

Matthew 1:18–25

In the annunciation to Joseph recorded in this passage, Matthew follows the pattern of the typical annunciation of birth in the Old Testament — for example, of the births of Isaac (Genesis 17:15–21) and Samson (Judges 13).

Matthew’s portrayal of Joseph who received revelations in dreams (1:20; 2:13, 19) and who goes down to Egypt (2:14) resembles the portrait of the Joseph of the Old Testament, the patriarch who was “the dreamer” (Genesis 37:19: literally, “the master of dreams”) and who went down to Egypt to escape an attempt on his life (Genesis 27:28).

Verse 1:18: In 1:16, Joseph is referred to as Mary’s husband; he is not said to have been Jesus’ father. In verse 1:18, Matthew states that although Mary gave birth to Jesus, she conceived before she and Joseph (to whom she was engaged) began to live together. Her virginal conception was brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 1:19: When Joseph learned about Mary’s pregnancy, he, a righteous man, was unwilling to give away her secret — an action that would have brought public disgrace upon Mary. Hence, he decided to break off his ties to Mary without any publicity.

Verses 1:20–21: However, while Joseph was giving thought to doing this, God intervened by sending an angel to visit him while he was dreaming. The angel addressed Joseph as “Joseph, son of David,” and then added, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”

(and therefore is not the result of Mary having had sexual relations with some other man).

Hence, Joseph is to play the part of a father toward Mary's Son by giving Him His divinely revealed name, "Jesus," and thereby assuring to Jesus His royal, messianic dignity. Matthew calls attention to the meaning of the name *Jesus* ("Yahweh saves") — a name that designates the Child's future role in the salvation of Israel and humanity at large: "He will save His people from their sins."

Verses 1:22–23: Matthew sees this whole series of events (Mary's miraculous conception, Jesus' virginal birth, Joseph's caring paternity, and the mystery of the incarnation) as predicted in Isaiah 7:14. The name "Immanuel" ("with us is God") is realized to the full in Jesus, God's incarnate Son. "Immanuel" foreshadows the promise of the risen Jesus to remain with His community until the end of time (28:18–20). Note that Matthew begins in chapter 1:23 by declaring "Immanuel/God with us," and closes in 28:20 with Jesus' assurance that "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Verse 1:24: The story of the annunciation to Joseph reaches its climax with his act of obedience in receiving Mary as his wife.

Verse 1:25: At the same time, Joseph respected Mary's virginity and had no sexual relations with her until after she gave birth to Jesus. And after that birth took place, Joseph named the Child.

Harold St. John once wrote of the incarnation:

"After many, many centuries of dwelling in cloud and thick darkness, God sent His Son to learn the experiences and thoughts of men... He knew hunger, weariness, poverty, sorrow... and when He had learned these things, Jesus opened His mouth and the world has been listening to Him ever since."