

Christmas: A Very Jewish Story With Good News for the Nations

Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels, beginning with these opening words: “This is the genealogy of Yeshua the Messiah, son of David, son of Avraham” (Matt. 1:1, CJB). Yes, this is the story of the Messiah of Israel, the one promised centuries earlier in the pages of the Jewish Scriptures.

As for His birth, Matthew writes, “Here is how the birth of Yeshua the Messiah took place. When his mother Miryam was engaged to Yosef, before they were married, she was found to be pregnant from the Ruach HaKodesh [meaning Holy Spirit]” (Matt. 1:18).

Are these names sounding unfamiliar? Yeshua, Miryam and Yosef?

That’s because we’re used to hearing them through the lens of the Greek language, transmitted into Latin, and then into English, where the names become Jesus, Mary and Joseph. But in their day, in their hometown, these individuals would have been known as Yeshua, Miryam and Yosef.

That’s how Matthew—or Mattityahu, in Hebrew—would have known them. And even though Matthew’s Gospel has only been preserved in Greek (there are traditions that suggest part of it—or even all of it—may have first been written in Hebrew), the background is entirely Jewish.

As for the rest of the details of the Messiah’s birth, Luke, who may have been a Gentile, records this: “Around this time, Emperor Augustus issued an order for a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This registration, the first of its kind, took place when Quirinius was governing in Syria. Everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. So

Yosef, because he was a descendant of David, went up from the town of Natzeret in the Galil to the town of David, called Beit-Lechem, in Y'hudah, to be registered, with Miryam, to whom he was engaged, and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth; and she gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him in cloth and laid him down in a feeding trough, because there was no space for them in the living-quarters" (Luke 2:1-7).

The more we read, the more Jewish the story gets, with not only the names of the main players being Jewish but the places as well, including Natzeret (Nazareth), the Galil (Galilee), Beit-Lechem (Bethlehem) and Y'hudah (Judah).

Yet it is Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, who also includes the nations of the world in the opening chapters of his book.

Look first in Matthew 1:5-6a: "Salmon was the father of Bo'az (his mother was Rachav), Bo'az was the father of 'Oved (his mother was Rut), 'Oved was the father of Yishai, Yishai was the father of David the king."

Do you grasp the significance of this? Even though Matthew is tracing the genealogy of Jesus through His male ancestors, he goes out of his way to point to two women here, Rachav (Rahab) and Rut (Ruth). And why is this so important? It's because both of them were Gentiles.

Yet here they are, playing a key role, not only in the Messiah's ancestry but in the ancestry of King David. In the biblical picture, it doesn't get any bigger than that.

Two Gentiles, both of them women, play a major role in bringing the Messiah into the world. There is surely a message here. Matthew doesn't want us to miss it.

Going back over to Luke, who also emphasizes Yeshua's mission to both Gentiles and women, he records a significant event

that took place when the Messiah was born: "In the countryside nearby were some shepherds spending the night in the fields, guarding their flocks, when an angel of Adonai [the Lord] appeared to them, and the Sh'khinah of Adonai [the glory of the Lord] shone around them. They were terrified; but the angel said to them, 'Don't be afraid, because I am here announcing to you Good News that will bring great joy to all the people. This very day, in the town of David, there was born for you a Deliverer who is the Messiah, the Lord'" (Luke 2:8-11).

So an angel of the Lord announces to these Jewish shepherds that a deliverer (or Savior) has been born, the Messiah, the Lord.

Matthew, however, relates a different event, one that took place some time later: "After Yeshua was born in Beit-Lechem in the land of Y'hudah during the time when Herod was king, Magi from the east came to Yerushalayim and asked, 'Where is the newborn King of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him'" (Matt. 2:1-2).

What? Pagan astrologers were coming to worship the newborn King of the Jews? How could this be?

Prof. Craig Keener writes, "Without condoning astrology, Matthew's narrative challenges his audience's prejudice against outsiders to their faith (Matt. 8:5-13, 15:21-28): even the most pagan of pagans may respond to Jesus if given the opportunity (Jon. 1:13-16; 3:6-4:1, 10-11). For one special event in history, the God who rules the heavens chose to reveal himself where pagans were looking," according to *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*.

This is the wonderful news that this Jewish story tells us for every nation on the planet. The Messiah of Israel is the Savior of the world. The one predicted in the Hebrew Bible, born to a Jewish virgin and raised in a Jewish society, will

one day die for the sins of Jew and Gentile alike.

That's why Matthew ends his account with these words from Yeshua Himself after He rose from the dead: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make people from all nations into *talmidim* [disciples]" (Matt. 28:18b-19a).

Yes, go and make disciples of the nations. Go and tell everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, that the Savior has come, that the Messiah has paid for their sins, that they must turn to God in repentance and receive forgiveness.

That's why the Messiah's birth was such big news, not just for the Jewish people but for the Gentiles as well. The very Jewish story of His birth is also great news for the whole world. Let the celebration begin! {eo}