

For Advent Sunday, I was invited to try to summarise the first three sessions of my annual gospels course, covering the opening four chapters of Matthew's gospel, which is the set gospel to be read every Sunday during the liturgical year A, from Advent Sunday 2026 to the end of November 2026. These group classes were delivered through Exeter Cathedral in November-early December 2025 to help people to prepare for all the readings from Matthew which they would hear during Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. These are summary notes to accompany the live recording of the sermon, which is available on my website.

1 INTRODUCTION: CAN MATTHEW BE JEWISH AND ALSO ANTI-SEMITIC?

Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels – yet often seen as most anti-Semitic?! Jewish atmosphere, structure, prophets; Mission to the 'lost sheep of house of Israel' Yet 'woes to Pharisees/hypocrites', Matt. 23
'His blood be upon us and children', 27.25
Rabbi Sacks' view of Jews/Judaism: jokes!
What does 'Iουδαῖος, *Ioudaios*, mean? Judaeen – geographic? Judahite – tribal? Jewish – but ethnicity/race or religion/faith?

2 GOSPELS ARE SAME GENRE AS OTHER ANCIENT LIVES (Background)

so they must be interpreted in a similar fashion. Graeco-Roman biography is very different from modern examples. Portrait through of person's deeds and words, with an extended account of their death and end. *What are the Gospels?* 25th Anniversary Edition (Baylor University Press, 2018).
Four gospel versions of story of Jesus kept by the early church. *4 Gospels, 1 Jesus?*
Four narratives seen through the four traditional symbols Ezekiel 1; Revelation 4
Very early symbols get applied to gospels; e.g. Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. III.11.8-9.
Research into the 4 images in Celtic art. Used for the four story-portraits of Jesus

3 WHO IS MATTHEW AND WHO IS HE WRITING FOR? – Matthew 1.1-17

New Moses?? Fits with very Jewish atmosphere from 1.1:
Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυίδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ
'The Book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham';

Genealogy from Abraham; 3x14 = David. 3 x 14 = 3 x D=4+V=6+D=4; importance of David – for the LAND. David is also of tribe of Judah, a Judahite, great king, expansionist; passed it to Solomon, then kingdom fractured – north and south – leading to Samaria and West Bank!

Mentions of David: 17 x Matt; 7x Mark; 13 x Lk; 2x in Jn, one verse. Jesus' siblings also sons / children of David; later persecutions and executions of them

Four women: Tamar, Canaanite, acted like a prostitute, but more righteous than her father-in-law, Judah

Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, helps spies, seen as righteous, marries Salmon

Ruth, Moabite, background of war, Ruth leaves home with Naomi in Bethlehem;

Boaz Wife of Uriah = Bathsheba; adultery and murder, David in the wrong

Four 'righteous' indigenous women of the land: cp Canaanite woman in Matt 15.21-28. Does this prepare the way for Mary as mother of Jesus?

Joseph, 'son of David' is a 'righteous' man, does the right thing, despite appearances Birth/infancy from Joseph's view; very Jewish atmosphere.

Fulfilment of many OT prophecies drives Matt's narrative.

Jesus as another Moses; mountains; law and prophets.

Righteousness *dikaïos*/-unē; 22x in Matt / 1x Mk / 11x Lk. Kingdom/ship of heaven 33x (0 elsewhere), 'kgdm of God' 5 Mt/14 Mk/33 Lk/2 Jn/13 rest of NT,

4 MATTHEW'S STRUCTURE AND EXPECTED AUDIENCE – Matthew 1.18-25

Matthew 1-2 full of Jewish atmosphere, angels, dreams, warnings, OT prophecies, v. 18 Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις οὕτως ἦν 'genesis' again

Before they 'come together', συνελθεῖν, Mary found to be 'with child': it is not about her not being a virgin, but being found to be pregnant. When? Wedding night?? Joseph described as a 'righteous' man, δίκαιος, and he attempts to do the 'right' thing for Mary, at the risk of shame for them both, hence 'secretly'.

Angel in dream addresses him as 'Joseph, Son of David' – echoes another 'Joseph son of Jacob, >Isaac, >Abraham', the interpreter of scripture and of dreams v.20 τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν gennethen 'gen-' root again.

Meaning of Jesus' name Ἰησοῦς: 'Joshua' in Hebrew = 'saviour-healer'; 'Yhwh is god'; Fulfilment of prophecy, Is. 7.1 παρθένοσ Parthenos / 'almah young woman

Name Ἐμμανουήλ = 'Emmanuel', the 'with-us-God'

Joseph is obedient to the angel's message; did not 'know' her until after the birth, οὐκ ἐγίνωσεν αὐτήν – implies he did have sex afterwards, back to Jesus' siblings.

5 PARALLELS IN EXODUS & MATTHEW OF MOSES AND JESUS–Matthew 2

Evil king summons wise men and magi	7.11; 8.7, 18	2.7
Hero rescued from evil king slaughtering baby boys	1.15-2.10	2.16-18
Hero flees to another land to stay alive	2.15-22	2.13-14
Hero returns after the death of the evil king	2.23	2.19-20
Going back home, taking wife and sons	4.18-20	2.21
God brings his people up out of Egypt, cp Hosea	11 3.10, 17; 6.4;	2.15, 21-23
Hero spends time on mountains with God	19; 23-24; 34 4; 5-7; 14-15; 17; 28	

Wise men, 'magi', where from? Sun-rising, = East → Parthians??, formerly Persians, Iraq/Iran, great empire opposing Rome to the East; legionary fortresses; Parthia supported Herod's rival in 40-37, so not likely to be Parthian. Arabs/Nabataeans SE? Interpreters, dreams, stars, Star Num. 24-17-19 Star out of Jacob, sceptre Israel, crush Moab & Seth sons; Philo, prophecy of Balaam; R Akiba – Bar Kokhba 'star' Various star theories: Jupiter-Saturn 7BC; Prophecy Micah 5.2

Note dreams again; Joseph's hospitality to strangers, à la Abraham
Gift giving duties; Dream for magi route home.

Herod

Herod, client-king 37-4BC: paranoid worries; kills opponents, sons
Slaughter of Judaeans 40BC at Bethlehem; built Herodion
Herod had 9 wives, by 6BC killed Mariamme, his favourite & two sons; one more later, plus others. Slaughter of his own sons → Innocents, echo Exod. 1.22
Herod built **Herodion** on the site of slaughter of Judaeans from Bethlehem who opposed him in 40BC. The hill towers over and looks down on Bethlehem Herod had palatial rooms in it, but also constructed his tomb to be there, a massive landmark visible for miles around.

David's tomb in Jerusalem, pillaged it of its gold and ornaments – but a flame burst out to prevent him seeing the grave, so he put a large white monument at its mouth to dominate it (Josephus *Antiq.* 16.179-183). Herod also burned the

Davidic family records. Jesus, warned by Pharisees, calls his son Herod Antipas 'that fox', (Lk. 13.32). Tribal / family FEUD between houses of David & Herod?

Weeping Rachel

Fulfilment again, from Jeremiah 31.15; originally about Babylon's capture of Jerusalem in 6th century; Ramah just to north of Jerusalem, land of two of her tribes, Benjamin and Ephraim. Now linked to the tomb of Rachel, close to Bethlehem, 10 miles south; traumatic memory of Herod's slaughter, 40BC
NB 'all the baby boys in Bethlehem and close area' would not actually have been that many, given the population – 20??

But it is not mentioned by any other sources – hence questions about its historicity. But it IS the kind of thing Herod would do – and had done – enough to worry and frighten Joseph – and give him BAD DREAMS!

NB Constant reference to "the child and his mother" – suggesting that Joseph is NOT Jesus' natural/biological father. But very protective – note use of 'withdraw'

6 ESCAPE INTO EGYPT – Matthew 2.13-15

Easy route to coast, down Gaza strip into Egypt; large refugee population of Jews in Egypt, especially Alexandria, founded for Alexander Great, later home of Philo. ἀναχωρέω, withdraw, leave: 4 x in 2.12,13,14, 22 + 6 more = 10x in Matthew; cp 1 x Mark, 1 x John, 2 x Acts, 0 in Luke and rest of NT.

Stories about Jesus in Egypt, learning magic, healing; churches of boy Jesus, e.g. Hermopolis 4th C. What does Jesus the Refugee have to say to us today . . ?

7 JOSEPH AS INTERPRETER OF DREAMS & SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2.19-23

Did Joseph teach Jesus? As a 'son of David' and Judahite, he opposed the family of usurper Herod for true God of Israel and Ἰουδαῖοι, hence time to return to Judah. But Herod's death and lavish funeral in 4BC was marked by revolts, students tearing down Roman eagles, all put down violently by Archelaus, using Roman troops, thousands killed, and Caesar confirmed Archelaus as king.

Was Joseph going back to join in the '**Jerusalem spring**' in the hope of a restoration of the house of David? **Hopes dashed by the violence?**

And Augustus' confirmation of Archelaus to succeed Herod.

So Joseph takes his family north.

Matt. 2:23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean." 'Nazōraios' odd for 'Nazarene'; no prophetic text??

Is. 11.1 'shoot' (n-ts-r) of Jesse; *notsrin* Christians. Was Nazareth a refugee village of Judahites? Also, another Bethlehem and Kochaba, 'star town' (Num. 24.17) => **immigrant Judaeen communities?**

Revolt against Archelaus leads to the **War of Varus 6BC**, two legions & 4 cavalry units = 12,000 men, burned Sepphoris (4 miles from Nazareth!), then fought Judaeans at Jerusalem, crucified 2,000 (Josephus War 2.66-75; Ant. 17.286).

Joseph τέκτων (archi-)tectōn, craftsman, => no land

4 brothers, 2 sisters => Joseph lives at least to 10AD then Jesus takes over business and family until his late 20's, marrying off siblings before ministry at 30

8 JESUS UNDER CARE OF MARY, BUT ALSO HUMAN FATHER – JOSEPH

Joseph's influence on Jesus' view of God as 'father'?

Cp Luke 2, 12 year old story - adulthood? Does Joseph die soon?

Does this explain why Jesus is not married – unusual at the time, especially for rabbis Expand on Jesus between mid-teens and late 20s, taking Joseph's place, marrying his siblings off.

9 BAPTISM – Matthew 3

Note **Mark and Matthew** refers to people flocking from Jerusalem, Judaea, and region around the Jordan river between Israel & Jordan;

Traditional Baptism Site: Al-Maghtas, in Jordan 'Bethany Beyond the Jordan'

Origen Bethabara 'Place of the Ford' Supposed site of Joshua's crossing into Promised Land, Elijah's stopping of water for fiery chariot, baptism of Jesus.

Search & rediscovery in 1994. Area de-mined, UNESCO, Popes John Paul II, Benedict, Francis, (American) tourists, border issues between Israel and Jordan.

John the Baptist coming out of the desert/wilderness – area with valleys, mountains, hills, wadis – and a voice crying in wilderness; lots of such holy men / prophets / Messiahs

Reminder of the OT: Exodus, Red Sea, 40 years wandering in desert-wilderness, crossing Jordan by Jericho into the Promised Land of Canaan

Now at heart of the modern land disputes of Israel, Palestine, and Gaza.

Bethlehem 5-6 miles south of Jerusalem; **Herodion** 2-3 miles south of Bethlehem

Jericho 15-20? miles – road up through wadi by St George's Monastery

Desert – wilderness between Jordan river, Jericho area around Dead Sea to east, and Jerusalem and the hill country of Judaea to the west

Qumran community chose to live in the desert – purifying (vs Temple)

JnBap in desert – and **Jesus**; baptismal site close to desert/wilderness

The arrival of 'crowds' (Mk-Lk), **Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew** – explain;

Pharisees are going to get most of Matthew's "anti-Semitism", Mt 23

NB 'brood of vipers' is *gennhmata echidnwn* *genn* word again. **Abraham** as ancestor – genealogy?

Jn Bap's deference to the One Coming after him there is in all 4, with 'untie' sandals – Matt 'carry' = disciple?

Matthew alone has JnBap's hesitation – debate about Jesus' sinlessness

Gospel of *Nazaroans*/Jerome *Pelag.* 3.2; Answer is for 'righteousness' sake'

Mark as private revelation; **Luke** has bodily dove; both 'you are'; **Matthew** has a public event – 'This is my Son'

10 TEMPTATION – Matthew 4

Mark – bare minimum – wilderness, THE Satan, 'angels and wild beasts'

Matt and Luke share Q story – Deut 8.3; 6.16; 6.13 – reflection on Dt 6-8

Continuing to repeat Israel's story, water crossing – into desert – testings; but note change of sequence and emphasis – why? Who is original?

Luke Temple → Luke did the swap?! **Matt – mountains** – back to Moses; link to 5.1; 8.1; 15.29, 32; esp 28.16 'all authority', picks up v.9

Jesus repeats JnBap's message

Matthew has 'withdrew' again, from wilderness of Judaea around Jerusalem, back up to Galilee – like his father? Much more mixed area. But he moves away from Nazareth and hill country (and Sepphoris?) to Lake. Matthew's understanding of Galilee of the Gentiles – back to Joseph moving up there when too dangerous in Judaea-Jerusalem Matthew has 'withdrew' again, from wilderness of Judaea around Jerusalem, back up to Galilee – like his father? Much more mixed area.

CONCLUSION – Matthew 4.23-25

A general summary of Jesus' ministry of teaching, healing, and deliverance.

Implies the end of the introductory section – break to New Year.

Matthew – keen to stress mission to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel'

That's what we will be tracing in February – how Jesus' mission to 'the lost sheep of house of Israel' becomes a Gentile church? And what happened to him in the end – and why??!

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