

THE STORY OF THE INCARNATION

THE FIRST DAYS OF JESUS

ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER
& ALEXANDER E. STEWART

FOREWORD BY JUSTIN TAYLOR



“This latest work on the incarnation and nativity is an excellent example of serious scholarship served up in a most readable manner. No birth in history had such prophetic preparation, which is a powerful, central theme in these pages that celebrate the start of the greatest life ever lived. This is a welcome antidote to the cheap sensationalism in recent books on Jesus that try to demolish every reason for regarding Christmas as ‘the most wonderful time of the year.’”

Paul L. Maier, Professor of Ancient History, Western Michigan University; author, *In the Fullness of Time*

“*The First Days of Jesus* is a revealing look at the earliest days of Jesus in Matthew, Luke, and John set against some of the skeptical takes on these passages. Add to this a taste of Jewish messianic expectation and you have a nice overview of the start of Jesus’s career and where it fits in God’s plan. Solid yet devotional, it is a great introduction to the first days of our Lord.”

Darrell L. Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement, Howard G. Hendricks Center, and Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“*The First Days of Jesus* combines Scripture passages, historical background, scholarly insight, and practical application to cast Christ’s incarnation in fresh light. Few tasks are more urgent than for today’s Christians worldwide to rediscover and deepen their connections with their origins. This book is a valuable resource for achieving that aim. Like the star of Bethlehem itself, this volume leads those who seek God to find him afresh in the events of Jesus’s historical appearance, the prophecies that preceded, the apostolic testimony that accompanied, and the social world that God split wide open when he sent his Son.”

Robert W. Yarbrough, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Köstenberger and Stewart admirably unpack the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke along with that beautiful first movement of John’s Gospel against both the grand sweep of biblical history and the nitty-gritty details of first-century events and culture. The result may dismantle a few of your nativity-scene notions about the Christmas story even while building up your faith in and commitment to the Word become flesh.”

George H. Guthrie, Benjamin W. Perry Professor of Bible, Union University

“Köstenberger and Stewart provide for us a faithful and useful guide to the early days of Jesus. This book should serve well those desiring to learn about the early chapters in the Gospels and those who desire to preach and teach these narratives.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Written with exceptional clarity, *The First Days of Jesus* pays close attention to the key biblical texts on Christ’s nativity in an illuminating way. It deals briefly yet helpfully with critical scholarship and presents the events surrounding Jesus’s conception and birth in both a canonical and a chronological fashion. It addresses unashamedly the difficulties with these birth stories, tackling the problem of variant accounts, the use of sources, the nature of prophecy and typology, and much more. It challenges us readers to respond to the Word of God with the obedience of faith, like Mary did, and with praise, worship, and witness, as the shepherds did. I know of no other book that so masterfully weaves together these infancy narratives on so many fronts. I thoroughly enjoyed it and highly recommend it!”

Gregg R. Allison, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There is more to Christmas than you may think. Cut through the layers of tradition and the fog of nostalgia, and discover the scandal of how it all started. The Bible has more to say about Jesus’s earliest days than you might expect, and this book is a reliable guide. *The First Days of Jesus* blends world-class scholarship with real-world concern for everyday Christians. Here attention to detail, in the text and in history, complements warm devotion and pastoral care.”

David Mathis, Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Minneapolis

“In this accessible and reliable guide to how the Gospels present the early years of Jesus Christ’s life, Köstenberger and Stewart provide an exceptionally helpful study, informed by the best of modern scholarship. Drawing on what we know of the historical context, they expound with clarity both the meaning of the biblical text and its relevance for modern readers. In doing so, they enable us to grasp afresh how a detailed appreciation of Jesus’s first days contributes significantly to a deeper understanding of his whole life.”

T. Desmond Alexander, Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies, Union Theological College, Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

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FOREWORD

One New Testament scholar described the Gospel of Mark as a “passion narrative with an extended introduction.”¹ This is why Andreas Köstenberger and I coauthored *The Final Days of Jesus*: if you want to understand who Jesus is, you have to understand the most important week of his earthly ministry.² The Gospel writers, like Jesus himself, set their faces to Jerusalem and refused to look back (Luke 9:51, 53).

But something built into the human spirit *wants* to go back, to see how it all started. God himself, of course, begins the biblical storyline, “In the beginning” (Gen. 1:1). And the story of Jesus, as the preincarnate Word, likewise starts, “In the beginning” (John 1:1).

Although we would never complain about how the Spirit of God chose to guide his inspired writers, we sometimes wish the narrative of Jesus’s first days would slow things down and add some more detail. Obviously we cannot add more chapters to the Bible. God has given us everything we need to worship him in a way that pleases and glorifies his great name and equips us for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17). But we can slow down. And we can go deeper. This is where Köstenberger and Stewart, gifted biblical theologians and New Testament scholars, can help us.

People say that familiarity breeds contempt, but when it comes to Bible reading, I’ve found that familiarity is more likely

¹ Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (1892; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 80.

² Andreas J. Köstenberger and Justin Taylor, with Alexander Stewart, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

to produce *laziness*. I tend to skim when I already know the story. How many times in my life have I read or heard preached the following familiar words?

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1–7)

We've heard it so many times that we assume we know what it all means.

But then we start to ask questions. Who was Caesar Augustus? When did he rule? Over what exact area did he rule? Why did he want all the world to be registered? Who was Quirinius? Is the Syria in this passage the same as the modern country of Syria? Don't some Bible scholars say that Luke's history about the timing of the census is inaccurate here? Why did Joseph have to go to Bethlehem instead of registering in Nazareth? How big was Bethlehem? Why did Mary need to go with him? And why doesn't it say she rode on a donkey—is that in another account, or is that just what we've seen on TV? How exactly is betrothal different from engagement? Where is the innkeeper? And what kind of an "inn" was this—a cave, a room in a house, or an ancient hotel?

These are fourteen questions off the top of my head, and we've only covered seven verses. As we keep reading, the questions keep coming. Even though we've read or heard it dozens of times, it is humbling to recognize just how much we still don't know.

The book you hold in your hands has no gimmicks or clever sales pitches. It won't reveal a "gospel" you never knew. (If it did,

you should throw it away [Gal. 1:8].) It doesn't purport to finally disclose the secrets of Jesus's childhood or what he did in Egypt. Instead, it takes us back to Scripture, the only infallible source with an account of how God became man and dwelt among us.

I think you will find several benefits in reading *The First Days of Jesus*:

First, this book can help you *slow down*. The biblical narrative contains details that you probably haven't noticed before. These details reflect historical realities you probably didn't know before. And these biblical and historical realities have implications for your life that you probably haven't thought of before. Köstenberger and Stewart guard us from racing through familiar words and guide us in seeing what we have not yet fully seen.

Second, this book can help you *go deeper*. The incarnation—God become man—is a deep mystery. Pastor-theologian Sam Storms poetically captures some of the paradoxes at play:

The Word became flesh!
 God became human!
 the invisible became visible!
 the untouchable became touchable!
 eternal life experienced temporal death!
 the transcendent one descended and drew near!
 the unlimited became limited!
 the infinite became finite!
 the immutable became mutable!
 the unbreakable became fragile!
 spirit became matter!
 eternity entered time!
 the independent became dependent!
 the almighty became weak!
 the loved became the hated!
 the exalted was humbled!
 glory was subjected to shame!
 fame turned into obscurity!
 from inexpressible joy to tears of unimaginable grief!
 from a throne to a cross!

from ruler to being ruled!
from power to weakness!³

The wonder of the incarnation deserves a lifetime of thought, and this book is a faithful resource to prompt deeper reflection on the foundation of our salvation.

Third, this book can help you *make connections*. Even though the Bible devotes only four and a half chapters (out of 1,189) to Jesus's first days, Köstenberger and Stewart show us that the incarnation is the hinge of redemptive history—with the Old Testament leading up to it and the rest of the New Testament flowing from it. Reading this book will help you see how the whole story line fits together.

C. S. Lewis once confessed that in his own reading, “devotional books” did not produce in his mind and heart the results they promised. He suspected he was not alone: “I believe that many who find that ‘nothing happens’ when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.”⁴ You may want to contextualize away the pipe depending on your own preferences and convictions, but I think the advice is sound, and I found this to be the case when reading *The First Days of Jesus*.

This is not the dry-as-dust formula of dumping data and dates onto the pages of a book. This is not a book of theology void of history or a volume of history minus theology. It is a work of confessional theology rooted in historical investigation and devoted to a careful reading of Scripture, all designed to help us worship our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. I hope you find this book as meaningful and fruitful as I did.

Justin Taylor
Maundy Thursday, 2015

³Sam Storms, “The Most Amazing Verse in the Bible,” February 20, 2010, <http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/the-most-amazing-verse-in-the-bible>.

⁴C. S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 205.

INTRODUCTION

SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year—at least according to Andy Williams’s famous rendition of Edward Pola and George Wyle’s Christmas song that can be heard in malls and on radio stations across America throughout the month of December. Pola and Wyle provide several reasons for this assertion:

It’s the most wonderful time of the year
With the kids jingle belling
And everyone telling you, “Be of good cheer.”
It’s the most wonderful time of the year.

It’s the hap-happiest season of all,
With those holiday greetings and gay happy meetings
When friends come to call.
It’s the hap-happiest season of all.

There’ll be parties for hosting,
Marshmallows for toasting,
And caroling out in the snow.
There’ll be scary ghost stories
And tales of the glories of
Christmases long, long ago.

It’s the most wonderful time of the year.
There’ll be much mistletoeing
And hearts will be glowing

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When loved ones are near.
It's the most wonderful time of the year.¹

For all of the shallow reasons that Williams sings about, he rightly taps into many people's perceptions of Christmas as a sentimental time to reconnect with family and friends. This superficial sentimentality sums up Christmas for many people in our modern Western culture.²

CULTURAL CHRISTMAS

When you think of Christmas, what first comes to mind? Perhaps you think of the manger scene with shepherds and wise men, presents, a Christmas tree, decorations, shopping, relatives, Santa Claus, Christmas cards, snow, caroling, or the January credit card bill. Despite what some Christians may want to believe, Christmas, as celebrated by many Americans, is a cultural, not a religious holiday. If Jesus were to be completely removed from the equation, Americans could continue to celebrate Christmas with hardly an interruption. People would still decorate their houses and workplaces, give and receive presents, take the day off work, go to parties, stand in line with their children or grandchildren to see Santa Claus at the local mall, listen to wonderful songs on the radio about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Jack Frost, and world peace, and watch an endless stream of movies featuring Santa Claus as the main character. These are some of the ways in which we celebrate Christmas in America (and other countries have their own Christmas traditions). Christians, of course, may also attend a special Christmas pageant at their church, maybe even with some live animals. Even live animals, however, can't compete with the main feature of Christmas for every child: presents!

Cultural Christmas doesn't need Jesus. There is too much money at stake for retailers to depend upon a first-century Jew-

¹ Edward Pola and George Wyle, "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," performed by Andy Williams, Columbia Records, 1963, record.

² See the helpful booklet containing a series of messages by Josh Moody, pastor of College Church, *How Christmas Can Change Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: College Church, 2013). Audio versions of these messages are available at http://www.college-church.org/av_search.php?seriesid=101.

ish messianic baby to bring in the revenue. The financial side of Christmas has thoroughly shaped and molded its cultural expression. Our economy needs Christmas. What would happen if Americans stopped overspending and going into debt each December? As every economist would tell you, the economy would be dealt a serious blow. Even families that try to scale back find it very difficult because of all the expectations from relatives and friends. Although other countries and cultures have Christmas traditions of their own, at least in America (and much of the Western world), Christmas is synonymous with commercialism.³

THE BATTLE FOR CHRISTMAS

Christians, of course, have not allowed the almighty dollar or superficial sentimentality to take over Christmas without a fight. Throughout the month of December, churches proclaim the *real* reason for the season through special services and events. We know it's all about *Jesus* (or at least it once *was* all about Jesus), and we want it to be all about Jesus *again*.

We engage in this battle for Christmas, however, with one hand tied behind our back—solidly rooted in the very culture that is obscuring or ignoring the original reason for the season. We find ourselves making up *spiritual* reasons for our cultural practices. For example, we give gifts to each other to remind ourselves of God's great gift of *Jesus* to the world or of the gifts of the *wise men* to *Jesus*. That may sound nice, but is it true? Or do we give gifts because our parents did and everyone else we know does? What kind of parent would you be if you didn't give your child a Christmas present? Or—God forbid—if you didn't celebrate Christmas at all? Very little is intrinsically spiritual with these kinds of expectations; they are almost entirely cultural. Of course, there's nothing inherently wrong with observing such rituals. The difficulty comes in trying to understand and communicate accurately the *real* significance

³Both Linus and Lucy lamented this fact long ago in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965). Linus: "Christmas is . . . getting too commercial." Lucy: "We all know that Christmas is a big commercial racket. It's run by a big eastern syndicate, you know." Charles M. Schulz, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, directed by Bill Melendez, aired December 9, 1965, on CBS.

of Jesus's birth as a human child when its *true* meaning is buried beneath so many layers of culture-related traditions.

Examples abound. What does the decoration of an evergreen tree have to do with Jesus's coming to earth to rescue God's creation? We may tell ourselves that it symbolizes everlasting life because it is *ever-green*, but is that really the reason we set up a Christmas tree each year? Similarly, we may point to candles as a symbol of Jesus as the Light of the World, holly as a symbol of the crown of thorns that was placed upon Jesus's head, the color red as a symbol of Jesus's blood shed on the cross, the Yule log as a symbol of the cross, mistletoe as a symbol of reconciliation, and bells as a symbol for ringing out the good news. Even if some of these associations and symbols date back centuries, they fail to explain why we incorporate these traditional elements in our Christmas celebrations today. If we're honest, we have to admit that we celebrate Christmas the way we do primarily because of our cultural traditions, even though they have little (if any) real connection to Jesus's actual coming to this earth as a baby.

Now please don't misunderstand what we're trying to say here. We are not advocating that all true Christians reject these traditions as mere trappings of culture. Far from it. Traditions can be deeply meaningful and enhance our spiritual experience, and as long as they don't clash with biblical information, they can certainly be used to celebrate key events such as the birth of Jesus by the Virgin Mary. So if you are looking for an argument against the use of Christmas trees or the giving of presents, you are reading the wrong book (though the Puritans made a pretty good run at it; these pious forebears rejected Christmas observances on account of their religious beliefs).⁴ We're simply trying to draw attention to the difference that exists between the *traditional* ways in which we celebrate Christmas based upon our culture and the *reality* and *significance* of Jesus's coming to this earth to enact God's grand rescue plan to restore and reclaim humanity. In this regard, it's helpful to

⁴See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "A Puritan Christmas," *Biblical Foundations* (blog), December 16, 2006, <http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/a-puritan-christmas>.

recognize the many ways in which our cultural traditions, often unintentionally, distort our understanding of the actual import of Jesus's coming as the long-awaited culmination of God's plan.

GOING BACK IN TIME

In order to appreciate the significance of Messiah's coming—and so to understand the *true* meaning of Christmas—we need to travel back in time, back to the first Christmas, before this event even carried that name. We can't offer you a time machine (sorry!), but we can point you to the earliest written witnesses to the first Christmas: the canonical Gospels of Matthew and Luke. (Mark's Gospel picks up the story of Jesus when he's a grown man and does not discuss Jesus's birth. John's Gospel does not mention Jesus's birth directly but surprisingly contributes quite a bit to our understanding of the significance of Jesus's coming—more on that later.) These Gospel authors wrote their accounts on the basis of others' eyewitness testimony; neither Matthew nor Luke (nor even John) was there on that fateful night in Bethlehem. Luke even explicitly alerts his readers to his use of eyewitness testimony in his preface:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.⁵

Luke provides an account of a careful ancient historian motivated by a desire to present an accurate narrative of the events surrounding Jesus's birth, life, death, and resurrection in order to strengthen his readers' faith. Similarly, while Matthew says nothing of his sources, his Gospel would have likely begun circulating by the late AD 50s to early 60s, early enough that surviving

⁵Luke 1:1–4.

eyewitnesses could still have provided oral source material and confirmed the published contents of his Gospel.

The fact that Matthew and Luke were personally absent from the events they record does not lessen the value of their testimony. Their Gospels reveal a concern for careful and accurate reporting; one detects a complete lack of the fanciful and over-the-top types of stories that various gnostic authors invented about Jesus in the second century.⁶ The Gospels are akin to the ancient genre of *bios*, or biography, not fiction.⁷ Although we cannot know for certain which eyewitnesses passed on the accounts, likely candidates include Jesus's mother, Mary, as well as his half-brothers James and Jude, both of whom (especially James) served as leaders in the early church and would certainly have known the stories surrounding Jesus's birth. We can safely assume that Joseph had died by the time Jesus began his public ministry because none of the Gospel accounts mention him, but Joseph must have passed on his account of the angel's messages to others, whether Mary, his sons, Jesus, or some other close friends or relatives.

The New Testament Gospel accounts of Jesus's birth—the so-called infancy narratives—provide a different perspective than most modern popular presentations. They are far richer and deeper than can be communicated in a children's Christmas pageant, a still manger scene on a fireplace mantle, or a Christmas card. The baby would not have had a halo and—despite the famous line from “Away in a Manger,” “but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes”—almost certainly would have cried.

Perhaps the hardest aspect of Jesus's coming for modern read-

⁶Gnosticism was the first Christian heresy, both denying the goodness of material substance and thus Jesus's human flesh and denying Jesus's full and ultimate divinity.

⁷See the classic work by Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). Andrew T. Lincoln argues that the genre of ancient biography allowed for legendary embellishment in infancy narratives. *Born of a Virgin?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 57–67. However, Matthew and Luke doubtfully invented Jesus's virgin birth independently; they more likely passed on the traditions they had received about Jesus's infancy, traditions that family members preserved and that were widespread in earliest Christianity. Richard Bauckham cogently argues that we can trace Luke's genealogy in particular back to Jesus's immediate family members. *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (London: T&T Clark, 1990), 315–73. For an extensive discussion of ancient historiographical practices, see Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 51–220.

ers to appreciate is its Jewish context, particularly its connection to the Old Testament. Even as the Gospel infancy narratives are more meaningful than contemporary cultural versions, they lack many of the details that have been added over the centuries. For example, they don't tell us about the nature of the stable (cave, open-air, wood, etc.); whether there even *was* a stable; whether or not animals grazed nearby; or how many wise men traveled to Bethlehem. The wise men almost certainly did *not* arrive on the night of the birth, as most mass-produced manger scenes depict, and a star most likely would not have been suspended right above the roofline. A careful reading of the New Testament infancy narratives in their historical context will help you separate fact from fiction and clear away the brush so you can truly encounter and be changed by the Christ of Christmas.

A GUIDEBOOK

One might best describe this book as a guidebook for reading and encountering the Gospel infancy narratives. No book, no matter how well written, could ever function as a substitute for the narratives themselves, so each chapter will begin with the relevant text of Scripture to be discussed. Each chapter will examine a section of the biblical text with an eye toward proper understanding and application. Sometimes this will require attention to historical and cultural details. At other times it will require looking at connections with the Old Testament or later events in Jesus's life. We aim throughout to present the most important information in a clear and understandable way in order to enable you to grasp and be changed by a biblical understanding of Christmas.

In our companion book, *The Final Days of Jesus*, we set forth two complementary ways of reading the Gospels, vertically and horizontally.⁸ Reading the Gospels *vertically* means reading each one (or at least a portion of it, such as its infancy narrative) from beginning to end as a self-contained story in its own right. Reading

⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Justin Taylor, with Alexander Stewart, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 18–19.

the Gospels *horizontally* means exploring how each presentation relates to the others in a complementary fashion, jointly witnessing to the same historical reality, statements, and events. Both types of reading are valuable; both should be done sequentially. In the present case, since both Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives (not to mention John's prologue) are so unique and coherent, it makes sense to start with a vertical reading of their respective accounts and to draw horizontal connections once we have completed the vertical readings. This will involve comparisons of various aspects of the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives, such as their respective genealogies or other elements in their stories; it will also involve comparisons of Matthew's and Luke's accounts on the one hand and John's on the other.⁹

In that vein, our approach to the biblical text will essentially be *biblical, exegetical, historical, and devotional*. *Biblical* means that we will look at how the infancy narratives connect with Old Testament prophecies and in some cases point forward to later fulfillment. We will also try to consistently relate the infancy narratives to the larger story of Scripture.

Exegetical means that we will give careful attention to the words of the actual text.¹⁰ While a biblical approach looks at the entire forest, an exegetical approach carefully examines the individual trees.

Historical means that we will situate and discuss the infancy narratives within their first-century context in ancient Palestine. Critics of Christianity often use a supposedly historical approach to mock certain aspects of the infancy narratives. Some of this criticism is patently superficial and skeptical and stems from a prior rejection of any possibility of God's supernatural intervention in history. If God exists, however, we have no reason to rule out the possibility of supernatural events such as the virgin birth or angelic appearances simply out of a misguided desire to be historical

⁹See chaps. 1 and 10 (especially the section, "Matthew and Luke in Harmony") and chap. 14, respectively.

¹⁰The word *exegetical* comes from the Greek and means literally, "leading or drawing out." Using an exegetical approach is roughly synonymous to what we mean by engaging in inductive Bible study. On this issue, see R. Alan Fuhr and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Inductive Bible Study: A Method for Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, forthcoming).

or scientific. Beyond these biased critiques, some scholars raise legitimate historical questions that we will address, such as the dating of Quirinius's census that precipitated Joseph's and Mary's journey to Bethlehem and the differences between Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Jesus's birth.¹¹

Finally, *devotional* means that we will aim to discuss the scriptural texts in such a way that you, the reader, will be drawn closer to God. We don't write simply to convey information; we want you to be delivered and transformed by the same God who has delivered and is transforming us. This devotional aspect does not imply that we will ignore difficult issues or reject logic and rational argument. Christianity, rightly understood, does not entail a rejection of reason!¹² Our attention to the devotional aspect of this material rather emphasizes the fact that, especially in a case like Jesus's birth, information alone is insufficient. The technological revolution we are witnessing in our lifetime notwithstanding, an increase in knowledge by itself will never be able to fix humanity's greatest problems—sin, alienation, and death. Only God can do that. We hope that this book will draw you closer to the One who did not abandon a rebellious creation but set out to rescue it at great expense to himself. God's plan of redemption was conceived even before creation, was set in motion the moment humanity rebelled against its Creator, and was accomplished by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It will achieve its consummation when Jesus returns to reclaim and restore God's creation once and for all. What a glorious day that will be!

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's rewind so that, with the help of sound historical research and a careful reading of the relevant texts, we will be able to put ourselves in the place of the people who lived at the time when the original Christmas—the birth of the Christ-child—took place.

¹¹ Quirinius's census is mentioned in Luke 2:2.

¹² This is the underlying premise of Andreas J. Köstenberger, Darrell L. Bock, and Josh Chatraw, *Truth Matters: Confident Faith in a Confusing World* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2014); and the book by the same authors, *Truth in a Culture of Doubt: Engaging Skeptical Challenges to the Bible* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2014).

THE FIRST DAYS OF JESUS ACCORDING TO MATTHEW, LUKE, AND JOHN

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE	EVENTS RECORDED
Matthew 1:1-17	Jesus's ancestry
Matthew 1:18-25	The virgin birth
Matthew 2:1-12	The visit of the <i>magoi</i>
Matthew 2:13-15	Escape to Egypt
Matthew 2:16-18	Herod's order to kill boys under two years of age
Matthew 2:19-23	Return of Jesus's family to Nazareth
Luke 1:5-25	The foretelling of John the Baptist's birth
Luke 1:26-38	The foretelling of Jesus's birth
Luke 1:39-45	Mary's visit to Elizabeth
Luke 1:46-56	Mary's song (<i>Magnificat</i>)
Luke 1:57-66	The birth of John the Baptist
Luke 1:67-80	Zechariah's prophecy (<i>Benedictus</i>)
Luke 2:1-7	The birth of Jesus Christ

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SCRIPTURE PASSAGE	EVENTS RECORDED
Luke 2:8-21	The angelic announcement to the shepherds
Luke 2:22-38	Jesus's presentation at the temple; the prophecies of Simeon (<i>Nunc Dimittis</i>) and Anna
Luke 2:39-40	Return of Jesus's family to Nazareth
John 1:1-5, 18	The Word's preexistence and agency in creation
John 1:6-8, 15	The witness of John the Baptist
John 1:9-14	The Word's assumption of flesh
John 1:16-17	Culmination of the law, grace, and truth

PART 1

VIRGIN-BORN
MESSIAH

THE LONG-AWAITED MESSIAH

SON OF ABRAHAM, SON OF DAVID

MATTHEW 1:1-17

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

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And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

OUR STORIES AND GOD'S STORY

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players,
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.¹

Our lives are original stories. Each one is different from every other. We are copyrighted, with no possibility of plagiarism. Every story has a unique and different beginning. The conflicts, heroes, and villains all vary. Some stories end sooner than others. The lives of the rich, powerful, famous, or influential are memorialized for future generations in biographies or autobiographies, while the poor often die in anonymity. However, a dark shadow hangs over each of our plots. The inescapable reality of sickness, death, and loss makes every one of our stories a tragedy to some degree or another. Yet as Scripture makes clear, death will not have the final word. For those in Christ, resurrection will triumph.

The Bible is also a story, *God's* story. It recounts the Creator's involvement with his creation, how he made a beautiful and good world, and how he fashioned humankind in his image and as his representatives to share in his rule. Created in God's image, we are able to think, feel, love, choose, perceive beauty, and enjoy God's

¹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Agnes Latham (London: Methuen, 1967), 2.7.139–142.

good creation. The Bible also recounts how things went terribly wrong, how the human race rejected God's rule and embraced the rule of sin and death. As a result, our lives are now marked by suffering, sickness, sin, hurt, and, finally and inescapably, death. Tragically, our ancestors threw off God's good rule and became slaves to the evil rule of sin and death, and we all, whether we like it or even acknowledge it, share in the same fate.

The Bible continues to tell the story of how God did not simply walk away from his creation in the midst of turmoil and rebellion but purposed to rescue it at great cost to himself through the sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection of his Son, Jesus. What's more, God's story continues beyond Jesus's resurrection. A future day is coming when the Messiah will return physically to his creation to remake the heavens and the earth, to wipe away every tear, and to remove sin and death—the realities that have kept his creation under their spell—forever.

The two halves of God's story pivot around one central point: the coming of Jesus to rescue God's wrecked and ruined creation—BC and AD. Jesus's coming was the great game-changer of history. This chapter will look at the unfolding of God's story leading up to the day when God himself visited his creation through the incarnation, with a view toward the way in which God's story impacts the unfolding stories of our lives. Our involvement in God's story has the ability to rewrite our stories—to change their endings. Put another way, become a part of God's story, and he will write yours. This chapter will present God's story, and the epilogue will return to the question of how we let God write our stories.

GOD'S STORY: A GENEALOGY?

It would be interesting to know how many of you reading this book skipped the genealogy in Matthew 1:1–17 reproduced at the beginning of this chapter. Perhaps some of you skimmed it. Maybe a very few read every word, whether out of a desire to be spiritual, a respect for God's Word, an obsessive-compulsive personality, or some other reason. Genealogies typically hold very little interest

for most people in the twenty-first-century Western world (those with a passion for genealogical research excepted). Lists of ancestors bore most of us. In our present culture, we are lucky to keep memories alive for three generations, maybe four if we are the nostalgic type or had a famous ancestor.

Our general lack of interest in genealogies creates an interesting situation when it comes to Jesus's family tree in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Consider the following four facts.

First, based upon evidence from the earliest Christian writings following the New Testament, a collection known as the apostolic Fathers, Matthew was the *most widely used* Christian Gospel in the first two centuries. Many of the early Christian writers possessed some form of Matthew's Gospel.

Second, when the earliest Christians began to assemble the books that would become the New Testament, they placed Matthew's Gospel *first*. This tradition has remained to this day, and all modern Bibles start the New Testament with the Gospel of Matthew, indicating its foundational position.

Third, Matthew began his Gospel with a *genealogy*. Even ancient authors knew that it was important to put attention-getting or particularly important material at the beginning of a speech or book in order to arouse people's interest. The fact that Matthew began his Gospel with Jesus's genealogy indicates its importance. The entire New Testament begins with these verses!

Fourth, the Old Testament book of Ezra bears witness to the fact that genealogies played a crucial role in Jewish society following the return from Babylonian *exile*. Some men who claimed to belong to the priesthood were excluded because their names were not found in the genealogies and they could not prove their credentials or pedigree.² Such evidence was needed at this point in Israelite history in order for those returning from exile to claim family property and offices. At the time of Jesus's birth, many viewed Herod the Great negatively because he was a half-Edomite by ancestry and not a pure Jew. Ancestry was culturally,

²See Ezra 2:59–63.

religiously, and politically important in the era we call Second Temple Judaism—that is, the period between the reconstruction of the temple in 516 BC and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.

These considerations confront us with a question: What are we missing when we skip or skim over the genealogy found in Matthew 1:1–17? To answer this question, we need to embark on a brief journey through the Old Testament to trace the unfolding of God’s story leading up to the opening verses of Matthew’s story about the coming of the Messiah.

THE BEGINNING OF TIME

A Distant Promise

In the early days of humankind, when the first people rejected God’s rule and things went radically wrong, the Bible records a somewhat enigmatic promise. In judgment of Satan, the deceiving Serpent, God declares the following: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”³ While a bit strange and enigmatic, this prophecy in essence declares that one day a *descendant of the woman* (that is, a human being) will crush the head of the Serpent, Satan (a created, angelic being who had previously rebelled against his Creator).

Imagine someone reading through the Bible for the first time without knowing its ending. This hypothetical reader just read how God created an amazing, beautiful world and how Adam and Eve believed the Serpent’s lie and chose to throw off God’s rule to grasp hold of all the “good things” God was holding back from them. What a breathtaking disaster! Within the course of one chapter, the world has gone from beautiful, orderly, and joyful to marred, cursed, and sorrowful. Genesis 3 ends with the world dark and broken and with God barring his image bearers and representatives from access to the tree of life. At this point,

³Gen. 3:15.

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the reader desperately needs a piece of good news, and God does not disappoint. While the Serpent and humanity will continue their conflict, one day a human being, an offspring of the woman, will, at great cost to himself—the “bruising of his heel”—crush the Serpent’s head.

Our hypothetical reader immediately begins to wonder, who is this descendent of the woman? When will he come and conquer the Serpent, setting everything right in God’s creation? At this point, the text offers few clues as to his identity; all that is known is that he will be human and a descendant of Eve.

C. 2100 BC

God Chooses a Family

The reader doesn’t have to wait long for additional clues because God soon narrows the messianic line down to a particular family: the family of *Abraham*.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”⁴

God chooses a particular man from the great mass of humanity in order to reveal himself and his plan further. As the stories about Abraham in Genesis soon make clear, he is far from perfect.⁵ He makes many mistakes—lies repeatedly, acts out of unbelief—but, more than anything else, he lives a life marked by faith in God’s promises. God has told Abraham that he will make his descendants a great nation and that through Abraham’s offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Our reader is filled with expectation. Is Abraham the one? Is this the “seed of the woman”

⁴Gen. 12:1–3.

⁵Genesis 12–25.

who will overcome the Serpent and set things right again in God's creation?

As the narrative of Abraham's life progresses, it becomes clear to the reader that he is not the Promised One, but rather, one of his descendants will be the source of God's blessing to the whole world. Our reader does not yet know the precise identity of the promised offspring of the woman, but the search has been narrowed down considerably; that person will be a descendent of Abraham.

Further Clues

Abraham, of course, had a multitude of descendants, starting with Ishmael (Abraham's son but not through his wife, Sarah, and thus ineligible to receive God's promise), and followed by Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons. Do the subsequent Old Testament narratives narrow things down still further? As Jacob, Abraham's grandson, lies on his deathbed in Egypt, he summons his twelve sons and prophecies concerning each one of them.⁶ Things take an interesting turn when he utters the following prophecy concerning his son Judah: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."⁷ This both narrows down God's promise to Abraham and expands its scope. Abraham's seed through the line of Judah will bring blessing to the nations through a *kingly ruler* (symbolized by the scepter) who will receive tribute and obedience from the peoples of the earth.

C. 1000 BC

It will take hundreds of years, but in due course the reader discovers that this prophecy finds initial fulfillment in a descendent of Judah named *David*. When God first chooses David to be king

⁶Genesis 49.

⁷Gen. 49:10. The ESV contains a footnote noting some translational difficulties in this verse: "By a slight revocalization; a slight emendation yields (compare Septuagint, Syriac, Targums) *until he comes to whom it belongs*; Hebrew *until Shiloh comes, or until he comes to Shiloh.*" *The ESV Study Bible*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 134. Fortunately, the different options do not affect the primary sense of the prophecy.

and Samuel the prophet anoints him,⁸ our hypothetical reader can connect the dots and breathe a sigh of relief. Jacob's ancient prophecy concerning the line of Judah is finally beginning to see fulfillment! Going back even farther, the reader can connect these dots to God's promise to Abraham and to his initial announcement of judgment to the Serpent. Is David the one? Is David the seed of the woman who will overcome the Serpent and set things right in God's world? Has the promised deliverer, the "seed of the woman," finally arrived?

The Davidic narratives in the Old Testament soon make clear that David will not fulfill the original messianic promise. Like Abraham, Jacob, and Judah before him, David's life is marked by sin and failure even as he is known for his faith and called "a man after God's heart."⁹ As in the cases of Abraham and Judah, however, God narrows the focus to a descendent of King David. At one point during David's kingly reign over Israel, God sends the prophet Nathan to give David the following promise: "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."¹⁰ *A descendent of David will rule on his throne and over his kingdom forever.*

Did God's Promises Fail?

Prospects look fairly bright with Nathan's promise to David that God will establish his kingdom and throne forever, but matters do not seem to go as planned. David's kingly descendants regularly stray from God's laws and ways and often lead the nation into idolatry (the worship of other gods) and rejection of God's rule. The Old Testament prophets¹¹ declare God's words, warnings, and promises during this period of national decline. Each in his own way, the prophets warn the people of judgment for rejecting the Lord and envision a future time when God will set things right in

⁸ 1 Sam. 16:1–13.

⁹ Acts 13:22; cf. 1 Sam. 13:14.

¹⁰ 2 Sam. 7:16.

¹¹ That is, those featured in the portion of the Hebrew Scriptures called "The Prophets": Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve so-called Minor Prophets.

all the earth through a descendent of David. The wolf will lie down with the lamb; swords will be beaten into plowshares.¹² A Davidic ruler will usher in world peace and blessings for the nations.

722 BC / 605-586 BC

Our reader soon learns that because God's people fail to repent, he eventually sends them into exile through the conquest of the foreign nations of Assyria (722 BC) and Babylon (605–586 BC). Although they return from exile and resettle the land, they experience nothing that could remotely be described as the fulfillment of God's messianic promises. Some of the Old Testament writers struggle with this lack of fulfillment. The psalmist expresses this pain poignantly in Psalm 89:

You have said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to David my servant:
'I will establish your offspring forever
and build your throne for all generations.'" . . .

"My steadfast love I will keep for him forever,
and my covenant will stand firm for him.
I will establish his offspring forever
and his throne as the days of the heavens.
If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my rules,
if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with stripes,
but I will not remove from him my steadfast love
or be false to my faithfulness.
I will not violate my covenant
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
Once for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.
His offspring shall endure forever,

¹²Isa. 11:6, 2:4.

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his throne as long as the sun before me.
Like the moon it shall be established forever,
a faithful witness in the skies.”

But now you have cast off and rejected;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.
You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.
You have breached all his walls;
you have laid his strongholds in ruins.
All who pass by plunder him;
he has become the scorn of his neighbors.
You have exalted the right hand of his foes;
you have made all his enemies rejoice.
You have also turned back the edge of his sword,
and you have not made him stand in battle.
You have made his splendor to cease
and cast his throne to the ground.
You have cut short the days of his youth;
you have covered him with shame.

How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire? . . .

Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,
which by your faithfulness you swore to David?¹³

This passage powerfully affirms the surety of God’s promises to David while simultaneously crying out in pain: Why has God abandoned his promises? Why has he broken his covenant? We put our hope in him and have been devastated: “Where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?”

400s BC

The Old Testament ends with the messianic promise unfulfilled, looking ahead to God’s future action of bringing salvation. From

¹³Ps. 89:3–4, 28–46, 49.

what our hypothetical reader sees, the promised offspring of the woman has not (yet) come. The world has not yet been set right. Blessing has not come to the world through Abraham's descendants. The scepter has departed from the line of Judah. David's kingdom has been defeated and lost, and no Davidic ruler reigns to mediate God's blessings to the nations. The Old Testament ends looking to the future for closure and fulfillment. While the Second Temple period is anything but silent, the prophetic voice has ceased.¹⁴ The waiting has begun.

TURN OF THE ERA

With this background in place, we read the opening words of Matthew's Gospel with new eyes: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."¹⁵ The entire New Testament begins with a verse that declares *Jesus* to be the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the long-awaited Messiah! Jesus's descent from David would turn out to be foundational for later New Testament theology.¹⁶

The Book of the Genealogy

The genealogy proceeds to establish Jesus's identity—traced back to David, the descendent of Judah, the descendent of Abraham, whom we know from the Old Testament narratives to be the descendent of Eve.¹⁷ Finally, our reader finds resolution to the tension introduced in Genesis. *Jesus* is the promised seed who will set everything right! The entire Old Testament progressively narrows down the identity of God's Messiah until the day he finally arrives—the day God comes to his creation to undo the work of the fall, destroy the works of the Devil, and begin to set things right.

Four features of Matthew's listing of Jesus's family tree deserve comment. To begin with, the first two Greek words of the New

¹⁴For a discussion of Second Temple Jewish expectation during the Intertestamental period, see the appendix.

¹⁵Matt. 1:1.

¹⁶Acts 2:29–36; 13:22–23; Rom. 1:3; 15:12; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 5:5; 22:16.

¹⁷Jesus's genealogy in Luke 3:23–38 makes this point explicit and traces Jesus's ancestry all the way back to Adam.

Testament, *biblos geneseōs* (“The Book of the Genealogy”), mirror the language used to introduce creation itself and the genealogy connected to Adam.¹⁸ The use of this language points the attentive reader back to the creation of the world and links Jesus’s genealogy to God’s original plan for his creation.¹⁹

Second, the inclusion of four *women* in the genealogy is unusual, particularly in light of the fact that each of the women was an outsider to Israel with a questionable background. Most ancient genealogies excluded women, particularly women who may have tarnished the family line. Matthew does the opposite. Tamar was a Canaanite who disguised herself as a prostitute in order to seduce Judah.²⁰ Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute who lied to protect the Israelite spies and helped overthrow Jericho.²¹ Ruth was a Moabite woman who moved to Israel upon the death of her husband.²² Finally, Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite; King David married Bathsheba after fathering a child by her and killing her husband.²³ The inclusion of these non-Israelite women foreshadows the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and bears witness to the grace of God that actively seeks to forgive and restore sinners and to reach out to those who are marginalized and viewed as outsiders.

Third, Mary falls in line with these other women by conceiving a child in an *unusual, questionable, or surprising* manner. The family tree itself anticipates the virgin birth of Jesus by breaking its normal pattern of presenting information. The chain of generations consistently reads, “[father’s name] *was the father of* [son’s name].” Matthew repeats this pattern for every single father-son pair until Joseph: “Joseph the husband of *Mary, of whom Jesus was*

¹⁸See Gen. 2:4: “These are the generations [*biblos geneseōs* in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible] of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens”; and Gen. 5:1: “This is the book of the generations [*biblos geneseōs*] of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God.”

¹⁹In this regard, Matthew shares an affinity with John’s Gospel, which likewise opens with establishing a connection between Jesus’s coming into this world and God’s original creation (John 1:1; see also vv. 3–5). We will explore this in greater detail in chap. 13 below.

²⁰Genesis 38.

²¹Joshua 2; 6:25.

²²See the book of Ruth. The Moabites were particularly despised in Israel’s history. Deuteronomy 23:3 states, “No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever.”

²³2 Samuel 11–12.

born, who is called Christ [Messiah].”²⁴ The Greek language itself specifies clearly that Jesus is the biological son of Mary but not of Joseph.²⁵ Thus, although Joseph was Jesus’s *legal* adoptive parent, he was not his *biological* father. The alert reader takes note of this curious way of putting things but must wait until the end of the chapter to receive additional details regarding this startling change in the pattern of listing Jesus’s ancestry.

Fourth, by dividing salvation history into three periods of fourteen generations each (Abraham to David, David to the exile, the exile to Jesus), Matthew communicates the theological truth that *God* was in *control* throughout even the most difficult periods of Israel’s history—the Babylonian exile—to move history toward this climactic point in the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Interestingly, Jewish apocalyptic (end-time) literature commonly divided history into set time periods to indicate God’s control and guidance of history. Such divisions also aided memorization in a primarily oral culture, and the use of the number fourteen may have even emphasized the link to David via gematria (numerology).²⁶

The Genealogies in Matthew and Luke

Many have pointed out the differences between the genealogies in Matthew and Luke,²⁷ as well as how they differ from Old Testament genealogies of Jewish history. We cannot explore the subject in depth here, but scholars have suggested several ways to explain the variations. Some have posited that Matthew traces Joseph’s genealogy while Luke follows Mary’s, perhaps reflected in Matthew’s decision to link Jesus to David through Solomon while Luke runs his lineage through Nathan.²⁸ This position, while popular, is less convincing because both genealogies seem to run through Joseph

²⁴ Matt. 1:16.

²⁵ The relative pronoun “of whom” is feminine.

²⁶ Many scholars believe that the number fourteen was important for Matthew because the numerical value of David’s name is fourteen. One arrives at this number by using the ancient practice of gematria (numerology) in which each consonant carries a numerical value. The consonant *d* (*dalet*) equals four and the consonant *w* (*vav*; our English *v*) equals six. “DaWiD” thus equals fourteen ($d[4] + w[6] + d[4] = 14$). If Matthew indeed had this kind of numerical symbolism in mind, it would further strengthen Jesus’s connection to his ancestor David.

²⁷ See Luke 3:23–38.

²⁸ Luke 3:31.

and because it would have been very unusual in antiquity to begin a genealogy with the mother.

Scholars have also commonly explained the differences by pointing to levirate marriage. Particularly in the period lacking biblical evidence between the exile and Joseph, we have difficulty identifying when a genealogy focuses on legal or biological fatherhood, since under Jewish law at that time a man could father a son under his deceased brother's name, a practice called "levirate marriage." Adoptions could further complicate the picture.

More commonly today, Matthew's genealogy is described as a dynastic document focused on the royal line while Luke's is linked more closely with a biological family tree.²⁹ Craig Keener notes, "modern scholars more frequently argue that Matthew provides the legal line of royal inheritance; but those who wish can connect this lineage with Luke's physical line by means of two adoptions."³⁰

Other factors contribute to the smaller differences. Matthew and Luke were likely depending on the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which differed in some respects from the Hebrew texts available to us, particularly in the spelling of names. Matthew also evidently skipped some generations by linking a son to a grandfather or great-grandfather. In addition, some extrabiblical Jewish sources for these genealogies that have been lost may have contained variations or corruptions. Synthesizing various available genealogies would have also been a complicated process.

All of these factors likely play a role in explaining the differences between Matthew's list of Jesus's ancestry and other available genealogies, but we should also remember that ancient genealogies were often written for specific purposes and were less concerned with scientific exactness than are modern genealogies. Matthew intended his genealogy to show Jesus's concrete historical and legal connection to *David* and beyond that to God's covenant with

²⁹See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 32–33; Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (London: T&T Clark, 1990), 315–73.

³⁰Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 75.

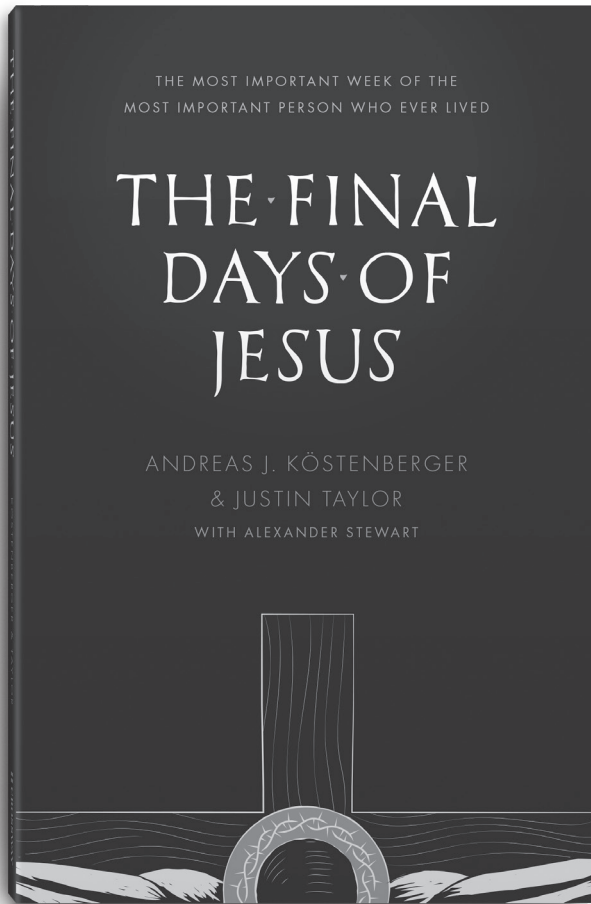
Abraham. Matthew accomplished this purpose legitimately even if his genealogy skipped, for example, Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah between Joram and Uzziah in order to keep the number to fourteen—a strategy that facilitated memorization and highlighted Jesus’s connection to David by way of gematria.³¹

The Mystery Revealed

With Matthew’s genealogy, God has at last revealed the identity of the hero of his story. We know who the long-awaited deliverer is. In this way, Matthew strikes a note of fulfillment, climax, and consummation. The messianic hope has found its fulfillment in Jesus. The Messiah has come! This chapter has covered a lot of ground by tracing the development of God’s story through the Old Testament narratives. In the epilogue we will return to the relationship between God’s story and the individual stories of our lives. Jesus’s birth, life, death, and resurrection marked the turning point of God’s story, but the story is not yet over. Jesus has not yet returned, and his followers are even now called to join him in his mission. Jesus’s birth is not just a past event with no significance; Jesus changed the course of history and even now, two thousand years later, can change the course of your life. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. The following chapters will slow down and focus much more closely on the events surrounding Jesus’s birth. Matthew’s narrative begins by answering the question, “How did the Messiah’s birth come about?”

³¹ See the discussion above. Compare Matt. 1:8–9 with 1 Chron. 3:10–12; Uzziah is likely an alternative name for Azariah.

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THEOLOGY