

6. Matthew Chapter 1 – Hidden Meanings and Nuances for a Jewish Audience

1. The Significance of the Virgin Birth in Ancient Thought

The concept of a virgin birth was not unique to Christianity; many ancient cultures had stories of miraculous births associated with important figures. For example:

- Egyptian mythology includes the story of Horus, who was conceived through divine means.
- Greco-Roman traditions feature divine births, such as the birth of Hercules from Zeus and a mortal woman.
- In Jewish thought, extraordinary births often signified that God was at work, such as the miraculous births of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel.

For Matthew’s Jewish audience, the reference to the virgin birth would have been especially powerful. It was not just a miraculous event but a theological statement: Jesus was conceived through divine intervention, fulfilling a divine plan.

2. Isaiah’s Prophecy and Its Interpretation

Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14: “*Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.*”

- In its original Hebrew context, the word *almah* (translated as “virgin”) simply meant a young woman of marriageable age.
- In the Greek Septuagint translation of the bible (2nd – 3rd century), the word “*almah*” was translated as *parthenos*, which explicitly means virgin.
- Matthew deliberately connects this prophecy to Jesus, reinforcing the belief that his birth was part of God’s unfolding plan for Israel.

By invoking Isaiah, Matthew is emphasizing Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. He presents Jesus not as a break from Jewish tradition, but as its culmination.

3. Joseph the Dreamer: A Parallel to the Patriarch Joseph

Matthew’s account of Joseph receiving divine messages through dreams recalls another famous Joseph in Jewish history—the patriarch Joseph in Genesis.

- Joseph, son of Jacob, was known for his prophetic dreams and his role in preserving his family.
- Like his namesake, Joseph in Matthew’s Gospel receives divine revelations through dreams.
- Both Josephs play crucial roles in God’s plan for salvation: the first Joseph ensures the survival of Israel, while the second ensures the protection and legitimacy of Jesus.

For a Jewish audience, this parallel would have been striking. It suggests that just as God worked through the patriarch Joseph, He was now working through Jesus’ earthly father.

4. The Role of Dreams in Ancient Judaism

In ancient Jewish and Near Eastern culture, dreams were considered a primary way in which God communicated with people.

- Throughout the Old Testament, figures like Jacob (Genesis 28:12), Pharaoh (Genesis 41), and Daniel (Daniel 2) receive divine messages through dreams.
- Joseph's dream about taking Mary as his wife would have been understood as a direct message from God, carrying significant authority.

For Matthew's Jewish audience, this reinforces the idea that Jesus' birth was not an ordinary event—it was divinely orchestrated and confirmed through prophetic means.

5. The Name “Jesus” and Its Meaning

When the angel tells Joseph to name the child Jesus, Matthew explicitly states the reason: “*because he will save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21).

- The name Jesus (Yeshua in Hebrew) means “Yahweh saves.”
- This ties into the Old Testament tradition of God as the one who rescues His people.
- Names carried deep theological significance in Jewish thought. For example, Joshua (*Yehoshua*) led the Israelites into the Promised Land—now, Jesus (another form of Yehoshua) would lead people into spiritual salvation.

Matthew's audience would have recognized the powerful implications of this name and its connection to Jewish history.

6. Jesus as the Fulfillment of Prophecy

Matthew repeatedly emphasizes that Jesus' birth fulfills Old Testament prophecy. This is a deliberate strategy to convince Jewish readers that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

- The reference to Isaiah 7:14 (the virgin birth prophecy) establishes Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises.
- Later, Matthew will continue using Old Testament references to show Jesus as the new Moses (leading a new exodus), the son of David (the rightful king), and the suffering servant (Isaiah 53).

For a Jewish audience, this would have reinforced the legitimacy of Jesus as the culmination of Jewish expectation.

7. The Meaning of Emmanuel: “God With Us”

Matthew's use of *Emmanuel* (God with us) is not just a title—it is a theological statement.

- Throughout the Old Testament, God's presence with His people was central to Jewish faith (e.g., the tabernacle, the Temple, and divine appearances to the prophets).
- By calling Jesus “Emmanuel,” Matthew is asserting that in Jesus, God is now dwelling among His people in a new and personal way.

This would have resonated deeply with Jewish readers who longed for God's presence and salvation.

Final Thoughts

Matthew's Gospel is rich with Jewish themes and references designed to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and expectation. His audience would have understood:

- The virgin birth as a divine sign.
- The connection to Isaiah's prophecy as proof of fulfillment.
- The parallel between Joseph in Genesis and Joseph in Matthew as divine continuity.
- The role of dreams as valid divine communication.
- The significance of Jesus' name as a symbol of salvation.
- The title *Emmanuel* as a declaration of God's direct presence.

By embedding these references into his narrative, Matthew provides a theological bridge between Judaism and the message of Jesus, affirming that Jesus is not a break from Jewish tradition, but its ultimate fulfillment.