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Session 1

THE GOSPELS FOR ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

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CONTENTS

Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew

Introduction to the Notes	2
Introduction to <i>Matthew</i>	2
How Did <i>Matthew</i> Come to Be?	3
Authorship and Dating	8
Community of <i>Matthew</i>	8
Attitudes to the Law in <i>Matthew</i>	9
The Beginning of <i>Matthew</i>	10
General Comments about Matthew's Introduction to Jesus	13

Particular Lectionary Passages for Advent and Christmas

Advent 1 - Matt 24:36-44 – Watchfulness	15
For the Preacher	18
Advent 2 – Matt 3:1-12 – John the Baptist	18
For the Preacher	24
Advent 3 – Matt 11:2-11 – Messengers from John	25
For the Preacher	26
Advent 4 – Matt 1:18-25 – Announcement to Joseph	26
For the Preacher	28
Christmas Day 1 – Luke 2:(1-7,) 8-20 – Luke's Account	28
For the Preacher	30
Christmas Day 2 – John 1:1-14 – John's Account - the Word	30
For the Preacher	35

Introduction to the Notes.

On Saturday 2nd November, 2019 and twice in 2020 we shall be holding seminars based on the *Gospel of Matthew*, where we will be considering some general information about this Gospel, as well as looking at a few passages which are included in the lectionary readings.

The purpose of these notes is to provide some background information on *Matthew*, as well as complementing the passages considered in the seminars, plus other passages in the lectionary not covered in the seminars. Particularly it is hoped that they may be of assistance to those who need to prepare sermons from the lectionary readings, however I also hope that they may be useful to anyone who is simply interested in studying a little more about this Gospel.

This set of notes applies to the season of Advent and Christmas, and will be covering passages in the lectionary in this period, including passages from other Gospels.

Introduction to *Matthew*

Matthew is one of four gospels in our Bibles. These gospels seem to be written to tell at least some of the story of Jesus, particularly some of his teachings, his deeds, including his miracles and healings, and particularly his arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection. The gospels are not just interested in biography, they each want to say important things about who Jesus is.

The very last verse of the *Gospel of John* states that the world is not big enough to contain all that could be written about Jesus. So apparently each gospel, including *Matthew*, does not try to say everything there is to say about Jesus.

When we compare the four Gospels in our Bibles we see that they each provide a different emphasis, a different perspective. They are written basically in narrative form, and not, say, as a chapter out of a theological text book. The critical thing, however, is that even though they are in narrative form, they make strong theological statements about who Jesus is.

So *Matthew* is one of a number of accounts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ministry. Over these seminars we will be focussing on what is Matthew's particular spin on things. As we do this we will make some comparisons with other Gospels to determine more clearly similarities and differences.

Matthew is an interesting Gospel in its own right. It is the only Gospel that has this magnificent section of Jesus' teaching which we call the Sermon on the Mount. Three chapters' worth! We will look at this section in a bit more detail later on.

Matthew contains other great sections of teaching, more so than Mark's Gospel. It has a longer resurrection account than *Mark* does. *Matthew* treats the disciples a little more favourably than *Mark*.

It could be said that it is the most Jewish of the gospels in our Bibles, and I'll explain more about what I mean by that.

While it doesn't have the pictures of Jesus as the light of the world, the good shepherd and so on, that the *Gospel of John* has, it still has a great deal to say about who Jesus is. Each of the Gospels presents different perspectives on Jesus compared to the other Gospels.

Sometimes *Matthew* may make us squirm a little. Of the four Gospels, *Matthew* comes down the hardest on the scribes and Pharisees especially in ch. 23. He says they are like "whitewashed tombs" (23:27). Would Jesus have used these words or this is *Matthew's* perspective?

It certainly seems, with careful reading, that *Matthew* is not anti-semitic as we would use the term today. Indeed there are many strongly pro-Jewish themes in this Gospel. Rather *Matthew's* context appears to be, as Lee explains: "a small sectarian community, recently separated from the synagogue, living in fear of persecution, struggling to forge identity from a ruptured past, trying to hold to its Jewishness, while affirming its Christian commitment and openness to Gentiles."¹

Matthew may reflect some antagonism between *Matthew's* community with the local synagogue communities (perhaps say in the 60s or 70s CE).

Another question which arises when we read *Matthew* is: Is *Matthew's* description of the place of the Law contrary to Paul's position? Do we hear about grace in *Matthew* or an impossible requirement of righteousness and adherence to the Law?

Matthew seems to have more teaching about end-times (we call this "eschatological") material. We'll also explore that a little further.

How Did *Matthew* Come to Be?

How did the *Gospel of Matthew* come to be? This is not a simple question and I'll need to spend only a few minutes to try to offer an answer to this. It turns out this will help us in the way we read *Matthew* so it is worthwhile pursuing. Yet we'd have to spend much more time if we wanted to pursue this question more thoroughly.

The first 3 Gospels are very similar to each other, while *John* is quite different. Because *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke* are so similar, they are often put side by side for comparison. That is why they are called "the Synoptic Gospels" because "synoptic" literally means "looking at together".

¹ Dorothy A. Lee, "Matthew's Gospel and Judaism," *Jewish-Christian Relations* www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=760 accessed 30/5/11.

Source Theories

A great deal of the synoptic material is a variation of a common theme shared by the others, and yet each has a distinctive emphasis, so it is too simplistic to say that they are each different editions of the same information.

Some have suggested that *Matthew* was written first, *Mark* made a summary of Matthew's work, and eventually *Luke* was produced as a result of consulting Matthew's and Mark's account. This theory, however, doesn't quite fit the evidence. Why, for example, would Mark leave out the Sermon on the Mount or the birth account if Mark was constantly referring to *Matthew* when he wrote his account?

Let's look at an example of putting passages from the first three Gospels side by side:

Matt 19: 13 – 14 (NRSV)	Mark 10: 13 - 14 (NRSV)	Luke 18: 15 – 16 (NRSV)
Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; ¹⁴ but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."	People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."	People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

Most would agree that all three Gospels are describing the same event, but there are some minor differences. Notice the similarities especially in what Jesus' said. Also notice that *Matthew* has "kingdom of heaven" not "kingdom of God" at the end. Here we are seeing, not just the almost identical words of Jesus, but also the similar description of the events

As it turns out, much of what is in *Mark* is in *Matthew* and *Luke*. There is only a little bit in *Mark* that is not in either *Matthew* or *Luke*. Of the 661 verses in *Mark*, 601 are in both *Matthew* and *Luke*. Only four stories in *Mark* are missing from both *Matthew* and *Luke*.

Matthew and *Luke* also share a lot of material that is not in *Mark* at all.

Mark is the shortest gospel and begins with Jesus' ministry as an adult while the other two begin with his birth and also share stories which *Mark* doesn't have. All

three gospels conclude with his crucifixion and resurrection, although the resurrection accounts are different.

In the material common to all three, they say the same things about Jesus. They even use the same sentences in the same order and with pretty much the same words as we saw in the example above. What might we conclude about this? Why are these Synoptic Gospels so much alike? What is the relationship between them? These questions earn the name: "The Synoptic Problem".

There are occasions when Matthew and Luke appear to correct or smooth over Mark's less than flattering description of Jesus. For example Mark 6:5 says that Jesus was not able to perform miracles in his home town. Luke appears to omit this note (Luke 4:24-25) while Matthew softens it (13:58):

And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

At times it appears that Matthew seeks to correct Mark. Look at this example from Mark 1:2-3 (NRSV):

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,' "*

But "sending the messenger ahead of you" doesn't appear in Isaiah, and so Matthew just includes the Isaiah quote (Matt 3:3 NRSV):

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,
"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.' "

In Mark 5:31 Jesus is criticised by the disciples for asking who touched him.

and his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'"

Matthew doesn't include this in his telling of the story (9:20-21) while in Luke 8:45-46 we have a gentler version:

Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me."

The most common theory to explain the evidence is called the "two-document" or "two-source" hypothesis. This proposal suggests that Matthew and Luke had access to two main sources for their information. The first source is the *Gospel of Mark* (or

something very much like it). The second main source for Matthew and Luke is labelled “Q”. We don’t have access to this alleged source. Matthew, according to this theory, would have had access to other material not found in Luke. This is labelled “M”. Luke also would have other sources not included in *Matthew*, which has been given the name “L”.



We have to remember this is a simplified theory trying to explain the development of these gospels. We have no way of knowing for sure whether this is the correct theory, but theories like this do try to explain how each gospel writer tried to assemble all the material and information available to them as they put together their own unique picture of Jesus, and how they collected the teachings of Jesus’ disciples.

Ideas and Theology in Source Usage

If we accept that each Gospel writer collected these materials and arranged them sometimes differently in their own gospel accounts, then this explains how each of the Synoptics demonstrates differences to the others. Each present a picture of Jesus from a different perspective. Powell, for example, offers the following picture of Jesus from *Matthew*:²

“The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the one who abides with his people always until the end of time. Jesus founds the church: in which sins are forgiven, prayers are answered, and the power of death is overcome (Matt. 16:18-19; 18:18-20).”

Matthew includes most of Mark’s material. The following illustrates some of the material special to *Matthew* which doesn’t occur in the other Gospels:³

Infancy Narrative (1:1-2:23)

- Magi from the east
- Herod tries to kill the infant Jesus
- The flight of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to Egypt
- The family was unable to settle in hometown of Bethlehem, so they resettle in Nazareth

Matthew uses formula quotations throughout the Gospel (for example, virgin birth fulfils Isa 7:14 in Matt 1:22-23; see also 2:5-6, 17-18 and so on).

² Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 82.

³ Frederick J. Murphy, *An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 140-41.

It is in *Matthew* that John resists baptizing Jesus (3:14-15). There is also (special to *Matthew*):

Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7) shows a special interest in the Jewish Law (Torah), in acts of piety, and in ethics
Jesus' teaching insisting on the importance of the Torah or the Law (5:17-20)
Six antitheses radicalizing or changing the Torah (5:27-48)
Teaching on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (6:1-8, 16-18)
Pearls before swine (7:6)

The inclusion of eschatological⁴ material in the Discourse on the Disciples' Mission (10:17-25).

The payment of the Temple tax (17:24-27).

Parables special to *Matthew*:

- Weeds and Its interpretation (13:24-30, 36-43)
- Hidden Treasure and Pearl (13:44-46)
- Net (13:47-50)
- New and Old Treasure (13:52)
- Unmerciful Servant (18:23-35)
- Labourers in the Vineyard (20:1-16)
- Two Sons (21:28-32)
- Ten Bridesmaids (25:1-13)

Other passages special to *Matthew*:

Last judgment scene (25:31-46)

Death of Judas (27:3-10)

Cry of the crowd, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' (27:25)

Guard at the tomb (27:62-66)

Bribing of the soldiers and rumour that Jesus' body was stolen (28:11-15)

The risen Jesus commissions the eleven disciples to teach the whole world (28:16-20)

Like *Mark*, *Matthew* presents Jesus as a powerful miracle-worker and who also undergoes suffering and death. Unlike *Mark*, *Matthew* has a fuller record of the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

Matthew presents Jesus' teaching with insertions of 5 long discourses into *Mark's* account:

chs 5-7	- the Sermon on the Mount
10:1-42	- commissioning and discussion about the disciples and mission
13:1-52	- parables about the Kingdom of heaven - the parable of the Sower, other parables, Jesus use of parables
18:1-35	- instructions about relationships within the Christian community - greatness, temptation, lost sheep, correcting a brother and

⁴ That is to do with last days, judgment etc.

reconciliation, unforgiving servant
24:3-25:46 - eschatology – parables and instructions about judgment

The first of these, the Sermon on the Mount, is the first of Jesus' public acts (unlike in *Luke*).

Matthew also includes an infancy narrative (2 chapters). Unlike *Mark*, *Matthew* presents a picture of God's involvement in the life of Jesus from the time of his conception through the Holy Spirit (1:18). *Mark* only really begins with Jesus' work after his baptism.

Authorship and Dating

Scholars are much divided over who put together the *Gospel of Matthew*. The Gospel itself doesn't tell us. We have the title "The Gospel of Matthew" but we are not sure when this title was added and if it is correct. While some have suggested that it was indeed Matthew the tax-collector, one of Jesus' 12 disciples (9:9; 10:3), the question is then raised why so much reliance is given to Mark's Gospel (and Q?) than to first-hand experience and recollections of a disciple of Jesus. Is it anonymous because the author was well-known and active within the community?

Thus it is usually proposed that *Matthew* was gathered at a later time than when *Mark* was written. There are possible references to the sacking of Jerusalem which occurred in 70 CE e.g. 22:7 destroying "those murderers" and burning "their city" suggesting to many scholars that it was written after then.

There is some debate about whether the author was Jewish or Gentile. The entire Gospel certainly reflects a strongly Jewish background. Those who argue against Matthew being Jewish cite reasons such as some apparent confusion about the teaching of the Sadducees and the author's apparent hostility to Jewish leaders and even possibly against Jewish people as a whole.⁵

The author does seem to be well educated and fluent in Greek. He⁶ also understood the Old Testament well.

In terms of dating, this is uncertain as it is with all gospels. As suggested above most date it after the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE.

Community of Matthew

The audience is probably a mixture of converted Jews and Gentiles, perhaps Jewish believers in the majority, possibly living somewhere in Syria maybe 70-90CE. The incoming of the Gentiles into the believing communities may be reflected in *Matthew's* inclusion of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard where grace was

⁵ Murphy, *An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels*, 139.

⁶ There is no hard and fast evidence that the author was male, but would be more likely to be so.

also shown to those who commenced work later than others (20:1-16), indicating the Gentiles being incorporated later.

Antioch has been suggested as the location of Matthew's church community. We can see the growth of the church in Antioch in Syria in the *Book of Acts*, including the conversion of Gentiles earlier on at the time of Paul.

Matthew perhaps describes an urbanised community such as Antioch. A later bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, in his letters (written 110-115 CE) appears to be relying on parts of *Matthew*.

There is an interesting and unexpected mention in Matthew (4:24) that Jesus' fame spread through *all of Syria*.

There appear to be tensions between Jews and Christians in the community. Does it reflect a time and place when believers have been expelled from the synagogue? (Note the use of the term "*their synagogues*" in 10:17 and 23:34).

The author is still strongly attached to Judaism. He upholds keeping all the Law (5:17-20). He acknowledges that the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat (23:2) and so their teaching should be honoured. Questions of order, discipline and authority appear to have arisen in the community which Matthew is seeking to address. Differently to Mark, Matthew is more concerned with Jesus' teachings than his actions.

Attitudes to the Law in Matthew

"... the problem posed for Matthew's community was not so much the validity or value of the Torah [the Law] as such, but the Torah as interpreted in the light of Jesus' own teachings."⁷

Jesus says in 5:17 (NRSV):

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

stressing the importance of the Law. The following verses emphasise the point:

¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

How do we relate this to 5:31-32, 33-37, 38-41 where parts of the law seem to be overthrown?

The Law had already been much interpreted but the question is by what authority could the law be interpreted?

⁷ Donald Senior, *What Are They Saying about Matthew?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 47.

Verse 5:20 speaks of the new righteousness but for Matthew the law is “filtered through the teaching authority of the risen Christ.”⁸

It has often been then argued that Matthew’s primary goal was to encourage the church communities to emphasize the importance of doing God’s will. This was the intent of the Law. Those who fail to do God’s will, including simply using words instead of action, are liable to judgment (21:18-19, 33-46). The Law is to be interpreted through Jesus’ reading of the Law, and the important priorities that it conveys.⁹

The Law is not dissolved, however Christ has provided the Law with eschatological fulfilment, “a prophetic fullness which rescinds the letter of the law even as it completes its meaning. Jesus is the Messiah who brings consummation, not the revolutionary who brings desolation.”¹⁰

It has been suggested that Matthew less depicts Jesus’ stance toward the law, but instead how the Law stands in relation to Jesus, who brings it to fulfilment and so now it is to Jesus to whom attention is drawn.¹¹

Senior concludes: “While many points are still debated, there are important points of convergence: (1) The law issue is not simply a matter of Matthew’s struggle against outside opponents (for example, the synagogue) but goes to the heart of his message to his church. (2) The law issue is closely linked to Christology: Jesus’ authority as the risen Christ underwrites the Church’s interpretation of law. (3) Apparent contradictions among some of Matthew’s law texts might best be explained by taking into account different layers of tradition within the Gospel.”¹²

The Beginning of *Matthew*

When we come to study biblical texts it is often the case that the beginnings provide very important clues to how we read the whole book. *Matthew* is no different. Matthew 1-2 has often been called Matthew’s infancy narrative; unlike *Luke* however, there is little said in *Matthew* about Jesus’ infancy. Jesus’ actual birth is only briefly mentioned (see 1:25 and 2:1). The bulk of the first two chapters deals with other characters. This either suggests that Matthew doesn’t know the other stories about Jesus’ birth and early childhood, or secondly, in this account he is not so much interested in telling his listeners that detail as he is interested in telling them other things about the coming of Jesus into the world.

Boxall prefers to call the section “The narrative of Origins”.¹³

⁸ Donald Senior, *What Are They Saying about Matthew?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 51.

⁹ Senior, *What Are They Saying about Matthew?* 53.

¹⁰ Cited in Senior, *What Are They Saying about Matthew?* 54-55.

¹¹ Senior, *What are they Saying about Matthew?*, 52.

¹² Senior, *What Are They Saying about Matthew?*, 55.

¹³ Ian Boxall, *Discovering Matthew: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (London: SPCK, 2014), 79.

The Genealogy (Matt 1:1-17)

While Matthew 1:1-17 doesn't seem to appear in our lectionary, it is important for us to have a look at this opening passage, even if it is only briefly. Jesus' ancestry might not be riveting reading, but it is useful to consider why Matthew had chosen to start the Gospel in this way (unlike the other Gospels) and to reflect why Matthew has shaped it like this.

Mark begins his account with a statement that it is good news about Jesus, who is the Christ (or Messiah) and who is the Son of God. If Matthew has seen Mark's Gospel, why did he choose not to start in the same way as Mark? Instead Matthew begins:

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

Or *"A book of the genesis of Jesus Christ ..."*. Similarly in v. 18 it begins *"The genesis of Jesus Christ was like this ..."*

And so there is a nod from Matthew's opening towards the beginning of our Bibles! Matthew will continue his account with many references to the Old Testament.

Unlike Mark, Matthew doesn't immediately identify Jesus as Son **of God** but as the **son of David**, in fulfilment of prophecies about Davidic kings; and also the **son of Abraham** i.e. Jesus is founded firmly in Judaism, with the Jewish people. He is also connected with the covenant environment of the Old Testament and therefore the fulfilment of God's promises to the people. Matthew immediately connects Jesus with his Jewish heritage and promises.

Jensen writes: "Genealogies were one of the chief ways that oral people understood issues of identity. We can be sure that people read and heard this first chapter of Matthew with excited anticipation."¹⁴

There are three sets of 14 generations listed. What's so special about 14 (especially if we consider that it really must have been more than 14 generations in each period)? It could be read as 6 sets of 7 generations. If 7 is the number of climax or completion then the 7th "set" is the climax in Jesus. We do know that 7 is a special biblical number, often indicating completeness, wholeness or perfection.¹⁵

Note the mention not just of significant men in Jesus' ancestry but also significantly, and unusually, gentile women (or those having gentile connections) and/or seemingly risqué women. A deeper reading would suggest that men were usually the culpable ones in connection with these women.

There was Tamar who deceived her father-in-law Judah. He thought she was a prostitute and slept with her (Gen 38:11-18). (Tamar was only trying to continue the blood-line. Then Rahab is mentioned. She helped Joshua's spies when they came to Jericho. She was actually a gentile prostitute (Josh 2:1-24). Also there was Ruth who

¹⁴ Richard Jensen, *Preaching Matthew's Gospel*, 32.

¹⁵ W

was a gentile Moabite woman and was faithful in accompanying her mother-in-law Naomi in returning to her land. And finally Bathsheba, married to a Hittite man, whom David immorally seduced while she was married to Uriah.

These women were divinely vindicated and form part of a divinely legitimized messianic line.¹⁶ Carter says: “All five situations are subversive ‘over-against’ prevailing norms, marginal to the patriarchal line and structures The margins are not God-forsaken or cursed, but crucial to God’s purposes.”¹⁷

The female elements of the genealogy lead into Mary’s unusual motherhood of Jesus. Although Mary’s pregnancy is certainly not normal, it is in keeping with OT remarkable conceptions such as of Sarah (with Isaac), Rebecca (with Jacob and Esau – Gen 25), Rachel (with Joseph – Gen 30:22), Manoah’s wife (with Samson), or Hannah (with Samuel). Only here in *Matthew* is the Holy Spirit specifically named in the conception.

The inclusion of Gentiles in the genealogy raises the introduction of the gentile inclusion into Christ’s reign. (See also Matt 28:19-20 where the disciples are sent to *all the nations*).

Perhaps also there is the statement through this genealogy that God uses people from all sorts of backgrounds to fulfil the divine purposes along with the ups and downs of life. Matthew will soon relate the story of the gentile astrologers (or “magi”) coming to visit the infant Jesus.

Verse 1:18 it could either read: “now the **birth** of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way ...” or “now the **origin** of Jesus the Messiah took place ...”

That is, the reader is then asked to think about relationships to mother, father, ancestors, to one’s nation. Already Matthew has indicated this latter translation with the inclusion of the genealogy.

As we have noted some of the characters in Jesus’ genealogy had chequered backgrounds. Who are we to throw too many stones? It does illustrate the fact that Jesus didn’t control his ancestry, but as Harrington says, “God ‘can write straight on crooked lines’”.¹⁸

The presence of the women in the genealogy is certainly unusual and a reflection of their inclusion in the history of Israel. They, like their male counterparts, reflect a mixture of behaviour and including that of the males around them wasn’t always admirable, although at times they reflect heroic deeds. Also the inclusion of the women sometimes reflects the inclusion of gentile blood in Jesus’ ancestry.

So Jesus is born into a world with a bit of a wobbly background, the highs and lows of Abraham’s and David’s lives, plus the time that his ancestors spent in exile. Jesus is very much born into the predominantly (but by no means exclusively) Jewish line,

¹⁶ Peter-Ben Smit, “Something about Mary? Remarks about the Five Women in the Matthean Genealogy,” *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 191-207.

¹⁷ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, 60.

¹⁸ Wilfred Harrington, *Reading Matthew for the First Time* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014), 34.

but as such is a true child of Abraham. With the mention of David he is of the royal and therefore messianic line.

Thus the genealogy introduces for us in this particular Gospel, the issues of Judaism, covenant agreements, the Reign of God, and at the same time the everydayness of who Jesus is.

We shall deal with Matt 1:18-25 further below under a separate section “Advent 4”.

General Comments about Matthew’s Introduction to Jesus

Witherington provides a summary of the first 2 chapters of *Matthew*.

“The king, the long-awaited and long-foreseen ruler, Immanuel, the one the wise ... seek, has come into the family of Mary and Joseph.”¹⁹

Throughout these two chapters there are many Old Testament references. Harrington writes: “He introduced them because they fit his theology of the oneness of God’s plan and because they help to bring out, for his Christian readers, who and what Jesus is. Thus, the five infancy narrative citations tell us that the virginally conceived Jesus is God-with-us; that, as son of David, he was born in Bethlehem; that, in being called out of Egypt, he re-enacted the exodus of his people; that he suffered the Exile of his people, and that as the Nazorean, he began his saving work.”²⁰

(The quote about the Nazorean is possibly a playing around with the name reflecting the “branch” (*neser*) of the Isaiah prophecy (Isa 11:1) and the term *nazir* (= “one consecrated to God”).)

“Matthew presents a stark contrast between two different dynasties. Two different ways of kingship exist: the Herodian, steeped in blood and violence; and the Davidic, grounded in the covenant faithfulness of God. The Herodian dynasty continues with Herod’s sons, under whom Rome divided up Palestine into four ‘governorships.’ ... The author of Matthew seems to draw an ironic picture of contrast between two father/son pairs: Herod and Archelaus, and God and Jesus.”²¹

“In many ways this Matthean story is about inheritance and lineage. The first-century world was one in which lineage conveyed the hope of a future for a family. The Davidic lineage, presented in Matthew 1, is spared; the Herodian lineage is represented in the next generation of Archelaus, and the lineage of the families of Bethlehem is cut off by the death of the sons.”²²

“For Matthew’s persecuted church, a comforting reminder of God’s protection was just the sort of thing they hoped for. That good news will still preach. You also have

¹⁹ Witherington, *Matthew*, 73.

²⁰ Harrington, *Reading Matthew*, 39.

²¹ Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 15.

²² Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 15.

the opportunity of calling modern-day disciples to speak out against such social injustice when it raises its head in our time, an all too frequent occurrence.”²³

Patrick J. Willson:

Matthew tells us that it is when Herod sits on the throne that the child is born who will be called Emmanuel, God-with-us. Not into any fairy-tale land of ‘once on a time in a land far away,’ but into this world of tears and terrorism and tyrants and tragedy, a child is born, and an angel whispers, ‘Emmanuel, God-with-us.’²⁴

A children’s book entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom* is based on Edward Hicks’s famous painting by the same name. The inspiration comes in part from the Isaiah passage that envisions a day when lions eat straw, wolves play with sheep, and children are safe even among beasts (Isa 11:1-9). The preacher might briefly retell the story:

In the book it seems that the lion, wolf, and leopard manage to get out of Hicks’s painting in the museum and find their way into Brooklyn’s Botanical Garden. Immediately, the police and fire departments are summoned. Guns are pulled, fire hoses are aimed. Something has to be done about these ferocious beasts. Only these three creatures are not ferocious at all but cowering with fear in a world of guns and violence. Then some children intervene (‘and a child shall lead them’). They recognize the animals as belonging to Hicks’s painting. In the end the animals are returned to the piece hanging on the wall. And the lion says, ‘This is more like it. This feels like home.’ Then he adds, ‘We had hoped by now that the world would have become a peaceable kingdom.’”²⁵

Eugene Boring notes how God functions as ‘the hidden actor’ in this drama, behind the scenes (sending magi, warnings in dreams, messages from angels, and so forth). Given the popularity and familiarity of Christmas pageants, maybe the preacher could creatively play with the image of Matthew’s Christmas pageant, not with shepherds and the like (as found in Luke’s version), but this gospel’s account of two very different kings, legitimate (the Christ) and illegitimate (Herod). Thomas Long tells about the annual nativity display at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, with all of the usual scenery except for one unique feature: the manger scene is set among ruined Roman columns.”²⁶

Frank Craddock in his sermon ‘The Hard Side of Epiphany’ writes of the birth accounts in *Matthew* and *Luke*:

“All of our decorations are Luke. They’re all from Luke. Madonnas that we’ve picked up here and there in travel – of wood, one is made of corn, of brass, one made of glass. They’re wrapped in tissue and put back in a box like you’d put away crystal or china because they’re fragile. Our nativity scene is really cheap, but the kids made it years ago; and we put it out, and it gets prettier every year. But it’s from Luke ...

²³ Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 17.

²⁴ Cited in Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 18.

²⁵ Ewa Zadrzynska, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Boca Raton, Fla.” M. M. Art Books, 1994). Cited in Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 19.

²⁶ Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 21.

Luke is over now, and we go to Matthew. Exit the women; in come the men. Exit the stable; now it's a king's palace. Exit the shepherds; in the wise men from the east. Exit the angels, and in comes Herod. We have a little music box. It plays carols – 'Silent Night, Holy Night' and 'O Little Town of Bethlehem.' Just open the lid, and it starts playing. It's on the coffee table. It's Lukan. Music is from Luke. Put the lid down on that, because exit Mary; enter Rachel. Exit lullaby; enter the scream. 'I heard a voice in Ramah. It was Rachel weeping for her children.'"²⁷

So this is how we are introduced to Matthew!

Advent 1 - Matt 24:36-44 – Watchfulness and the Return of Christ

Readers of the Bible today are probably less familiar with a style of language that was more common in Jesus' day. This style is called "apocalyptic" and is picture language, often used to describe end-time events. We know of this type of writing from parts of the Old Testament, especially *Daniel* and *Zechariah*, but also from other ancient Jewish writings that were circulating at the time of Jesus.

Apocalyptic language was used to encourage believers to endure through suffering, and to keep hope that God would ultimately save the people from distress. There is a constant call to faithfulness, especially in times of distress or temptation.

The passage, Matt 24:36-44, is embedded in a wider passage of apocalyptic material in Matthew, i.e. Matt 24:1-25:46. Several parables are told by Jesus to illustrate the general nature of end-times life. It has been observed that in the first parable (vv. 37–41) the return of Christ is unexpected, while in the second (vv. 45–51) his return is earlier than expected, and in the third (25:1–13) it is later than expected. And so believers are constantly called to be in a state of readiness.

In this passage Jesus is using this apocalyptic picture language to describe his return (here called *parousia*). In Advent we consider the coming of Jesus, past, present and future. In this passage our eyes are looking forward to Christ's future return.

The picture language, as apocalyptic style, is not to be taken literally, rather it uses *images* to portray the nature of these events. Here we read that the time of Christ's return is unknown (see v. 36) and so people may not be prepared (vv. 37-41). Jesus is urging his followers always to be ready (vv. 42-44).

While many have sought to interpret apocalyptic language so that they can calculate *when* Christ will return, so far their predictions have been incorrect! This is because apocalyptic language cannot be interpreted like this to make calculations, rather this style of language says other things about end times. Again the pictures are not to be taken literally, but parabolically or metaphorically.

Just as the coming of a burglar takes one by surprise, so will it be like that with Jesus' return. We are still called to be prepared (metaphorically "awake").

²⁷ Fred B. Craddock, "The Hard Side of Epiphany," *Wineskins* 2 (1994): 13, cited in Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 21-22.

How should we be prepared? The passage itself doesn't make that clear; we need to read in other places for an answer to that question. Matt 25:31-46 will reveal more about judgment and what people have been found to be doing, or not doing. Such things include the welcoming and aiding the poor, hungry and sick.

The disciples' original request for a "sign" for the end-times is therefore refused by Jesus. He simply says "be ready".

The passage says that no-one knows when these events will take place, not even Christ himself, only God knows (v. 36). Jesus uses the analogy of the coming of the flood (Gen 7:6-24) to describe how people were living a normal life when people were caught by surprise. Only those who had made advance preparation were saved. They were the ones who had been living in obedience to God. (See also the parables of 25:1-30). "The description of normal life in v. 38 underlines the lack of any prior warning: things were carrying on just as they had always done (as the "scoffers" observe in 2 Peter 3:4). But the time of normal banality is potentially also the time of danger."²⁸

Verses 40 and 41 have been used as part of a development of "rapture" theology and we need to digress for a moment as we explore this. France writes:²⁹

The sense of everyday banality continues. What could be more normal and unthreatening than working on the farm or grinding grain? Yet in those routine situations there will be a sudden crisis which will result in one "taken" while the other is left behind. But where are the unlucky (or lucky?) ones "taken" and for what purpose? The verb is *paralambanō* rather than a simple *lambanō*, and if the compound is more than just a stylistic variation it might be understood to mean "take to oneself" (as in 1:20; 17:1; 18:16; 20:17). If the passive verbs are understood as "divine passives" that would mean that God has taken selected people to himself, leaving the rest to continue their life on earth. Some have therefore suggested that this passage speaks of a "rapture" of the faithful to heaven before judgment falls on the earth. This is not the place to investigate the complex dispensational scheme which underlies this nineteenth-century theory, but it should be noted that in so far as this passage forms a basis for that theology it rests on an uncertain foundation. We are not told where or why they are "taken", and the similar sayings in vv. 17–18 about people caught out in the course of daily life by the Roman advance presupposed a situation of threat rather than of rescue; to be "taken" in such circumstances would be a negative experience, and Matthew will use *paralambanō* in a similarly threatening context in 27:27. The verb in itself does not determine the purpose of the "taking," and it could as well be for judgment (as in Jer 6:11) as for refuge. In the light of the preceding verses, when the flood "swept away" the unprepared, that is probably the more likely sense here.

The different fates of two apparently similar people (as also the different fates of Noah and his contemporaries) raise the issue of "readiness:" what is it that will determine who is and is not "taken"? The example of Noah suggests that it is not

²⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 938–943.

²⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 938-943.

purely arbitrary, and the rest of the discourse will explore the basis of the division between the saved and the lost, which reaches its climax in the separation of good and bad in the judgment scene in 25:31–46. For the moment saved and lost live and work together (as in the parable of the weeds, 13:30), but when “that day” comes the separation will be made and will be final.

The “rapture” theology, which suggests that when Christ returns, the saved shall be “raptured” to be with Christ (some believe such that planes will fall out of the sky when pilots are raptured, and cars will come off the freeways when their drivers are taken), also relies on an interpretation (I think misinterpretation) of 1 Thess 4:13-18. The word used for “take” here in Matthew is different to the Greek word used in 1 Thessalonians. Here it means “receive”. Those who are “ready” will be “received into God’s Reign in whatever shape or form that will take.

I shall make a few brief comments about the 1 Thessalonians passage as many have sought to bring these two discussions together. The passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is also written in apocalyptic style and so the warnings I gave above about reading this genre are relevant. It is picture language, not literal language.

At the time Paul was writing this, whenever a dignitary, such as a governor, or even the Emperor, came to visit a town, the most important people would go out *first* to meet the dignitary before they entered the town. Paul is here addressing the question of what will happen to those who have *already died*, will they miss out on meeting the returning Christ? “No” says Paul. On the contrary, Paul uses this picture language of saying: “No, instead of missing out, like the important people going first to meet the visiting dignitary, when Christ returns those who have already died will be the first to meet Christ. They will not miss out! Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Thess 4:18). The way Paul uses this picture language to answer the concern about those who have already died, is not to be taken literally. There is no mention of “rapture” in this passage, nor in the Matthew passage.

More will be said in the following parables about what readiness and judgment means, however what can be said from this passage is that while Noah and his family would not know the exact time of the flood, they were ready for it. They had been warned that it would come. People undertaking everyday activities such as grinding and working in the field must also be prepared. So too Jesus’ followers must know that Christ will return, without knowing exactly when, and so must be prepared. Jesus will then elaborate on the nature of this preparedness and judgment.

Hagner summarises the passage well:

Eschatology is never presented for the sake of mere information but always and consistently as the motivation for ethical living. Again, the fact of the parousia, not the time of the parousia, is what matters. The evangelist stresses the need to be prepared for that coming reality.³⁰

³⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 716–721.

For the Preacher

Hagner writes:

Although the world will have seen and experienced much that hints at the proximity of the eschaton [the end times], and perhaps precisely because of the pervasiveness of and the consequent inurement to, such “signs,” there will be no time to prepare for the parousia [coming] of the Son of Man. In fact, since the time of this event cannot be known in advance, it will catch many by surprise, and they will consequently not be “ready.” The exhortation to the disciples and the church, however, is to maintain themselves in a state of constant readiness. That is, disciples should be acting as disciples are supposed to act. Spiritual wakefulness, as Lövestam points out, means the living of life “in communion with the Lord and in faithfulness to him” (106). They must not be embarrassed at the time of the parousia, whenever it may occur. And thus in Jesus’ eschatological discourse, at the beginning of the stream of eschatology in the NT, eschatology and ethics are brought together. The NT writers, to their credit, never allow this connection to be broken.³¹

What implications does the keeping together of eschatology [study of the end-times] and ethics [how we should live] have for our preaching and how the church and individuals should be “preparing” for Christ’s return?

Apocalyptic language was to encourage believers to endure through suffering, and to keep hope that God would ultimately save the people from distress. There is a constant call to faithfulness, especially in times of distress. Does this impact our preaching?

Advent 2 – Matt 3:1-12 – John the Baptist

Here on the Second Sunday in Advent we are introduced to John the Baptist, a character even spoken of by the Roman Jewish historian Josephus who wrote favourably of him. Josephus describes him as attracting a significant following.

The storyline in Matthew has now jumped from Jesus’ birth to years later to the introduction to his ministry. This introduction is provided by the fiery John who in preparation for the Lord, calls people to repentance.

The setting is the wilderness. This, plus the quote, recalls Isa 40:3 to indicate the recurrent prophetic theme. Wilderness is also important in the history of Israel as it relates also to the Exodus. France notes: “The hope of a new exodus then led the prophets to speak of the wilderness as a place of new beginnings (Jer 2:2–3; Hos 2:14–15; cf. Ezek 20:35–38); the blossoming of the wilderness is one of the great themes of Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 41:18–19; 43:19–21; 44:3–4, etc.). The voice in the wilderness (Isa 40:3) was the inspiration for the Qumran community (probably an Essene Jewish community) to take its place down near the Dead Sea to wait for God’s eschatological intervention (1QS 8:12–14; 9:19–20), and it was on the area of the wilderness and the Jordan valley that several of the “prophetic” or “messianic”

³¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 716–721.

figures of the first century focused their appeal. Particularly similar to John the Baptist was the ascetic prophet Bannus who some years later also gathered disciples in the wilderness, practising “frequent ablutions in cold water” (Josephus, *Life* 11–12).³²

And so the important task is given to John in the wilderness to announce the coming of the Messiah with Jesus’ baptism in the Holy Spirit. Having said this, the one expected in the Isaiah passage to which Matthew refers, was the Lord God; here in *Matthew* it is the Lord Jesus who is announced.

Matthew appears to emphasise the subordination of John the Baptist to Jesus (see also 3:14). However parallels are still drawn between John and Jesus. Both are announced with the verb “appeared” or “arrived” (*paraginetai*) (3:1; 3:13); John’s preaching anticipates that of Jesus (cf. 3:2 with 4:17; 3:10 with 7:19; 3:12 with 13:30; and the ‘offspring of vipers’ of 3:7 with 12:33-34; 23:33).³³ Therefore for Matthew, John has also an important message to deliver.

The present tense for John’s “arriving” or “appearing” emphasises John’s message as being important, as Jesus himself will also take up.

As the reading for Advent 3 will demonstrate (see below), Jesus spoke most highly of John and his ministry (11:7-19). There was also a continuum from John’s ministry to Jesus’ (21:23-32). France also lists similarities:³⁴

- 3:7 (“brood of vipers,” escaping judgment) with 23:33; cf. also 12:34
- 3:8 (repentance) with 11:20–21; 12:41;
- 3:8, 10 (producing good fruit) with 7:16–20; 12:33; 21:41, 43;
- 3:9 (children of Abraham) with 8:11–12;
- 3:10b (fruitless tree cut down and burned) exactly repeated in 7:19;
- 3:11–12 (judgment by fire) with 5:22; 13:40–42, 50; 18:8–9; 25:41;
- 3:12 (grain gathered into the granary) with 13:30.

Also compare 3:2 with 4:17, 3:7 with 12:34 and 23:33, and 3:10 with 7:19). Both are taken by the people to be prophets (11:9; 14:5; 21:11, 26, 46). They are executed as criminals (14:1–12; 26–27) and are buried by their own disciples (14:12; 27:57–61).

John’s proclamation (*kēryssō*) of repentance and the coming the Reign of Heaven is repeated by Jesus in 4:17, a verse which is the prelude to Jesus’ ministry in *Matthew*. The author will use this same word for Jesus’ proclamation (4:17, 23; 9:35; 11:1) and that of the disciples (10:7, 27) as well as for the proclamation of the Christian good news (24:14; 26:13).

Matthew is the only gospel writer at this point announcing the nearness of the kingdom. “What Jesus does in his ministry he does by the power of the Spirit; yet Jesus will not act in the manner of a triumphalist messiah, in accordance with

³² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 97–116.

³³ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 46.

³⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 97–116.

popular expectation, but in his own unique way, in obedience to the will of his Father.”³⁵

But what is meant by the Kingdom or Reign of God being “at hand”? How is the word *ēggiken* to be translated? Hagner suggests “at the point of arriving”. The perfect tense of this verb used here would suggest: “having drawn near and remaining near.”³⁶ It is available in the presence of Jesus Christ. France suggests: “‘The kingdom of heaven has arrived’ might thus be paraphrased as ‘God’s promised reign is beginning’ or ‘God is now taking control’ ... The time of God’s effective sovereignty has arrived, and now is the time for decisive action in response.”³⁷

This is an exciting message indeed!

The description of John’s strange attire is reminiscent of the prophet Elijah (Zech 13:4 and 2 Kgs 1:8), one of the great prophets of Israel. Elijah was also associated with the wilderness (1 Kgs 17:3-7; 19:3-8; 2 Kgs 2:6-12). (See also the plainer comparison with Elijah in 11:14 (cf. 17:12-13). Israel had not seen a prophet for a long period of time. His diet could be what a Nazarite would eat.³⁸ It is a picture of John living a simple basic life and not the “soft robes” referred to in Matt 11:8.

John’s baptism, with its call to righteousness, is at least to be regarded as a kind of prophetic action, wherein the message (and response to it, in this instance) is given symbolic portrayal, for the sake of both participants and observers. The symbolism of washing related to the removal of spiritual uncleanness is a natural one and is found frequently in the OT (e.g., Ps 51:7; Isa 4:4; Jer 4:14; Ezek 36:25; Zech 13:1). Despite the parallels that can be collected, John’s baptism thus preserves a high degree of originality...³⁹

France writes of ritual washings:

Ritual ablutions were familiar in Jewish religious and social life, as may be seen from the remains of *miqwā’ōt* (ritual immersion pools) found around the south side of the temple and in the vicinity of several early synagogue buildings. But *baptisma* as a ritual term is a distinctively Christian word, which is used both of John’s practice and of later Christian initiation to refer not to regular ablutions to remove ceremonial impurity but to a single act of symbolic cleansing marking the entry into a new relationship with God. There is no certain evidence for such a practice in contemporary Jewish life. A parallel has been claimed in one text from Qumran, but it is not clear that a single initiatory act is there in view. More promising is the practice of “proselyte baptism,” the ritual cleansing of a Gentile at the point of commitment to a new life as a Jew, but scholars do not agree whether this practice can be attested as early as the time of John. Whether or not the baptism of proselytes was yet a recognized practice, however, it seems most likely that John’s distinctive rite carried some such symbolism. These were people

³⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1 -13* (Word Biblical Commentary Series, vol 33a; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 42.

³⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 47.

³⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 97-116..

³⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 97–116.

³⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 46.

who were “repenting” (renouncing their former way of life) and committing themselves to a new way of life as the purified people of God. In the language of some of John’s prophetic predecessors, they were enrolling in a holy “remnant” over against the ungodly life of their contemporaries. The motivation was perhaps similar to that which led Jerusalem Jews to go down into the wilderness to join the breakaway Qumran community, but there is no sign that John expected his followers to cut themselves off from ordinary life as did the sectaries of Qumran. It seems rather that, at least after the initial “revival movement” by the Jordan, John’s converts returned to their homes to live out their repentant and renewed life (see 9:14; 14:12; 21:32).

The crucial difference between John’s practice and “proselyte baptism” is that John baptized *Jews*. There was, therefore, inherent in his baptism an implied critique of contemporary Jewish society as no longer truly constituting the holy people of God. This critique, which will become explicit in v. 9, thus prepares the way for Jesus’ subsequent encounter with the Jerusalem authorities in chs. 21–23 in which he will make it clear that there is a shift in the center of gravity of the people of God and that the time has come for the unrepentant leaders of “this generation” to give way to “a nation which produces the fruit of the kingdom of God” (21:43).

John’s baptism apparently marks in a concrete manner God’s reception of the act of repentance made by the penitent, as sin is confessed in the presence of God’s representative (it will be of no significance whether any wider public heard the confessions).

OT rituals using water are always concerned with ritual purification and not with sin and guilt. The connection with sin and guilt surfaces in calls for metaphorical self-washing (Is. 1:16–17; Je. 4:14) and where there is interest in the possibility of a metaphorical washing by God. Jewish texts of the period may take us a step closer to John’s baptism by linking literal washing with moral cleansing, but this remains uncertain.³¹

It is unlikely that Jewish proselyte baptism, which is frequently compared with John’s baptism, had emerged as a Jewish practice this early; even when it did emerge, it was self-baptism in the presence of witnesses, and not baptism by another. Though intelligible in a first-century Jewish context, John’s baptism was sufficiently distinctive to justify the nickname ‘the Baptist’.

Ancient bathing practices frequently involved effusion or effusion with partial immersion, and this fact has led to renewed support for the view that the mode of John’s baptism was effusion, but immersion remains the more likely mode.⁴⁰

And so it seems that what John was doing was quite unusual in contemporary Jewish life and indicated that they were now living in new times. Something new was happening.

⁴⁰ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 134–149.

The basis of judgment is not failure to belong to the natural children of Abraham (in Aramaic there is a play on words between “children” and “stones”), but the bearing of “good fruit” which comes with true repentance.

What is being denied is not privilege but immunity from God’s outrage at the abuse of privilege.⁴¹ If John was doing a new thing, Jesus would also introduce another new baptism.

France writes of the two baptisms:⁴²

Water is an outward sign, but the work of the Holy Spirit will be inward. Since fire occurs in both v. 10 and v. 12 (and probably also by implication in v. 7 in the imagery of the snakes escaping the fire) as a metaphor for God’s judgment, it should probably be taken in the same sense here. The coming of the Holy Spirit will burn away what is bad and so purify the repentant people of God. For a similar metaphor in the OT see Isa 4:4; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2–4.

“Baptize in the Holy Spirit” is a phrase used in the NT almost exclusively in the context of this contrast between John’s water-baptism and the salvation Jesus brings (cf. Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16). Only in 1 Cor 12:13 does similar language occur outside that specific context, and the different phrasing there, “in one Spirit baptized into one body,” does not suggest that “baptism in the Spirit” would have been recognized in NT times as a designation of something other than initial Christian baptism. Thus the contrast between water and the Holy Spirit here is not between two stages in Christian initiation, but between John’s baptism and that of Jesus. Christian baptism did of course adopt John’s use of the outward symbol of water, but the use of the outward sign in no way detracts from the true spiritual significance of baptism into the Christian community; it symbolizes (as for John it pointed forward to) that same pouring out of the Holy Spirit which is the essence of the Messiah’s saving ministry.

Old Testament prophets proclaimed the outpouring of the Spirit in the final days (Isa 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 36:26–27; 39:29; Joel 3:1–2). This would be a time of a closer walk with God. While they saw the Spirit coming from God, now John sees this coming in Jesus.

In v. 11 did John the Baptist anticipate judgment and blessing, or just judgment? Many see these words as a twofold judgment. The blessing comes through refinement. “Those who responded to his message in repentance and baptism were surely to experience the baptism of Jesus finally as blessing, and that mediated by the Spirit he was to bestow (cf. 10:20; 28:19).”⁴³

John calls for repentance ahead of coming judgment and sets the scene for Jesus’ work of judgment and salvation.

Christian baptism, anticipated in 28:18, is to be seen as a development from John’s baptism. It is not entirely clear why baptism plays no role in the Synoptic

⁴¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 134-149.

⁴² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 97–116.

⁴³ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 52.

account of Jesus' ministry (contrast Jn. 3:22; 4:1–2), but the best suggestion seems to be, though this is not worked out in any systematic way, that there is a general assumption that those who respond to Jesus' ministry have already been baptized by John. This passage views Jesus' ministry as endorsing and building on that of John, and the Synoptists have no desire to set Christian baptism in competition with that of John. (Christian baptism emerges in 28:18 precisely because of the expansion of vision at that point to include the peoples of the non-Jewish nations.)⁴⁴

John's words would have a later significance for Matthew's community:

But this straightforward account does not do justice to the full significance that Matthew and his readers saw in all of this. For them the judgment of which John spoke – and Jesus, too, in the following narrative – lay in the future (though perhaps already anticipated in the destruction of Jerusalem). Still, the positive aspects of the kingdom had begun to be experienced in the ministry of Jesus and now, through the resurrected Christ, in the Church. They themselves had been taught to baptize disciples in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (28:19). But this was no longer a baptism of preparation, as was John's, but rather an extension of that baptism 'in the Holy Spirit,' which John had prophesied. In short, the church of Matthew now knows the reality of what John announced in its beginnings. It sees itself as bringing forth the proper response of 'fruit in agreement with repentance' (v8), and it sees its present adversaries as already typified in the Jewish leaders who came to John but were inclined to rest in their Abrahamic lineage. For them was reserved the unhappy prospect of the judgment to come.⁴⁵

France writes about judgment:

Only when all the chaff has been separated from the grain is the latter collected (using the "winnowing-shovel") and stored away for use, while the chaff is burned. The metaphor is a familiar one (Isa 41:15–16; Pss 1:4; 35:5 etc.; cf. the burned stubble in Mal. 3:19 [EVV 4:1]) and needs no explanation. ... The verb ... "clear" is more literally "completely clean" or "purify;" in the agricultural imagery it perhaps indicates the threshing-floor left bare when all the chaff has been separated off and the grain stored, but metaphorically the verb points to the purpose of God's judgment, the complete removal of all evil leaving a purified people. With the mention of a fire "that cannot be put out" we have moved beyond the agricultural scene, where the fire must die when all the chaff has been burned, to take up an aspect of God's judgment which will be repeated in 18:8 and 25:41, 46, the "eternal fire/punishment" which awaits the wicked. ... we may note here that the term "unquenchable" does not in itself resolve the debate over whether the wicked are to be understood as eternally suffering or as annihilated, since an unquenchable fire may be the result of new fuel being constantly added. Such language derives from the vivid imagery of Isa 66:24 (cf. Isa 34:9–10), and also perhaps from the Jerusalem rubbish dumps in the Ge Hinnom (hence Gehenna) where fires burned continuously A further term which will be echoed in Jesus'

⁴⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 134–149.

⁴⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 53.

teaching is “gather,” which will occur in the same agricultural sense in 6:26; 13:30, but in 24:31 will describe the gathering together of God’s people by the angels.

The strong emphasis on judgment should not cause us to forget the positive aspect of John’s message, that while the chaff will be burned up, there will also be “grain,” a continuing purified “remnant” of the true people of God. It is the drawing together of that true nucleus of Israel which is the ultimate aim of the ministry of John, as it will be of that of Jesus. The judgment is only a means to that end.⁴⁶

Bestowal of the Spirit is not a normal part of Jewish messianic expectation. But it constitutes no difficulty here. John is not focussed on Davidic royal messianism: he is anticipating not a particular defined figure of Jewish expectation but rather an agent of God’s decisive intervention in judgment and mercy whose specificity remains largely to be defined by future developments. Of course, Matthew thinks in terms, partly, of Davidic messianism, but it is only a small step to linking the OT expectation of an eschatological outpouring of the Spirit with the equally OT expectation of a Spirit-anointed messiah and to thinking in terms of a Spirit-dispensing messiah.⁴⁷

John announces that times are a’changing! The new era is here and it is indicated by preparation, repentance, and impending purification.

For the Preacher

In Advent we consider the coming of Jesus, past, present and future. Here John the Baptist, seeing the imminent arrival (or “advent”) of Jesus, indicates that with his presence the Reign of God has come.

One of the most significant passages in the Bible for me occurs in Isaiah 40: “Comfort, comfort my people” as the good news is announced to the people of God in exile in Babylon. It is announced to them that their sins have been taken away, and that the way is prepared for them to return to their home land. Their salvation has come! Matthew taps into this passage to explain the role of John the Baptist in preparing the people’s hearts for the way of the Lord.

The theme of preparedness for Christ’s coming still continues through Advent. Here we hear of John’s message of repentance. The preacher can explore the meaning of “repentance” for today, and what the understanding of the presence (“at hand”) of God’s Reign means for us now. How are we to have our hearts prepared to meet the Lord?

What does the baptism in the Spirit mean?

Hare writes:⁴⁸

⁴⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 97–116.

⁴⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 134–149.

⁴⁸ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 19-20.

In parts of the modern church, Advent has become almost exclusively preparation for Christmas, that is, a time of pondering the meaning of the incarnation. It was not so earlier. The four Sundays preceding the Feast of the Nativity focused attention on the awesome second coming of Christ as judge as well as on his first coming in humility.

It is wise to retain the twofold accent of Advent, lest our concentration on the Christmas baby become empty sentimentality void of awe. We must not speak of God's love coming down at Christmas without remembering that the divine love is fierce in its judgment of those who resist love's demands. John the Baptist warns us that repentance must not be procrastinated.

The Christian equivalent of 'we have Abraham as our father' is 'We have Christ as our Savior.' While trust in Christ's salvation is a first requirement, it is not the last. Even Paul, mistakenly perceived by some as substituting grace for human responsibility, soberly reminded his converts at Corinth, 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he or she has done in the body' (II Cor. 5:10).

What do you think?

Advent 3 – Matt 11:2-11 – The Messengers from John the Baptist

Last week in the lectionary we were introduced to John the Baptist with his message of repentance and announcing the Reign of God. Now he wishes to be assured that Jesus is the Christ for whom he was preparing the way. This is understandable as it seems that John was expecting some immediate judgment (3:12). "Particularly he hadn't experienced the fulfilment of the liberty to the captives promised in Isa 61:1 and 42:7."⁴⁹

Chapter 11 outlines the character of the Reign of God that was promised by John in the earlier passage, and this passage provides the context of judgement for those who will turn their backs on this reign. This passage refers back to Jesus' actions ("what you are seeing") outlined in chapters 8-9 and also points to the disciples' missionary actions in 10:8. "What you are hearing" refers back to chapters 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount).

What is happening to the blind, lame, those with skin diseases etc. also allude to passages in Isaiah:⁵⁰

Miracle	Ref. in Matt	OT Ref.
Blind receive sight	9:27-31	Isa 29:18; cf. 42:18; 35:5
Lame walk	9:1-8	Isa 35:6
Lepers cleansed	8:1-4	Implied Isa 53:4
Deaf hear	9:32-34	Isa 29:18; 35:5 cf. 42:18
Dead raised	9:18-26	Isa 26:19
Poor hear good news	9:35	Isa 61:1

⁴⁹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 300.

⁵⁰ Hagner, *Matthew*, 301

And so for Matthew Jesus fulfils Isaiah's expectations.

While John expected the Reign to immediately come with judgment, Jesus' response indicates that judgment will come, however in the meantime his message is going especially to the unrighteous (cf. 9:13).⁵¹ Jesus will deal with the issue of judgment later in *Matthew*.

If Jesus has brought the kingdom and if Christians have begun to experience eschatological blessings through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it is perhaps natural to expect and want the eschaton now. But that is precisely what Jesus does not offer. And thus in the present the disciple of Jesus must be prepared for something less – indeed, for the reality of suffering and death – while even confessing the messianic identity and authority of Jesus.⁵²

For the Preacher

As we await the return of Christ, and as John wasn't seeing the fulfilment yet of all that he had prophesied, we are in a situation of "already" and "not yet". The preacher can explore what has been realised already in Christ, what can be realised today in Christ, and for what are we still waiting?

Are we too eager to see judgment on others rather than first seeing the good news?

Advent 4 – Matt 1:18-25 – The Announcement of the Birth to Joseph

We now move to the opening of the account of *Matthew* following the genealogy. This is the reading just before Christmas. It describes how Mary was pregnant with the Holy Spirit and how this was revealed to Joseph in a dream.

From vv. 18-23 Matthew emphasises:

- 1) Jesus as the Messiah,
- 2) his name means salvation, "for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21)
- 3) he is called "Emmanuel" (God with us) a theme which is also resumed at the end of *Matthew*.

It is also a reference to Isa 7:14. "Emmanuel" is a confessional name. It is confessional in the sense that the only persons who will utter it are those who look upon the figure of Jesus and profess that in him 'God is with us,' that God has, through Jesus' conception and birth, inaugurated the eschatological age of salvation.

Effectively his people will be disciples of Jesus. They will belong to the Church (16:18), acknowledge Jesus to be their Saviour from sins (1:21), and perceive that in

⁵¹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 301.

⁵² Hagner, *Matthew*, 302.

him God has drawn near in his gracious rule to proffer humans salvation (v. 23; 4:17).⁵³

How can Jesus be said to be of the Davidic line if Joseph wasn't his biological father? It is Joseph who gives Jesus his name and so through Joseph he is adopted into the line of David (1:25).⁵⁴ Jesus is adopted as the legal child of Joseph.

The miraculous conception of Jesus (1:18-21) reflects the ancient stories of Sarah (with Isaac), Rebecca (with Jacob and Esau – Gen 25), Rachel (with Joseph – Gen 30:22), Manoah's wife (with Samson), Hannah (with Samuel). Only here in Matthew is the Holy Spirit specifically named in the conception. Matthew has repeatedly shown Jesus' origin is in God. And thus in Matthew Jesus is of the Holy Spirit.

The birth narrative form is influenced by the Old Testament (see Exod 3; Jdg 6:11-24; Jer 1:4-10).⁵⁵

In verse 18 "The OT law treated betrothal as creating a legal state of marriage, with attendant possibilities of adultery, divorce, and widowhood." (See Deut 22:23-27; cf. *m. Yeb.* 2:6; 4:10; 6:4; *m. Ket.* 1:2; 4:2; *m. Git.* 6:2; 11QTemple 61.)⁵⁶

Would a public trial be necessary to determine the cause of Mary's pregnancy (v. 19): whether she had been raped, seduced or even pregnant prior to the betrothal? Joseph apparently wished to avoid a public trial for Mary and hence sought a divorce which would only require a written document and a competent witness.

There were popular traditions about the birth and infancy of Moses. (See Josephus, *Ant.* 2.210-17 and *Ps.-Philo* 9.) As Moses' father Amram was concerned about the circumstances of his wife's pregnancy, God appears to him in a vision and seeks to allay his fears. Amram is reminded of God's miraculous provision of a child to Abraham despite his wife Sarah's barrenness. He was told that the child shall deliver the Hebrew race.⁵⁷

Regarding verse 21:

What might be involved for Matthew in being saved from sins can be clarified by looking at his later references to 'sins'. John the Baptist's ministry provokes the confession of sins (3:6); Jesus himself forgives sins (9:2,5,6); his blood is finally 'poured out for the forgiveness of sins' (26:28; cf. 20:28)... That it is 'his *people*' whom Jesus will save from their sins brings to the fore here the corporate dimension of forgiveness and its connection with the covenant (as in 26:28).⁵⁸

⁵³ Jack Dean Kingsbury, "The Birth Narrative of Matthew," in David E. Aune (ed) *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson, S.J.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 154-165, here 162.

⁵⁴ Kingsbury, "The Birth Narrative," 164.

⁵⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 91

⁵⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 92.

⁵⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 98.

⁵⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 99.

For the Preacher

The preacher may focus on the special features of Matthew's birth account and explore the concepts of the miraculous, the obedience of Jesus' parents, or what sort of Christ will Jesus be.

Christmas Day 1 – Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20 – Luke's Account

The following notes are similar to those that appear in the notes for the Luke Seminars last year for Advent and Christmas.

Luke's birth narrative differs from Matthew's account. Emphasis is given here to the miraculous conception of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is in keeping with Luke's particular emphasis on the Holy Spirit throughout *Luke* and *Acts*.

Mary's song emphasises her humble state (1:46-55). This is also a theme in Elizabeth's and Zechariah's speeches (1:25; 1:67-71), but also in the speeches of Simeon and Anna (2:28-32; 2:36-38).

These speeches reach deeply into Israel's history with the promise of salvation. Mary's speech is reminiscent of Hannah's regarding the birth of Samuel.

Jesus' family are pious, law-observing Jews, as are those who prophesy over him in the Temple. They are obedient to what has been asked of them and their having Jesus circumcised along with the offerings given are portrayed as in keeping with Jewish law.

For Luke there is only one history of salvation, and that came through Israel into Judaism and thence into Jesus and the new community that bears his name... The bond Luke seeks to make between the new Jesus-movement and historic Judaism and Israel is further seen in the presence of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple talking to the leaders there. He and they are at one with each other.⁵⁹

The shepherds in Luke's birth narrative certainly indicate the lowliness of the situation again, how the good news is announced to shepherds.

There are other allusions present here. The Greco-Roman person of the day could remember the writings of Virgil the poet who wrote of the ideal ruler, born among shepherds (*Aeneid* 6.791ff). The Jew may reflect on the background to King David as recorded in Psalm 78:70–71 (NRSV):

- ⁷⁰ He chose his servant David,
and took him from the sheepfolds;
⁷¹ from tending the nursing ewes he brought him
to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,
of Israel, his inheritance.

⁵⁹ V. George Shillington, *The New Testament in Context: A Literary and Theological Textbook* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 91.

Luke's genealogy differs from Matthew's. Luke traces the genealogy back to Adam, son of God, indicating that it goes back to the source of all humanity and that Jesus is "Son of God".

The titles of "lord" and "saviour" ring out against the titles given to the previous oppressors of Israel. Jesus is also proclaimed as Messiah and "Son of the Most High" (1:32).

The consolation of Israel and the restoration of Israel for which Simeon and Anna had been awaiting is now announced. It is the time of fulfilment and again Luke reaches deep into Israel's longing history to announce the coming of the Messiah, the saviour. Now Jesus is also the light for the Gentiles, again in fulfilment of the prophecies of the post-exilic prophets of Israel.

The coming of Jesus is parallel to the coming of John the Baptist. Both are born in miraculous circumstances following the announcement from an angel (1:8-23 and 1:28-38); Both have the mother's response (1:24-25 and 1:39-56) both stories have songs of praise to God; both are filled with the Spirit (1:15, 35; cf. 4:1); both are circumcised and named (1:59-66 and 2:21-24) there is a prophetic response (1:67-79 and 2:25-39) and their growth is portrayed similarly (1:80; 2:40-52).

The two children belong to the one good news story of salvation.⁶⁰

Luke will later clarify that John makes the way for Jesus.

We then have the only story of Jesus' childhood in the gospels in our Bibles, when Jesus is found in the Temple when he was twelve. Here the emphasis is given of God being Jesus' father although he will be obedient to his earthly parents.

Various promises have been made and fulfilled with a corresponding response of praise as Achtemeier et al's table indicates:

Character	Promise	Evidence of Fulfilment	Response of Praise
Zechariah	His wife will bear a child	John is born	Song of Zechariah
Mary	She will conceive a son	Unborn John bears witness to Jesus in the womb.	" " Mary
Simeon	He will see the Messiah	He meets Jesus in the Temple	" " Simeon

⁶⁰ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 160.

The entire birth narrative in Luke is one of wonder, fulfilment and the work of the Spirit. This is against the background of empire and the foreground of Jewish piety and Mary's sense of quiet awe is in keeping with the marvellous event which is now announced.

For the Preacher

The preacher could pick up the themes of joy and praise which surround the birth accounts. Similarly they could reflect on the work of the Spirit or explore what it means for us for a saviour to be born. We often use the term "salvation" in religious circles, but how much do people who may be only worshipping this day understand what salvation can mean in their lives? What can Jesus save us from? Is Jesus being placed in an animal food trough, a symbol of lowliness, or is there also the possibility of interpreting an image of Jesus providing for the world? In what way might this be?

Another thought on which the preacher could focus is how God's great news has come to those who are "lowly"? (For example: the shepherds or Mary). What does this attitude mean for us, on which we could model our own lives? What might our Shepherd King teach us?

What is our attitude to worship? Why was it that the birth of Jesus was announced amongst worshippers, those who praise God?

Christmas Day 2 – John 1:1-14 – John's Account - The Coming of the Word

The following notes are similar to those that appeared in the notes for the Luke seminars last year for Advent and Christmas. This is an exceedingly rich passage and we shall only explore a few issues below. These notes will extend the passage up to and including verse 18. Verses 1-18 are commonly referred to as the Prologue of the Gospel.

Here we have a marvellous introduction. Commentators have often noted the feeling of grandeur about it and described it as one of the densest passages in the New Testament.

Compare *John's* beginning with the other Gospels:

Matt – the genealogy of Jesus followed by Matthew's version of the birth account
Mark - "the gospel" of Jesus Christ Son of God and prophecy fulfilment. No birth account.

Luke – a literary introduction followed by Luke's birth account of Jesus

The beginning of *John* instead goes way back to prehistory - Jesus came from above from the divine.

The passage then follows a movement in time, beginning with pre-existence (vv. 1-2), to creation (vv. 3-4), then the story of humanity and then incarnation and the

reception of the Word (*logos* in Greek – from which we get words like biology, zoology, theology etc.).

The main focus of this study will be to explore the meaning and background of this word *logos* or “the Word”.

One way to start to answer this is to look at Greek philosophy of the day. *Logos* was central to Greek philosophy in previous centuries - it is divine self-revelation. Note the following quote from Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus*, in Stobaeus, *Fragments* I.1.12:

- 1) Most glorious of immortals, Zeus
the many-named, almighty evermore,
Nature’s great Sovereign, ruling all by law...
Thee will I ever chant, thy power praise!
- 27) For unto thee the unloved still is lovely –
and thus in one all things are harmonized,
the evil with the good, that so **one Word**
should be in all things everlastingly.

The Stoic philosophers picked up the idea of the *Logos*. The whole universe came into being from the “rational principle”. The “word” was the mind of God, but here God was a pantheistic idea which pervaded all things. By their thinking, the *Logos* acts like a blueprint of life.

Another suggested background to the notion of *Logos* is that of Gnosticism. There is a much debated question of when Gnosticism started. We know it was present after the 1st century CE and yet it appeared to have roots in thinking much earlier than this.

It is difficult to define Gnosticism, partly because there have been different varieties of Gnostic belief. Basically Gnosticism places emphasis on knowledge. It relates to being saved by knowing God. Knowledge releases the soul to return to its spiritual origins. God communicates knowledge by the *Logos*.

There developed many streams of Gnosticism. One work which appears to be of Christian origin, showing Gnostic tendencies is the *Odes of Solomon*. This was written possibly around the same time as the *Gospel of John*, and shows several similarities with *John*. For example consider Odes of Solomon 41:11-14:

And his **Word** is with us in all our way,
the Saviour who gives life and does not reject ourselves.
The Man who humbled himself,
but was raised because of his own righteousness.
The Son of the Most High appeared in the perfection of his Father,
and light dawned from **the Word** that was before time in him.

Notice the similarities with John 1:1-18!

Logos also appears in Jewish philosophical thinking. Philo (the Jewish philosopher in Egypt early in the 1st century CE) wrote an interpretation of Genesis 1 using *logos* terminology. He saw the *Logos*, created by God as the intermediary between God

and creation. The *Logos* is what gave meaning to the universe. Like some of Philo's writings, John 1 may be a reflection of the Genesis story.

Moving away from philosophy, the "word of the Lord" was associated with prophecy in Old Testament times. "Thus says the Lord" is often what precedes the prophecy. In other words, the oracles of the prophets are the word of God.

And so John 1 portrays Christ as being the communication of God to the world.

Targums are Jewish interpretive writings based on the Jewish Scriptures. The "word of the Lord" is repetitive in these Targums and is used to talk about God indirectly. Thus, for example the fragmentary Targum on Genesis 1:1–5 says "and the **word of the Lord** said, 'Let there be Light' ... and **the word of the Lord** divided the light from the darkness ..."

The concept of *Logos* was used in late Jewish and pagan religious texts to designate God's agent in creation and in world government.

It is clear enough that the *Logos* of John is God's speech, God's self-disclosure to the world, and, as the text makes plain, the means through which God creates.

There is literature written before the New Testament in which the concept of "wisdom" (*sophia*) is important and shows similarities with John's use of *logos*:

Here are some examples:

Prov 8:22-31 - Wisdom speaks of her role in creation, the beginning of God's work, the first of God's acts of long ago

Prov 2:6 - Wisdom comes from the mouth of God

Prov 3:19 - Wisdom is God's agent in the creation of the world

Sirach 24:9 (speaking of Wisdom) - "Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be"

Sirach 15:3 - To all who receive Wisdom she gives "the bread of learning" and "the water of wisdom"

and in the *Wisdom of Solomon* there is a significant passage which speaks of Wisdom: 7:22-8:1; 8:5. Verse 7:27 says "In every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God" - NB Jesus' reference to "friends" in John 15:13-15). In 7:22 Wisdom is "unique" (*monogenēs* the same word used in John 1:14).

Baruch 3:37 - "Wisdom appeared on earth and lived with humankind"

Thus the *Logos* in John 1 appears to take on the idea of *Sophia* Wisdom.

The most obvious and immediate background of the concept of the Word is the *Genesis* creation story, which, like *John*, also opens with 'in the beginning'.

John like *Genesis* intends to speak of the creation. Each stage of creation is portrayed as resulting from God's speaking. As well as this similarity, in *Genesis* God first creates light. The motifs of darkness and light appear over against one another in both. In *John's* prologue, the contrast between light and darkness is developed in the direction of a sharply defined dualism, which is characteristic of the Gospel as a whole.⁶¹

Jesus Christ is not simply the historical person Jesus of Nazareth, although he is inseparable from him. Jesus is the Son of God, the Word of God, the Christ, the Son of Man. In Jesus Christ God is revealed to humanity and God acts on behalf of us in a decisive way. The terms and categories that we find appropriate to describe historical persons and events can no longer quite comprehend him.⁶²

In this Prologue we see the connection of God entering the world. Here, as van der Watt says: "We are introduced to a world where a loving God meets people in a unique way – through the Son of God, Jesus, who became human".⁶³ It is God wishing to communicate with us in a unique word.

This is some good news for a Christmas message!

The connection of "light" and "life" in this passage connects the themes of creation and redemption. The word for "light overcoming" can mean overcoming or being subdued. It can also mean comprehend. The darkness of the world can't understand the light, the Word.

While much of the *Gospel of John* seems other-worldly, here in the Prologue we have a picture of a Jesus in human existence who is flesh and blood (v. 14).

The concepts of "grace" and "Word" don't appear again in *John* however other key themes of the Prologue do appear later.

Thus "light" continues throughout (3:19 –21; 5:36; 8:12, 13; 9:5; 11:9–10; 12:46).

"Glory" is a common concept (2: 11; 7: 18; 8: 50, 54; 12: 41; 17: 22, 24).

"Truth" occurs also throughout (3: 21; 4: 23 – 24; 5: 33; 8: 32; 8: 40; 14: 6, 17; 15: 26; 16: 13; 17: 17 – 19).

There is within the Prologue a theme of one coming from God and being with God which is taken up in the rest of *John*.

The theme of many not accepting Jesus and yet those who do believe become God's children in 1:9-13 is particularly born out in chapters 2-12. It is the rejection which leads of course to the cross.

⁶¹ D. Moody Smith, *John*, 23.

⁶² Smith, *John*, 25.

⁶³ Jan van der Watt, *An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 7.

It is possible that this passage is an early hymn which has been incorporated into the Gospel (cf. Phil 2: 6 – 11; Col 1: 15 – 20; 1 Tim 3: 16). If so, John has used this song as a grand introduction to the nature of Jesus Christ come in the flesh from God the Father.

And so in this passage Jesus is set in the cosmic frame, he is eternal, pre-existent, the agent of creation. Jesus is portrayed in philosophical terms and ancient Jewish ways of thinking as the blueprint of creation, the spoken utterance of God with creative force who is present in the creation account of Genesis 1, the giver of life and light, the source of wisdom and knowledge and someone who is all these deep issues in actual flesh.

A word exists to say something and so the theme of revelation in the Gospel happens in the very first verse of *John*.

In the Prologue the Word is described as being as close to God as anywhere else in the New Testament. Note v.18. There is a high Christology and theology expressed in this Prologue. We have seen this as Christ is the Logos as divine and human (1:1, 14).

This Logos is light (1:5) and life (1:4) and unique (*monogenēs* - 1: 14, 18). *Monogenēs* is a little tricky to translate. It can be “only”, “one of a kind”, “unique”. It does not relate etymologically with the idea of “begetting”. It is used of the “only” son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12 cf. Luke 9:38) and of Jairus’ “only” daughter (Luke 8:42).⁶⁴

In v. 14 the usual Greek word for “dwelt” or “lived” is not used. Instead the word is *skēnoō* (relating to dwelling in a tent) reminding the reader of the dwelling of Wisdom in Israel (e.g. Sir 24: 8 “my creator chose the place for my tent. He said make your dwelling (*kataskēnōson*) in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance).

It also alludes to a Hebrew word to describe God’s abiding in Israel (Exod 25: 8; 29:46; 40:35; Zech 2:14) where God’s glory came over the tabernacle (or Tent of Meeting) in the wilderness wanderings of the people after the Exodus.

The “author can claim that to gaze on the incarnation of the Word was to see the revelation of the divine in the human story.”⁶⁵

Verse 16 contains a difficult phrase to interpret (“grace upon grace” - *charin anti charitos*). Literally it means “grace instead of grace”. Perhaps it describes two gifts of grace, one the law given through Moses, now grace and truth through Jesus Christ the incarnate Word. Morris⁶⁶ expresses it: “Grace means an ever deepening experience of the presence and the blessing of God.”

Verse 18 provides a highlight of the introduction of the Word: “he has made him known” - the verb for “make known” (*exēgeomai* - from which we get “exegesis”) means to tell at length, to relate in full. Jesus the Word of God and Son of God

⁶⁴ See also Dale Moody “God’s Only Son” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953), 213-219.

⁶⁵ Francis Moloney, *John*, 39

⁶⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* rev. edn. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 98.

begins to reveal God, the Father. It is not just about God but bringing God to us, it is about revelation, it is about communication.

In this passage we encounter some rich metaphors which will lead into the remainder of the Gospel. Christ as light, life, the negation of darkness, there is life vs death, there is the metaphor of word and God's communication in a human being. All these images encourage us to explore the depths in our own readings of this profound passage.

What do you glean from all of this? How might you preach from it?

For the Preacher

For Moloney the Prologue

expresses the major christological beliefs of Christianity: The Word pre-existed creation with God; creation was through the Word; divine filiation is possible for believers; Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God, the Word become flesh; he shares in the divinity of God, yet he has taken on the human condition totally; Jesus is the unique, once-and-for-all revelation of God in the human story; the perfection of God's earlier gift of the Law to Moses takes place in and through Jesus Christ. Despite this intense focus on christology that has marked the use of the Prologue over the Christian centuries, at the heart of this passage lies a theology. What the Prologue says about Jesus depends entirely upon what the author wants to say about God's having been made known in and through Jesus Christ.⁶⁷

The narration of the divine origin of Christ now throws light on his unique significance for salvation which is later revealed in the words and works of the person Jesus.

The preacher might like to explore the differences of the birth accounts in *Luke* and *John* (without going into too much detail!). If they wish to preach from the John passage they may wish to consider John's account of the pre-existent Word, how God has always been willing to communicate with humanity, through creation, through the prophets, through the Law and now through Jesus Christ in person "full of grace and truth". How might we translate the "Word" to our cultural setting today?

The preacher may choose to consider Christ as the blueprint of life (the Greek philosophical concept of the Logos), or the concept of true Wisdom. (Although we don't talk of wisdom today in the same way that the ancient Greeks and Hebrews did, we still consider in different ways how best to live our lives.)

The preacher may also consider how Jesus can be "light" and/or "life". Are there any other modern-day metaphors which could be used? What does it mean for us to have God "living with us"? And what does it mean for God to be "in the flesh" (which is what "incarnation" means)?

⁶⁷ Moloney, *John*, 41

I am not suggesting that our Christmas sermons should be an extensive outlining of ancient Greek philosophy, or Hebrew wisdom. That would be totally boring to most in our congregations whose minds are likely to be distracted easily by what they are having for lunch, or whether the house is ready for the visitors to arrive! I believe that “short and pithy” is usually ideal for a Christmas morning sermon!