

Tracing Matthew 1:21 throughout the Gospel of Matthew

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Introduction

The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the Savior of the world. Jesus himself makes this clear in his final command to make disciples of all nations, not just those who are the physical descendants of Abraham (Matt 28:19–20). However, when Matthew records the first declaration that Jesus would be a Savior, the message is not as clear as it seems. The angel sent to Joseph gave the first hint that Jesus would be a Savior when he said, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (1:21).² While this verse seems straightforward to 21st century Christians, it can be difficult to understand how revolutionary this statement truly was for a first-century Jewish audience.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty interpreting Scripture is discovering the original context and authorial intent. It is far too easy to simply read current cultural and theological context into the Scriptures rather than discovering the author’s cultural and theological context. This consideration has tremendous

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² All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.

implication for both our interpretation and application of the Word of God. When we do not spend the time rightly studying the Scriptures (2 Tim 2:15), it becomes far too easy to misapply Jesus' work and teaching. This is especially true when studying the Gospels.

As such, this article seeks to interpret Matthew 1:21 in its original context and discover how this verse is fully developed throughout Matthew's Gospel. This study will be addressed systematically, focusing on several important aspects along the way. First, a proper interpretation of Matthew will be presented. Second, the original recipients of this Gospel will be discovered, as well as the original intent of Matthew's work. Third, the statement that Jesus "will save his people from their sins" will be separated into two distinct aspects: 1) Jesus as a Savior from sin; and 2) Identifying who his people are. Finally, all of these components will be synthesized to develop an expanded statement of the angel's original message to Joseph.

Interpreting Matthew

Each Gospel is meant to be read on its own merit. Each human author was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16) with a separate agenda for his writing. As Toussaint writes, "They wrote their Gospels with the intention of setting forth an argument."³ To best discover that argument and to prevent a wrong understanding of that argument, the Gospels should be read and interpreted within their own books. Strauss agrees, stressing that the Gospels should be read "vertically, following the story from top to bottom—that is, from beginning to end."⁴ Certainly, there are things to learn when one harmonizes the Gospels, but each author gave enough context within his own writings to properly understand and interpret his intent correctly. In other words, one should not attempt to discern Matthew's argument from Luke's perspective.

³ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1980), 13.

⁴ Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 33.

One must establish the purpose of Matthew's Gospel through careful exegesis, determining the major emphasis that are established at the beginning while also growing in depth and understanding throughout the Gospel. When examining the Gospel, one can see Matthew emphasizes three important points. The first is that Jesus is the *Jewish* Messiah.

There are 61 specific quotations from the OT in the Gospel of Matthew.⁵ All told, there are over 120 unique references to the OT Scriptures.⁶ Matthew makes clear as he uses these OT Scriptures that he is demonstrating Jesus fulfilled the prophecies written about him (Matt 1:22). Although the many references to the OT could have been faith-affirming for Gentiles, it is much more likely that Matthew was writing his Gospel to those familiar with and rooted in the Jewish Scriptures, especially for those looking for the promised King who would come and rule on David's throne forever (2 Sam 7:14–16). This is one of the reasons that Matthew links the lineage of Jesus immediately to both Abraham and David (Matt 1:1): The covenantal promises God gave to both of these men would ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus.

The second major point of emphasis in Matthew's Gospel is that of the kingdom of God. It is mostly referred to as the "kingdom of heaven" (a phrase unique to Matthew), but is used in the same way as "kingdom of God," referring to the earthly rule of God's kingdom on earth.⁷ Jewish disciples would have wondered what happened to this kingdom, since the Messiah was supposed to bring in this kingdom to rule and was preached by both John the Baptist and Jesus as being near (3:2; 4:17). In other words, if Jesus is the King, then where is his kingdom? Matthew, more than any other Gospel writer, addresses the nature of the

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 3.

⁶ W. G. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1948; repr. Kregel Classics, 2010), 270.

⁷ Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Matthew," *Plano Bible Chapel*, 2019, <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/matthew/matthew.htm>, 77.

kingdom and its postponement, waiting until Israel is ready to receive her King.⁸

The third point of emphasis is on this new body of believers called the church. Israel would be familiar with Gentiles who converted to Judaism, but the church is something entirely different and distinct from Israel as a nation or as a religion. In this new body of believers, the unity is centered around the person, work, and teachings of Christ, not the law (28:19). The church (16:18) is a group of called-out people who will be united around Christ. In this new body, it did not matter if one was Jewish or not; it was a completely new group of people separate from the kingdom of God, while still remaining a part of it (21:43).

Note that the church has not replaced Israel, nor has it replaced the kingdom. It is a separate entity, a mystery uniquely revealed first to those living in first-century Palestine (Eph 3:4–6). To properly understand Jesus' ministry, one must differentiate between the kingdom of God which Jesus preached (Matt 4:17), and the church that Christ would build (16:18). If at any point these two programs are confused to be one single program, then Jesus' original message of good news to the nation of Israel is lost, replaced by a self-centered approach to interpretation which re-interprets Jesus' message to the current context.

These are the three major focal points of Matthew's Gospel, and one can find supporting evidences for each throughout his work. However, to best understand Matthew 1:21 and the Gospel as a whole, one must discover Matthew's original audience.

Matthew's Intended Audience

As stated above, if one of Matthew's focal points is to show Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, it would make sense that Matthew wrote to Jews who needed to be assured that Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies. Since these prophecies would have been written in the OT and not in the general literature of the day, the

⁸ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God as Set Forth in the Scriptures* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 274–276.

frequent references and quotations would not have benefited those unfamiliar with the OT.

Matthew wrote not only to strengthen the faith of Jewish believers, but also to persuade those who may not have believed in Jesus before his death and resurrection. In fact, this is clear even within the Gospel itself, as there were those who witnessed Christ post-resurrection who still doubted (28:17). Thus, one can conclude that there is at least a portion of Matthew's Gospel that is meant to persuade those of the nation of Israel who were still not sure about Jesus and his mission.

This may seem redundant, but it is important to recognize the Jewishness of Jesus' ministry and message. It is tempting to interpret Jesus' words as speaking directly to the church, but one must remember that Jesus ministered to Israel before his death, and only commissioned the building of his church *after* his resurrection (28:19).

Those who misinterpret the Gospels as "church" literature generally begin with the assumption that the NT is written for Christians, while the OT is written for Israel.⁹ This oversimplification of the Scriptures misses the uniqueness of the writing of God's word, fails to recognize the progressive revelation of Scripture, and removes the importance of the OT Scriptures. It is more appropriate to see the Gospels (and Acts) as a bridge between God's program with Israel in the Old Testament and the building of Christ's church in the New Testament.

This leads to the first clear declaration of Jesus' mission as confirmed by the angel in Matthew 1:21. Joseph, described as a righteous man, was betrothed to Mary, a woman who also feared God. It was reported to him that Mary was found to be pregnant before their consummation, and rather than exposing her sin publicly, he was going to send her away quietly and privately. Before he can act on his plan, though, an angel of the Lord comes to assure him that Mary has been faithful. Instead, the Holy Spirit

⁹ This is a broad, general statement, not meant to label any one individual, but to assert that many simply do not understand the distinction between the Old and New Testaments, and the unique fit of the Gospels as a bridge between the two.

conceived within her a son. The angel reveals that Joseph is, “to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” This birth of the Savior is meant to ultimately fulfill the words of Jeremiah 7:14, declaring that “God (is) with us.”

This declaration identifies two specific issues that are referred to and expanded upon throughout Matthew’s Gospel. The first deals with the work of Jesus—what does it mean that he will save from sins? How will he accomplish this mission? Does the concept that Jesus would save from sins differ from the expectation that the coming Messiah was supposed to be? The second issue revolves around the people of the Messiah—who are “his people”? Are his people referring to the nation of Israel? Are his people those who would believe? Or is this a reference to the church, the new body of believers that Jesus will call out in his ministry? We will address these issues in the order presented here, first dealing with Jesus as a Savior from sins.

The Messiah as a Savior from Sins

Jesus is introduced as the “Christ” immediately in Matthew 1:1. The word refers to the “fulfiller of Israelite expectation of a deliverer, *the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ.*”¹⁰ To truly understand who Jesus is and the fullness of his mission, one must understand his connection to the OT promises regarding him.

The very first verse of Matthew’s work reveals that Jesus is the embodiment of all the promises given to the nation of Israel: “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham ... (Matt 1:1).” Tying Jesus to David and Abraham would automatically bring to mind the covenant promises given to these individuals, both of which have national implications.

Beginning in Genesis 12, Moses wrote that God called a man named Abram out of the land he was living in to go to a strange land and walk through it. In the process, God gives Abram three

¹⁰ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1091.

unique promises,¹¹ unconditional in their nature, which would be for him and his descendants. The first promise is that God would give him the land that he roamed (Gen 12:7). The distinct boundaries of the land would be explained and expounded upon throughout the OT, including another covenant given later, but ultimately this land was gifted to Abraham and his descendants. It is important to note that this promise is given with no conditions; God will keep his promise simply because he promised.

The second promise was that of descendants. Abram had no children of his own, yet God promised that his descendants would be as uncountable as the numerous stars of the sky (15:5). This would ultimately lead to the birth of Isaac, who would have twins, one of whom (Jacob) would become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

These first two promises are easily identifiable and traceable throughout the Scriptures. One can determine if the land has been given (to this day not completely as defined in the OT), or whether Abram was blessed with innumerable descendants (a reasonable assumption at this point). This third promise, however, is more abstract than the first two. It contains several aspects of blessing and cursing, and a global promise of blessing. God revealed the beginnings of this promise in Genesis 12:2–3:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

In giving this promise, God reveals several times that it is his intention to bless Abram. That blessing will be accomplished in several ways. First, Abram's name will be made great. God

¹¹ When God is initially described to have given the promises to Abraham, they are not seen as a cohesive whole. Rather, they are presented at different times and places, beginning in Genesis 12:1–3, and continuing on throughout the account of his life. For the purpose of this paper, Genesis 12:1–3 will be foundational for the beginning of what is called the Abrahamic covenant.

declares that Abram will be a blessing to others. God also states that the response to Abram will result in a similar response from God. It is the last one that has significant ramifications on the birth of the Messiah: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

As one traces the story of Abram and his descendants, the ramifications of this third promise are immediately on full display. Those who blessed Abram and his family would be blessed (such as the nation of Egypt when Joseph was dispersing the food and grain), and those who cursed Abram and his family would be cursed (as when Sarai was taken by Pharaoh in Genesis 12). These ramifications occurred locally with potentially expanded regional or national impact, but for the most part, these particular blessings and cursings would not encompass all peoples on earth.¹²

However, one must look also at the second individual Jesus is related to according to Matthew 1:1, and that is David. David was the second king of the nation of Israel, and early on in his reign, he decided to build a house for God (2 Sam 7:2–3), a temple that would ultimately be built by his son Solomon. Because of David’s pure intention to honor God, God chose to honor David with a promise that would further clarify the blessing that would come to the entire world. David would give birth to a son who would build the temple, but beyond that, God also promised a lineage. “The emphasis on an offspring/seed who would come from David’s body links this covenant with the Abrahamic covenant.”¹³ Beyond his son Solomon would be born into David’s lineage who would establish a kingdom that would reign forever (v. 16). “The kingdom and its throne would be permanent, a realm over which the Son of David would reign

¹² One can argue that a great portion of the world was blessed through Joseph, but even this does not rise to the ultimate level of “all peoples” being blessed through Abram.

¹³ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New America Commentary, vol. 7 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 340.

forever.”¹⁴ This promise is referred to as the Davidic covenant. Both the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic covenant find their ultimate fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus, which is why Matthew’s Gospel references both of these OT individuals and by extension the promises given to them.

If a descendant of Abraham were going to bless the whole world and David were going to give birth to a son who would establish an eternal kingdom, then it would be reasonable to assume that Israel was looking for a political savior. While there would be no doubt that the Messiah would save, the thinking would have been more that he would save people from their enemies, not primarily from their spiritually poor condition.

Jeremiah 23:5–6 reveals how this king would deliver Israel from her enemies:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.”

It is important to note the emphasis on physical safety from enemies and peace in the land. As Jeremiah spoke to the nation just before and during the exile to Babylon, everyone who read this prophecy would understand the national ramifications of a king who would save the people. Peace, wisdom, and righteousness would come from the rule of this king, but a people in exile and distress and oppression would long for safety in the land. This Branch of David would be a king who delivered the entire nation from her enemies.

This is what makes the angel’s declaration in Matthew 1:21 so significant. Israel needed spiritual purification from sin, but this was something that is usually attributed to the work of God

¹⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, “2 Samuel,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 1:464.

alone.¹⁵ When Jeremiah prophesied about the new covenant that God would establish with his people, God said, “For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more” (Jer 31:34b). Yet the angel declares this would be the work of the Messiah. Jesus will save from sins, indicating his divine nature and work, hinting at the primacy of his mission—providing redemption to his people. This introduces one of the major works of the coming king: He was not just going to provide physical or political salvation,¹⁶ but spiritual salvation as well. Barclay argues, “Jesus was not so much The Man born to be King, as He was The Man born to be Saviour.”¹⁷ He is both, and to miss the saving nature of the king is to miss what the king came to do. As Osborne says, “It is clear that Jesus has come to bring spiritual salvation rather than political deliverance.”¹⁸

The emphasis on Jesus’ ministry of spiritual salvation is apparent from the beginning, even in the ministry of John the Baptist. The one who was to prepare the way for the Messiah began his mission by calling the nation of Israel to repentance (Matt 3:2). Those who believed in John’s message repented and were baptized to signify their turning from sin (v. 6). When John was arrested, Jesus took up the mantle of preaching repentance to the people of Israel, calling his people to turn from sin (4:17). In fact, Jesus’ first sermon recorded in Matthew’s Gospel contains the call to holiness for his people (5:48).

Beyond just calling for spiritual purity and holiness, Jesus displayed his ability to forgive sins. In Matthew 9, Jesus forgives

¹⁵ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 99.

¹⁶ Wayne S. Baxter, "Missing Matthew's Political Messiah: A Closer Look at His Birth and Infancy Narratives," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 27, no. 3 (2017): 341.

¹⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vol. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew P, 1958), 1:23.

¹⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 77.

the sins of a paralytic, demonstrating Jesus' power and authority to deliver people from their sins (9:2–8). Throughout the rest of chapter 9, Jesus' concern for the spiritual condition of his people is apparent. Jesus makes clear his focus is on calling sinners (9:13). He would even be accused of being a friend of sinners (11:19). This focus completely perplexed the religious leaders and crowds of Jesus' day who believed that the Messiah was to be focused on restoring and rescuing Israel physically.

To be fair, Jesus' own disciples did not fully understand the mission of the Messiah. When Jesus began to explain the need to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders, Peter rebuked Jesus (16:21–22). It would be only as they drew close to Jerusalem that Jesus revealed the reason for heading to Jerusalem was to “give His life as a ransom for many” (20:28). That Jesus would be the ransom indicates that he is substituting his life for others. This would call to reference the sacrifice described in Isaiah 53, one who would bear the sins of the people (Isa 53:6).¹⁹ In this sense, Jesus would be saving others' lives through his death. Carson writes, “The implication of the cumulative evidence is that Jesus explicitly referred to himself as Isaiah's Suffering Servant . . . and interpreted his own death in that light.”²⁰

Even in this moment, the connection between His death and the forgiveness of sins is not clearly drawn. It would be the night before Jesus would die that He expands on how His death will provide salvation from sin. In the midst of the Passover meal, Jesus paused to instruct His followers about a new observance. Taking and breaking the bread, Jesus acknowledged that the bread would now represent His body and instructed his disciples to eat it (26:26). Then, taking the cup of wine, He taught, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 28).

Under the Old Testament law, the blood of animals was used to cover sins. However, Scripture made it clear that sins could

¹⁹ Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 824.

²⁰ Donald A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 484.

not fully be taken away by the blood of animals (Heb 10:4). Now, with Jesus' sacrifice, a complete and final offering can be made for sin. "It would no longer be an animal's blood that would cover sins, but his blood—the blood of the Messiah-King."²¹ Jesus' blood would seal the covenant that God was making with his people, completely forgiving them of their sins. This was to call to mind the promise of a new covenant that would be established by God as revealed in Jeremiah 31:31. As Morris notes, "When Jesus spoke of his blood as blood 'of the covenant,' he was surely claiming that, at the cost of his death, he was about to inaugurate the new covenant of which the prophet had spoken."²² Morris continues, "It would be the establishing of the covenant that was based not on people's keeping it (Exod 24:3, 7), but on God's forgiveness (Jer 31:34)."²³ Toussaint writes that Matthew 26:28 "looks back at the words spoken by the King in Matthew 20:28 and anticipates the command of Christ to His disciples to make disciples of every nation."²⁴

While Jesus certainly came as the King, he also came as the Savior, and he offered his own life to cover the sins of many people. These "many people" are should be identified as "his people." This brings us to the second aspect of the angel's message, the people that Jesus came to save. We now turn our attention to answering the question: who exactly are Jesus' people that he came to save from sin?

The People of the Messiah

A quick glance at the Gospel would immediately provide an answer: It must be referring to the nation of Israel. This is an easy assumption to make, especially since Jesus is connected with the covenant promises to Abraham and David, and his blood sealing the new covenant that God would establish is the nation of Israel. Yet, when taking a longer look at the progression of Jesus'

²¹ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, Holman New Testament Commentary, vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 439.

²² Morris, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 661.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Toussaint, *Behold*, 300.

ministry, one will come to the conclusion that his people should not be limited to the nation of Israel.

This expanded understanding of who Jesus' people are would not have been clear to Joseph, who would have connected the birth of a Savior to be specifically linked to Israel.²⁵ His identification as Immanuel, God with us, in Matthew 1:22 indicates a further connection with Israel, linking back to Isaiah 7:14. Even the Magi from the east identified Jesus as the "King of the Jews" (Matt 2:2), further solidifying an initial impression that Jesus' people would be the nation of Israel. Repschinski agrees, stating that, "For the reader, ὁ λαός αὐτοῦ is, at this point, the people from whom Jesus comes. The phrase suggests that in his saving activity Jesus will be taking possession of his people, and this people is Israel."²⁶ Piotrowski goes so far to suggest that the entirety of Matthew 1:21 is informed by Ezekiel 36 and 37, that what is being hinted at here is that Jesus will restore Israel from the exile by forgiving their sins.²⁷

However, when one looks at the entirety of Matthew 1, there are hints that Jesus' people would extend far beyond the nation of Israel. Blomberg writes, "Matthew's names for Jesus present him as the fulfillment of the hopes and prophecies of Israel but also as one who will extend God's blessings to Gentiles."²⁸ Even before the names of Jesus are provided, one can see from the genealogy listed in verses 2–16 that there are several Gentiles included. Matthew does not detail every individual in Jesus' family tree, so the names listed must have significance.²⁹ In fact, five women (this would include Mary, the mother of Jesus) are listed in Jesus' family tree, a unique approach in listing

²⁵ Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 99.

²⁶ Boris Repschinski, "For He will Save His People from Their Sins' (Matthew 1:21): A Christology for Christian Jews," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (April 2006): 256.

²⁷ Nicholas G. Piotrowski, "I Will Save My People from Their Sins': The Influence of Ezekiel 36:28b–29a; 37:23b on Matthew 1:21," *Tyndale Bulletin* 64, no. 1 (2013): 54.

²⁸ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 53.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

genealogies in Jewish literature.³⁰ Some have suggested that the incidents surrounding the inclusion of these women were to indicate the potential illegitimacy of their children. “The only factor that clearly applies to all four is that suspicions of illegitimacy surrounded their sexual activity and childbearing.”³¹ There may be some truth to this, but it is also important to note that three of these five women were people outside the nation of Israel. To be certain, Tamar was introduced into this lineage before the actual formation of Israel as a nation, but this is the first indication that the blessing of Abraham is stretching beyond just the physical descendants of Abraham. Both Rahab and Ruth were Gentiles, but sufficient evidence suggests that they converted to Judaism. Still, the inclusion of these women, and their heritage, would suggest that there is more to being the people of Jesus than being a physical descendant of Abraham.

When one reads Matthew 3, it is apparent that John’s message of repentance was directed toward the nation, calling them to repentance in preparation for God’s kingdom (3:2). His ministry was to a primarily Jewish audience, reaching into Jerusalem, Judea and specifically the Jordan region (3:5). Yet in a confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees, John makes some very powerful claims about the people of God. John says to them, “And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (3:9). While John is not directly stating that Gentiles will be a part of the people of Abraham, what is clear that the presumption that nationality is good enough is wrong. Bloomberg takes it further, suggesting, “Matthew’s two-pronged emphasis, introduced in chaps. 1–2, thus continues: the messianic age brings new people into God’s kingdom and excludes others who thought themselves secure.”³² No matter the original emphasis, it is important to note that John is presenting the concept that God’s people can stretch beyond just the physical descendants of Abraham.

³⁰ Weber, *Matthew*, 17.

³¹ Bloomberg, *Matthew*, 55–56.

³² *Ibid.*, 78.

When John is arrested, Jesus begins his personal ministry in Galilee, identified as belonging to the Gentiles (Matt 4:15), fulfilling prophesy from Isaiah 9. While Jesus focused on the synagogues of the region, places of Jewish gatherings for worship and discourse, he received crowds from the region, some of whom would have been Gentiles. But the first real introduction of an individual introduced as a Gentile into the story of Matthew's Gospel is that of the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:5–13. While Luke's Gospel focuses on different aspects related to this incident, it is important to note that both Gospels detail the tremendous faith he had in Jesus, and Jesus' response to his faith. The centurion would not have recognized that Jesus was the seed of Abraham who would bring blessing to the world, but he did recognize that Jesus had authority over sickness and disease. This centurion approached Jesus in humility, acknowledging Jesus' authority—that Jesus could just say a word and disease would respond. Through this public declaration, the centurion demonstrated his faith in the person and work of Jesus (though not necessarily the full identity and mission of Jesus). As a response, Jesus recognized this centurion for his faith and used his example to provide insight on who his people are. "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (8:11).

This description of those coming from the east and west refers to those who are outside the nationality of Israel, not just limiting those who literally live to the east and west of Capernaum.³³ Jesus also communicates that there will be those removed from the kingdom who thought they belonged because of national heritage. "Many from within Judaism ('subjects of the kingdom'), who by ancestry believe themselves still part of God's covenant, will discover that they are not in the kingdom at all but painfully and eternally excluded from God's presence."³⁴ Jesus is making clear that natural descendants of Abraham are not guaranteed entrance into the kingdom. "The phrase **subjects of the kingdom** in 8:12 refers to the Jews, who had been given

³³ Ibid., 142.

³⁴ Ibid.

all the covenants and promises, and who should have known how to be heirs of the kingdom.”³⁵ A careful examination of the passage identifies that Jesus is looking for people who respond with faith. In praising the centurion, he contrasts this man’s faith with the nation of Israel, identifying the centurion’s faith as unheard of among even His own people.

This contrast would continue throughout Jesus’ ministry. Those who were of the nation of Israel, who received the covenants and promises of God ever since God chose Abraham, generally did not respond in faith. They responded in amazement and awe (7:28), but never took the additional step of believing in Jesus as their Messiah as they should have. They certainly pursued his healing power and his ability to cast out demons, but never personally submitted to his authority. This ultimately resulted in Jesus’ rejection of the crowds (11:16–19), the cities of Israel (11:20–24), and their religious leaders (the entirety of chapter 12). As a result, Jesus’ mission shifted from the nation of Israel as a whole (as presented completely in chapter 10, especially verses 5–6) to those who would respond appropriately to Jesus and come to him (11:28–30). This transition is solidified in Matthew 13 when Jesus begins to teach in parables, talking about the mystery of kingdom rather than its nearness.

It is then important to realize that the account of the Roman centurion (a Gentile) coming to Jesus occurs while Jesus is focused on the national ministry to Israel. Jesus recognized and praised this man’s faith (though certainly not complete in the understanding that Jesus would die for his sins), and acknowledged that there would be many who will come from outside the nation to gain acceptance into God’s kingdom. Matthew is not concerned with answering the question as to whether the centurion was credited with saving faith, but it seems entirely reasonable to believe that he was credited with righteousness, just as Abraham was credited with righteousness for believing in the revealed promise of God (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). His understanding of Jesus and who he was and what he was to do may not have been complete (and certainly not even his disciples knew the full extent of his mission at this point, either),

³⁵ Weber, *Matthew*, 117.

but the centurion's complete confidence in Jesus and his authority to act was. This may not be the first instance of faith as presented in the Gospel of Matthew (one can argue John, the disciples, or even the leper of Matt 8:2), but it is the first instance where an individual is recognized by Jesus as having great faith. In giving clarity to Matthew 1:21, it seems as though Jesus' people would extend beyond just the nation of Israel, and perhaps not even including the entirety of the nation, but rather any who would come to him in faith.

The next individual whom Jesus praises for her faith is the Canaanite woman of Matthew 15:21–28. In an often misunderstood and misapplied section of Scripture, Jesus is approached by a foreign woman to help her demon-possessed daughter. In Mark's account, she is identified as a Greek (Mark 7:26), but the emphasis of her heritage is meant to "evoke scriptural images of the original inhabitants of Palestine as objects of scorn and enemies of Israel."³⁶ This isn't just a regular Gentile, but a descendent of a nation that was judged as an enemy, a previous inhabitant of the land of Israel that was to be destroyed (Deut 20:17). Like the Samaritan of Luke 10:33, her nationality would have prompted revulsion by the original Jewish audience, and an affront (potentially) to Jesus and his disciples. Unlike the Roman, who was in authority over Israel, this foreigner had no real standing when it came to the people Israel. Yet she confidently approaches Jesus, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession" (Matt 15:22).

That she addresses Jesus as the "Son of David" is telling. This is a Messianic term, not just identifying Jesus' nationality. What makes this even more interesting is that she was no descendant of Abraham, thus she had no national right to call out to Jesus using a national Messianic term. "She was of a cursed family who had no right to Messianic blessings, yet she approaches the Lord on the basis of His Messiahship."³⁷ Jesus refuses to acknowledge her claim, but she continues to cry out, frustrating the disciples. Note that they aren't concerned about

³⁶ Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 631–32.

³⁷ Toussaint, *Behold*, 195.

her or her daughter; they are simply being inconvenienced and disturbed by her repeated request (v. 23). As the disciples ask Jesus to send her away, Jesus finally responds to the pleas of this foreign mother: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (v. 24). Hearing this, she falls on her knees before Jesus, crying for help; he replies, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs” (v. 26). This is not meant to be a slight to her sex or race, but rather an illustration meant to show why he was not going to help her. The nation of Israel is his focus, and it would be improper to supply what was meant for Israel to others. This is despite the fact that he has already helped Gentiles in other cases (like the centurion of chapter 8). Yet Jesus is firm—he will not help because he was sent to the nation of Israel. As Toussaint writes, “It is clear that Christ came to offer Himself to His people, and in grace He is prolonging the exclusiveness of His ministry in the hope that Israel will repent.”³⁸

However, she refuses to give in, arguing that even dogs benefit from the crumbs left behind by the children. “The woman accepts that she has no claim to be put on a par with the Jewish people in benefiting from God’s present intervention for the sake of his people, but even the dogs get scraps, and that is all she asks for.”³⁹ At this, Jesus praises her faith and rescues her daughter. In the same way that he delivers the centurion’s servant, he delivers this mother’s daughter.

This encounter leads Jesus to do for the Gentiles what he has done for Israelites—miraculously heal and feed them. In much the same way as he ministered to a primarily Jewish audience until this point, he now ministers to a primarily Gentile audience in Matthew 15. “Matthew apparently intends us to see Jesus as still in Gentile territory here.”⁴⁰

The most striking difference here is the response of the crowds. The Jewish crowds have not responded appropriately to Jesus, but this Gentile crowd does, fully appreciating and acknowledging Jesus as one sent from God. “The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 635.

⁴⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 245.

well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel” (v. 31).

As has been seen, Jesus responded to those who came to him in faith. Those who would be thought of as his people (Israel) did not respond, yet those who were outside the nation did respond. As a result, Jesus always acknowledged the faith of the individual who responded. As Jesus’ ministry changed from national Israel to individual respondents, Jesus clarifies who his people really are in Matthew 12:48–50: “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’” Chapter 12 represents the full transition of the call to national Israel and the nearness of the kingdom to the individual call to whoever will believe (presented as “whoever does the will of my Father”) and the mystery of the kingdom. Jesus makes clear that “human kinship does not take priority over spiritual kinship, and Jesus is busy ministering to crowds that include his spiritual family.”⁴¹

Matthew 12:48–50 gives greater clarity into the response by both Jesus and the Gentile crowds in chapter 15. As these Gentiles respond properly to Jesus, Jesus begins to treat them as the mission. As Blomberg says, “The ‘will of God,’ as throughout Matthew, means obedience to God’s commands by following Jesus.”⁴² These Gentiles are proving themselves to be Jesus’ people by responding in faith and worship.

This ultimately comes to a head when Jesus enters Jerusalem to offer himself as the Savior from sin. As Jesus is challenged by the chief priests and elders, he points out their refusal to listen to John the Baptist. Comparing their behavior to tax collectors and prostitutes, Jesus states that these “sinners” will enter the kingdom of heaven, not the chief priests (21:31–32). Again, Jesus is not identifying with the entirety of the nation of Israel, only those who respond appropriately. Jesus continues to instruct the religious leaders, teaching a parable about a landowner who is not respected by the servant hired to tend the field. These servants ultimately kill the landowner’s son. As a result, these

⁴¹ Ibid., 208.

⁴² Ibid.

servants would be removed, and new ones would be hired. Jesus applies the message this way: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit” (v. 43). In other words, those who believed they were worthy of the kingdom were never to receive it. Others who respond appropriately to Jesus will be given this kingdom. This declaration, combined with what has transpired previously, makes clear that only those who produce fruit (repentance and faith) worthy of kingdom will be able to enter it.

CONCLUSION

We now have enough of an understanding of these two themes to develop a substantive understanding as to the nature of the statement made by the angel in Matthew 1:21. As the coming King and Messiah, Jesus’ primary mission was to offer himself as the sacrifice for sins, addressing the spiritual need of the people. As such, he is the one who saves from sin. Combined with the phrase, “his people,” what is ultimately being prophesied as his people does not include the entirety of the nation of Israel, but only those who would respond in faith to him. This would include many from the nation, but *also* those outside the nation (as demonstrated in this article).

This is not to deny that Jesus’ death is sufficient to cover the sins of the world; on the contrary, anyone who believes is covered by his death (John 3:16). But Jesus’ death would only be effective for those who respond by faith. Matthew 1:21 does not deny that Jesus cannot save everyone, but it does suggest that his death will save his people fully.

As such, I offer the following explanation for the statement in Matthew 1:21: The angel tells Joseph that this child is to be named Jesus, because he will offer himself as the sacrifice for the sins of those who will receive him by faith, and they shall be called his people.

This expanded statement fits well with Jesus’ final command recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (28:19–20a). The command

is to make disciples of *all nations*, not just from Israel. That is because his people is a new people, a new gathering of those who would respond by faith. Jesus declared that he would build his called-out group of believers, the church (16:18). They are his people, gathered from all nations, whom Jesus came to save from their sins.