Lecture 17: Matthew's Infancy Narrative

Beginning our study of Matthew with his infancy narrative will give us a good entrance into understanding this evangelist, since his motivations in forming his infancy narrative are even more transparent than Luke’s. Therefore, exploring this narrative can give us insight into some of the issues most important to him. At the outset, however, I want to provide reasons for concluding that Matthew himself is responsible for the shape and content of his infancy narrative.

You’ll recall that Luke’s constructed his infancy narrative by intertwining parallel stories of Jesus and John. And we noted how he infused his narrative with themes he highlighted throughout his Gospel, such as the activity of the Spirit and the role of prophecy. When we turn to Matthew, the ways he has hand-shaped his narrative are even more apparent, and go beyond the way that he finds his own way to connect the tradition that Jesus was born in Bethlehem with knowledge that he grew up in Nazareth.

E.g. there are tell-tale signs that Matthew penned the conclusion of this story. The return of Joseph and his family from Egypt reads as follows: “19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ 21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

For the moment I want to focus on the last two verses, with which I will compare Matthew’s introduction to the story of Jesus’ ministry after his wilderness temptations: “12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 16 the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

There are several striking similarities in structure and diction between these passages. E.g. both begin with a report of something heard that prompts a decision to leave one location and settle in another. Moreover, not only does each passage designate the town where the person flees, but also the region: Nazareth was in the “district of Galilee,” as well as the old tribal territory of Zebulun, while Capernaum lay in the old territory of Naphtali. What’s more, following each of these reports, Matthew cites a passage from the Scriptures that the move fulfills. Joseph and
Mary’s settling in Nazareth is said to fulfill words adapted from (most likely) Judges 13.5, “He will be called a Nazorean,” while the reference to “the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali” leads into the quotation from Isaiah 9.

Note, however, a difference in order for these various localities. In chapter 2 the region is first identified and then the specific city, whereas in chapter 4 the newly adopted city is mentioned first and then the region. The reason for this difference is not hard to perceive: in each case the geographic unit featured in the citation is placed immediately before the quotation; the quotation determines the order of the place names.

And this reveals a consideration we must always bear in mind in working with Matthew: his desire to show links between events in Jesus’ life and work, and statements in the Hebrew Bible. He frequently allows the passage he cites to shape details of his story.

In fact, notice that even though Capernaum is in the “district of Galilee” just like Nazareth, Matthew introduces the old regional markers of this belonging to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali to lead into his quotation from Isaiah 9, which mentions those tribal units. And Matthew uses those tribal designations, even though Isaiah 9 subsequently also mentions “Galilee of the Gentiles,” which would create a better link to first century realities than these long-defunct tribal units. Clearly the important issue for Matthew was to provide a secure and immediate link to Isaiah 9 via the initial references to Zebulun and Naphtali.

This is one reason I would dispute Freed’s assertion that by including “Galilee of the Gentiles” in his citation from Isaiah, Matthew was emphasizing the openness of the gospel to Gentiles, since he doesn’t make the “Gentile” character of the region the basis of the link, but rather the old Israelite tribal designations. Thus, I think Freed is reading too much into a phrase that Matthew did not take up himself. The question of Matthew’s stance towards Gentiles is, as we shall see, a complicated one; by no means is a theme of Jewish rejection of Jesus, over against Gentile acceptance of him, as common in Matthew as he suggests. That description is more appropriate to Luke.

The final parallel between these passages that reveals Matthean composition of both is the introduction of each quotation with identical diction: “so that what had been spoken through the prophet(s) might be fulfilled.” This phraseology is distinctively Matthean.

E.g. you’ll recall that in Mark 1, after Jesus exorcised a demon from a man in a synagogue in Capernaum, he, along with Simon, Andrew, James and John, visited Simon’s mother-in-law, and Jesus healed her. Matthew also relays this incident, although in chapter 8 and, not surprisingly, he condenses it.

The sequel to that event in Mark reflects Jesus’ growing reputation: “32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with
And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.” Again Matthew relays Mark’s words in abbreviated form.

But Matthew alone subjoins to these two incidents the following note: “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” – Matthew identifies in these reports of healing a fulfillment of a prophetic passage. This sort of correlation of an event in Jesus’ life with a prophet passage appears twelve times in the Gospel of Matthew, of which four stand in his infancy narrative.

E.g. Matthew reports that after the wise men had visited the house where the family was living in Bethlehem, “the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” 14Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15and remained there until the death of Herod.”

For Matthew, however, this is significant not so much as an event in-and-of-itself, but more so as the realization of a prophecy: “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

As Nickle alerts you, this quotation comes from chapter 11 of Hosea, as part of the Lord’s lament over Israel: “1When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. 2The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.”

In this case, Matthew has taken a statement that Hosea applied to Israel and has cast it as a foreshadowing of the flight of Jesus’ parents to Egypt, based on the confession that Jesus is God’s son and the reference to Egypt. That might seem to us like a slim and questionable correspondence, but for Matthew it was enough to establish that this event connected with prophetic words. Nor is this the only odd correspondence Matthew draws in this narrative.

When Herod realizes he has been hoodwinked by the wise men, Herod directs his armies to slaughter all infants in Bethlehem, two years or younger. At the end of that report Matt comments, “17Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” – Matthew correctly identifies this passage as from Jeremiah (31.15). However, in that context, the talk of Rachel weeping for her children has to do with a lament over those taken into exile by the Babylonians when they sacked Jerusalem, as becomes apparent in the two verses that follow it: “Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the
enemy; there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country.”

Again, for Matthew, the issue is drawing lines of correspondence between events in Jesus’ life and words in the prophets. His notion of prediction and fulfillment is not according to modern scientific measurement of an event answering an intuition someone had in the past. To see that as his intent is to see him failing miserably. However, his approach is consistent with the way prophecy was interpreted and applied by Jewish groups in the first century.

E.g. the community at Qumran, in a commentary on the book of the prophet Nahum, cited this verse from the start of Nahum chapter 3: “Alas, the bloody city, all of it treachery, stuffed with loot!” – A glance at the context in Nahum shows this to be part of a mock lament the prophet utters against the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, and yet here is the interpretation Qumran found for it: “Its interpretation: it is the city of Ephraim, those looking for easy interpretations in the final days, since they walk in treachery and lies.” – “Ephraim” is a code word at Qumran for the majority of Israel, who refused to align themselves with Qumran and their demands for obedience to the Torah – quite a different group than the Assyrians Nahum had in view. As with Matthew, the correspondences drawn are more “resonances” than scientifically measured predictions-and-fulfillments.

Accordingly, when we see Matthew’s drawing such correlations between passages in the prophets and events in Jesus’ life, the relationship is more elastic than we might suppose. For Matthew, the notion of “fulfillment” of the prophetic words is rather general: more a matter of echoes or resonances that link Jesus to the Hebrew Scriptures.

There is still one other way that Matthew’s use of this citation in chapter 4 has controlled his portrayal of the action. Matthew reports in v. 13 that “Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum.”

While Mark’s initial narrative (after Jesus’ wilderness temptations) has him heading to Capernaum and performing a series of healings there, never does Mark say that Jesus made that city his home. Similarly, when Luke refers to Capernaum in 4.31, he designates it with no greater specificity than to refer to it as “a city in Galilee.” And while we’re at it, John’s Gospel is equally silent about any special significance for Capernaum.

Most likely, then, Mark’s reference to Jesus beginning his work with a visit to Capernaum gave Matthew a foundation for casting it as Jesus’ adopted city, since it allowed him to create another correlation between an event in Jesus’ life and a prophetic passage. While Nazareth was in the old territory of Zebulun, allowing him to coordinate that element of Jesus’ activity with Isaiah 9, having Jesus move his headquarters to Capernaum secured a foothold in the tribal territory of Naphtali, thus securing the connection with Isaiah.
Seeing how Matthew constructs loose correspondences between events and prophetic passages, we should not be too surprised to find, in chapter 2, that when Matthew informs us that the family settling in Nazareth fulfilled a prophecy that “He will be called a Nazorean,” no one has been able to specify a prophetic text that says precisely this. In fact, notice that while elsewhere Matthew names a specific prophet, here Matthew speaks of this as having been spoken through “the prophets.” Most likely what Matthew is doing is creating a resonance with several passages, such as the instruction to Samson’s mother, delivered by an angel in Judges 13.7: “You shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death.”

The word “nazirite” (in Hebrew is nazir) means “one devoted to God” and was transliterated into Greek as nazairaioi, which is very close to the Greek word behind “Nazarene,” nazoriai. The difference between the two is slight, involving the internal vowels. Quite likely, then, Judges 13.7 is at least a passage Matthew had in mind. In any case, it is clear that his attempt to link the move to Nazareth with a prophetic presaging of it is more a matter of resonance than of direct prediction.

It shouldn’t, then, surprise us to discover that the story of the flight of Joseph and his family to Egypt presumes another passage from the Hebrew Bible, although this time without directly citing it. One peculiarity of these verses that has often been noted is the distinction drawn between “Israel” and “Galilee.” Galilee was traditionally considered part of Israel, even if under Roman rule Israel’s territory had been divided into the districts of Galilee, Samaria and Judea; Galilee continued to be seen by Jews as Israelite territory. Moreover, “Israel” no longer designated a particular tract of land. Accordingly, it seems it would have been more accurate for Matthew to speak of the family setting out to return to Judea, where Bethlehem is located, but then switching course for Galilee, where Nazareth is found. And indeed, at one point he designates this territory as Judea. So why Matthew’s peculiar talk about heading for Israel, but diverting to Galilee?

Let’s notice that the reference to “Israel” arises first in an angel’s command to Joseph in a dream: “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”

By itself, this statement appears unremarkable; it’s a logical piece in the narrative. But let’s compare it with instruction given by God to the refugee Moses in Exodus 4.19-20: “19 The LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead.” 20 So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt.”

The points of contact here are no doubt apparent, but I’ll point them out anyway. Clearly the overall theme is the same: a man receives divine reassurance that it is
safe to return to the land where once a threat existed. Especially noteworthy, however, is the use of the same diction in the divine message: “Go to ‘X’; for all those who were seeking ‘Y’s’ life are dead.” And then we get a report of the individual taking his family and leaving for the former land.

The obvious difference between these stories, however, is that whereas the land to which Moses returned was “Egypt,” whereas Joseph and his family return to the land of Israel.” But let’s recall the awkwardness of the reference to “Israel” as a counterpart to “Galilee.” This peculiarity is explicable if Matthew modeled this story consciously on the story of Moses’ return to Egypt, as seems likely based on the parallels we’ve noted. One can understand why Matthew considered the logical counterpart to “the land of Egypt” to be “the land of Israel” rather than the “district of Judea” or the like. It seems probable, then, that Matthew modeled the story of the return after Herod’s death according to the report of Moses’ return to Egypt after the Pharaoh’s death.

And so, we can detect in the final verses, which talk about Joseph’s change in plans, that Matthew was just as responsible for creating these verses as he was for formulating vv. 12-16 of chapter four, where we find the same redactional devices.

If Matthew is responsible for creating vv. 13-23, which report the return to the land following Herod’s death, then what of the report presupposed in those verses – the story of Herod’s ordered annihilation of all male infants under 2 in Bethlehem, narrated as follows: “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.”

Of course, this is followed by one of Matthew’s citations of a prophetic text this event “fulfills.” We’ve already looked at this citation, noting the tangential relationship between the way the statement functions in Jeremiah and the way it functions here. The use of the fulfillment theme, given how we’ve seen Matthew operate to date, already raises suspicions that he has fashioned this part of his narrative in light of his quotation from Jeremiah.

More significantly, however, given the way Matthew played off the divine summons for Moses to return to Egypt in constructing the summons Joseph received to return, one cannot help but notice the similarity between Herod’s order to kill all male infants in Bethlehem, and the Pharaoh’s order to kill all Hebrew males early in the narrative of Exodus. Of course there Moses escapes not because his parents get out of town, but because his mother hides him at home for three months and then constructs a small boat in which to hide him among the rushes of the river, where he is found by the Pharaoh’s daughter, who takes him in and raises him as her own child.
Another difference between the stories is that the Pharaoh’s aim is not the annihilation of one child, but all Hebrew males, so as to ensure that the Hebrew people will not continue to propagate. He does not want this subject people to become too numerous to control. Herod, on the other hand, is out to eliminate a single child who, according to the wise men, will become Israel’s king, a possibility Herod wants to preclude.

These differences between Herod’s slaughter of the innocents and the Pharaoh’s slaughter of all Hebrew males raise doubts about finding a link between these stories such as we found in the commands to Joseph and Moses to return to their lands. And if we were to look simply at the biblical story of Pharaoh, we would be at a dead end. However, early Jewish literature retold biblical stories in such a way as to fill in the gaps of information. What, for instance, did Moses’ father have to say about this crisis? He’s not even given a name in Exodus.

The Jewish historian Josephus, working at the end of the first century, incorporates into his massive work, *Jewish Antiquities*, not only stories from the Hebrew Bible, but also retellings of them circulating in his day. Among the latter was this more detailed account of the Pharaoh’s plot: “One of the sacred scribes – persons with considerable skill in accurately predicting the future – announced to the king that there would be born to the Israelites at that time one who would abase the sovereignty of the Egyptians and exalt the Israelites, were he reared to maturity, and would surpass all men in virtue and win everlasting renown. Alarmed at this, the king, on this sage’s advice, ordered that every male child born to the Israelites should be destroyed by being cast into the river.”

This embellishment of the story assumes that knowledge of Moses’ eventual rise lay behind the Pharaoh’s plot, much as Herod’s actions are based on information about the birth of a rival. Positing that Matthew knew and used this elaboration of the Exodus story accords with his use of the story of Moses in describing Joseph and Mary’s return to “the land of Israel.” And it finds support from other features of Matthew’s story.

Recall, for instance, that when the wise men come to Jerusalem asking where the “king of the Jews” has been born, Herod consults with the chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem, who identify Bethlehem as the place the Messiah is to be born, based on a passage from the prophet Micah that forecasts a ruler will arise from Bethlehem to “shepherd my people Israel.” – This use of another Scripture citation establishing a correspondence between Jesus and a prophet’s words hints at Matthew’s hand in fashioning this story.

Moreover, let’s recall how the story Josephus tells elucidates hidden reasons for Pharaoh’s command to slay all Hebrew infants: “One of the sacred scribes – persons with considerable skill in accurately predicting the future – announced to the king that there would be born to the Israelites at that time one who would abase
the sovereignty of the Egyptians and exalt the Israelites.” – It’s noteworthy that, in Josephus’ account, the word “sacred scribes” is *hierogrammateis*, a compound of the words “priest” and “scribe,” while Matthew uses the phrase “chief priests and scribes” (*arciereis kai grammateis*), the two components in Josephus’ compound word. Given the similarities between these stories, the elaborated form of the narrative Josephus preserves likely provided material for Matthew’s story of Herod’s attempt to eliminate Jesus. In fact, as we’ll see, Matthew draws both subtle and not-so-subtle parallels between Jesus and Moses throughout his Gospel.

But we are still left with some features of this narrative unaccounted for, such as where Matthew gets this group of “wise men” who come to see the infant Jesus, as well as the story of them following a star to find Jesus.

We should first note that these “wise men” are not philosophers or men of letters. In fact, the word in Greek is *magoi*, sometimes transliterated into English as “magi.” Freed surveys opinions about such “magi” in the ancient world, but makes the error of speaking only of the western Mediterranean. It is important to note that these magi are said to have come from the east, and they report having observed “his star at its rising.” Ancient Mesopotamia was the birthplace of astrology, and its Magi were its widely-respected experts. I.e. these Magi are professional astrologers who have noticed a conjunction of stars signaling the birth of a new “king of the Jews.”

What doesn’t make sense, however, is the peculiar behavior of the star once they have set out. According to vv. 7-8, Herod consults with the Magi about when they first saw the star and then sends them off for Bethlehem to find Jesus and send back word (although he certainly isn’t serious about worshipping him, as Nickle seems to suppose). Then v. 9 reports, “When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.” – This is a most peculiar star: one that can precede them, showing the way, until at last it stands over the place, marking the spot. This sort of capability does not conform to the stars astronomers study, nor is it consistent with the types of stars Mesopotamian astrologers studied. Moreover, if the Magi had been following the star, and the star wound up taking them to the spot anyway, why did they stop to ask for directions? These are not typical males. Or, more precisely, the star’s function as a guide is muddled. Where did Matthew get this odd star?

It is instructive to note, first of all, that the embellishment of the story of Herod’s plot as told by Josephus has likely been influenced also by the story in Exodus 7 where Aaron casts down his staff and it turns into a snake. At that point, says Exodus 7, “Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts.” This is likely where the
“sacred scribes” of Josephus’ story come from. And the fact that these sacred scribes are said to be skilled “in accurately predicting the future” provides a parallel not only to the “chief priests and scribes” Herod consults, but also to the Magi, who specialize in just that skill. Doubtless the assistance this group renders Pharaoh was part of what inspired their presence in Matthew’s narrative.

And yet, the Magi do not function simply as Herod’s accomplices in Matthew, because they wind up thwarting Herod’s sinister plot. While they gave him information that alerted him to a potentially dangerous rival, they left him in a quandary when they did not report back, as instructed, but “left for their own country by another road.” And so, even if the Matthean context is amenable to the type of specialists these magi are, their role is different than that of Pharaoh’s advisors in the elaborated Exodus story. How do we account for this?

Given the way Matthew constructs his narrative from stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, it will not be surprising to find that he has done the same thing again here. In fact, the role played by the Magi also runs parallel to that played in the book of Numbers by the prophet-for-hire named Balaam that Freed mentions.

Numbers 22 reports that, as the Hebrews passed through the countries on the east side of the Jordan on their way from Egypt to their new land, the people of Moab were terrified, having heard of the destruction the Hebrews wreaked on other nations in their path. And so their king, named Balak, “sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw, to summon him, saying, “A people has come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth, and they have settled next to me. 5Come now, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land; for I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed.”

After some cajoling, Balaam agrees to accompany Balak’s messengers, but only with the understanding that he cannot promise to curse Israel; he must utter only what the Lord gives him to say. And sure enough, when he takes up his position overlooking the encampment of Israel, all Balaam can utter is a blessing. Not exactly pleased with this outcome, Balak takes Balaam to another spot, thinking the change of venue would change Balaam’s words. When that proves futile, Balak takes Balaam to yet a third location, but Balaam’s words are again a blessing, including the following lines from 24.17: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near – a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”

Especially interesting is the way the Septuagint translates this verse into Greek: “I will point to him, though not now; I bless him, though he has not drawn near; a star will rise from Jacob, and a man will stand forth from Israel.”
In the period of early Judaism leading up to the first century, this passage was interpreted as a prophecy of the Messiah. As Freed reports, we find it in texts from the community that lived at Qumran, and it appears in other Jewish writings before the turn of the era. In fact, a work called “The Testament of Levi,” which anticipates the rise of a priestly Messiah descended from Levi, derives this assertion from Num 24.17: “His star will rise in heaven, as if he were a king.” In fact, note the similarity between this statement and that of the Magi that they “observed his star at its rising.” The interpretation of the star of Numbers 24.17 as a star that signaled the rise of a royal figure is strikingly similar to what the Magi report.

And to this I want to add that even though Balaam is the chief character in Num 22-24, he doesn’t travel alone. Num 22.22 reports that as Balaam rode a donkey to meet Balak, two servants accompanied him. Then also, in Num 23.7 Balaam exclaims, “Balak has brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.” So Balaam, like the magi, travels from the east. What’s more, at the close of the narrative about Balak’s failure to get Balaam to curse Israel the narrator reports, “Then Balaam got up and went back to his place, and Balak also went his way,” just as Matthew tells us that, “having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

Given the striking similarities between Numbers’ story of Balaam and the story of the Magi, it seems likely that Matthew utilized this story, along with traditions about the Exodus story, in penning chapter 2.

Of course, this does not yet account for the peculiarity of the star going before the magi to guide them to Jesus, especially since they seem to have gotten to Jerusalem without asking directions. So whence this moving star?

The most likely explanation is that Matthew is drawing on another incident from the same era as the story of Balaam and the Exodus, when Moses led the people out of Egypt. As you might recall, Exodus reports that as the people set out on the journey to their land, “The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.” – It is likely a reminiscence of that scene that has been transmuted into a star that moved before the Magi to guide them to something more significant than the promised land.

Even the subsequent report that once the magi arrived and saw the child, they opened “their treasure chests, [and] offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” might well derive from reflection on a biblical passage. Isaiah 60.1 exclaims, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.” And then, a few verses later, we read the announcement, “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all
those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.”

Chapter 2, then, narrates events after Jesus’ birth in such a way as to show two possible responses to Jesus that will be repeated again and again in the First Gospel: either one can recognize and worship him, or one can try to annihilate him – although I would differ with Freed, who finds in Herod a representative of the Jewish people in their rejection of Jesus. Herod would be an odd representative of the Jewish people, given that they never accepted him as truly Jewish and no real love was lost between them. He was no more a part of the people than were any of the Roman procurators who followed him.

Underlying the whole narrative, however, is Matthew’s persistent attempt to align Jesus and events in his life with texts and themes from the Hebrew Bible. He does that not only by citing passages he asserts Jesus fulfilled, but also by structuring the narrative according to those archetypal descriptions of Israel’s life in the time of Moses.

We won’t be surprised, then, to find that Matthew works in much the same way in his first narrative, beginning with 1.18: “18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “23 Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

A notable difference with Luke’s infancy narrative is obvious. The lead character is Joseph, while Mary is present only in name. Moreover, she is not portrayed as a pious young woman, but as a problem, given her pregnancy prior to their living together. What is to be done about Mary? As we’ve seen, Joseph is ready to divorce her.

But there is a striking similarity between Joseph’s consternation and the consternation of Moses’ father in the expanded story of Moses’ birth told by Josephus.

A curious feature of the story of Moses’ birth in Exodus is that it says nothing more about Moses’ father than that he was a Levite. Naturally, that begged the
question of what role he played in Moses’ infancy, and legend supplied the answer, as well as a name for him: “Amarames…seriously anxious on his own account because his wife was with child, was in grievous perplexity. He accordingly had recourse to prayer to God….And God had compassion on him and, moved by his supplication, appeared to him in his sleep, exhorting him not to despair of the future and told him…’This child, whose birth has filled the Egyptians with such dread that they have condemned to destruction all the offspring of the Israelites, shall indeed be yours. He shall escape those who are watching to destroy him and, reared in marvelous wisdom, he shall deliver the Hebrew race from their bondage in Egypt.’”

Not only is there a similarity between the perplexity of Amarames and Joseph, as well as the divine reassurance each of them receives, but notice that just as Amarames is told that his son “shall deliver the Hebrew race from their bondage in Egypt,” so Joseph is told that Jesus “will save his people from their sins.” Just as Matthew adopted the story of Pharaoh’s plot against Moses for his story of Herod’s attempt on Jesus’ life, so it appears he also adopted this story – in both cases infusing the story of Jesus with reminiscences of Moses. But Matthew has even larger concerns driving him.

It is noteworthy that Joseph’s consternation is over how Mary became pregnant. This is likely not a scenario Matthew (or any other first century Christian) created, since it raises questions about who Jesus’ father was. And, in fact, we know that by at least the second century aspersions were being cast on Jesus patrimony in Jewish circles. What’s more, the Gospel of John, written somewhere in the range of 90-100 C.E., hints that such accusations were circulating already in that author’s day.

In chapter 8 of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus accuses the Jews he faces of being “children of the Devil,” to which they respond by saying, “We are not illegitimate children [lit: “children of/begotten by sexual immorality]; we have one father, God himself.” – Their retort is likely not a response to Jesus’ assertion that they are the Devil’s children, but an allusion to doubts about Jesus’ patrimony. I.e. “Christians may claim God is Jesus’ true father, but we know that he was conceived outside of wedlock; we are God’s true children.” Given that the Fourth Gospel alludes to this defamation, Matthew may also have been familiar with those charges, so that his portrayal of Joseph’s struggle to do what is right by the Torah is a way of addressing those charges.

In fact, towards the end of Matthew’s Gospel we find him familiar with another common defamation of Christian tradition, which he both reflects and counters with this report: “12 After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 telling them, ‘You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’” 14If this
comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.”

15So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.”

By casting this tale about what happened to Jesus’ body as a plot by the Jewish priests and elders, Matthew provides a rebuttal that portrays that tale as calculated misinformation.

Similarly, through his story of Joseph’s consternation over Mary’s apparently scandalous pregnancy, Matthew may be providing a rebuttal to charges that Jesus was conceived in some sort of illicit relationship (perhaps adultery). And while the angel’s announcement of Jesus’ conception by the Spirit while Mary was a virgin is integral to his defense, his citation of Isaiah 7:14 as a foreshadowing of this is not so much meant to “prove” it as to provide a warning: to cast aspersions on Jesus’ divine origins is to stand against the purposes of God, who planned this long ago.

So once again we find Matthew’s narrative quite likely the product of his own hand, combining whatever lore there was about Jesus’ birth with Scriptural traditions about Israel. And by the way Matthew wrote his infancy narrative he was able not only to refute calumny about Jesus origins, but also to establish from the beginning of Jesus’ life his similarity to Moses and his singular ties to God, who gave him birth. And Matthew was equally able to lay down the two sides one may join: either worshipping him, as do the magi and as will many throughout Matthew’s narrative, or seeking to kill him, as does Herod and as will the Jewish leaders (who are no better than Herod).