



## INCARNATION: A YALE BIBLE STUDY

### Come Thou Unexpected Jesus Fleshing Out Matthew's Christmas Story

with Dr. Allen Hilton

"At the center of the human heart is the longing for an absolute good,  
a longing which is always there and is never appeased  
by any object in this world."

Simone Weil

#### Open – Anticipation

Hunger is the best sauce, says the proverb. Anticipation is a part of our experience of anything we see coming – a holiday, a big date, or, on the other side of the pleasantness ledger, a root canal. We frame the events of our lives by the way we expect them, and our Gospels present Jesus as a long-expected savior. Charles Wesley's famous hymn captures the spirit of this expectation:

*Come, Thou, long expected Jesus  
Born to set Thy people free;  
From our fears and sins release us,  
Let us find our rest in Thee.*

*Israel's strength and consolation,  
Hope of all the earth Thou art;  
Dear desire of every nation,  
Joy of every longing heart.*

*Born Thy people to deliver,  
Born a child and yet a King,  
Born to reign in us forever,  
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.*

*By Thine own eternal Spirit*

*Rule in all our hearts alone;  
By Thine all sufficient merit,  
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.  
By Thine all sufficient merit,  
Raise us to Thy glorious throne*

These are beautiful lyrics, and they capture Advent in their own way. For many of us, though, the Jesus we expect and the Jesus we discover are two different sorts.

If you're in that group, our ancient brother Matthew understands you. His story of Jesus' birth sets up that very kind of comparison. We're accustomed to taking every line of the story as God's voice, but Matthew's Gospel will make us wonder about that. Is the Jesus we see profiled in the first three chapters the same as the one we meet in the rest of the book?

The answer is fascinating. It summons the lyrics a group that is very much not a hymn-writing lot: The Rolling Stones. Jagger once unwittingly penned an apt theme for Matthew's Gospel: "You don't always get what you wanted...you get what you need." And so, traveling from Wesley to Jagger and back, we sing out Matthew's tune: "Come Thou Unexpected Jesus".

### **Part One – The Jesus We Expect**

We who want to drink deeply the drama of Matthew's Christmas story naturally gravitate to the narrative of Joseph's difficult decision, Jesus' birth (1.18-25), and the visit of the Magi from the east (2.1-11). That makes sense, because the creche we dust off and the nativity scene we play out in this season do feature these key players; and these beautiful episodes deserve our attention.

There is a danger, though, that we'll miss things. If we rivet exclusively on those famous scenes, we can speed right past an important aspect of how those episodes and the others around them function in Matthew's Gospel. We tend to isolate Jesus' birth and the wise guys' visit and reserve them for Christmas and the twelve days after. We even "put them away" like our Christmas decorations, ready for next year.

For Matthew, though, these parts of the Christmas pageant are the opening act of a powerful play – almost a prologue to how he will portray Jesus to his mostly-Jewish-Christian audience living amid the non-Christian Jews who surround them. They surely loved these stories, but their larger questions and the issue of their lives as they first heard this scroll read out would have riveted on Jesus' identity. They had bet their faith and life on Jesus' identity, and most of their neighbors disagreed with them about that decision.

In that early Christian context, Matthew's first act sets the expectations and anticipations of who Jesus will be and what he will do. In our time together this session, we'll focus on those expectations by reading closely through the genealogy, the angel's announcement to Joseph, the words of wise men and Herod and priests, and the actions of Herod.

Once we've gathered all these, we will be ready to compare what these early voices expect Jesus to be with the Jesus who actually lives and breathes in the pages of chapters 4-28. So, let's read!

### **A Genealogy (Matthew 1.1-17)**

Twenty-first-century Americans have gone stark raving genealogical. In fact, there's pretty good money to be made telling people where they came from. Have you done Ancestry or 23andMe? Ancestry.com raked in a \$ 1 billion [last year](#). That's partly because DNA testing has increased interest, but people were pretty nuts about Ancestry before that began. In an ethnically-diverse land, we want to know who we are, and knowing our heritage seems to help us with that.

Genealogies mattered in first-century Judaism, too. That's partly because, while a mission to Gentiles had begun in the couple centuries leading up to Jesus' time, the covenant people had largely defined themselves by bloodlines for a couple millennia. But more specifically, the Jewish people had a leftover expectation that a David-Son was on the way.

All of that said, when we read Bible, you and I don't perk up at genealogies. Our eyes glaze over. We love getting credit for a memory verse with only three words ("Adam, Seth, Enosh" in 1 Chronicles 1.1); otherwise we snooze through them. We should reconsider our approach, because that one would hurt us here. Matthew 1.1-17 forms the first statement about Jesus in that Gospel.

*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.  
2 Abraham was the father of Isaac...<sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of King David.  
And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah...<sup>11</sup> and Josiah the father of  
Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.  
12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel...<sup>16</sup> and  
Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called  
the Messiah.\*  
17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from  
David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to  
Babylon to the Messiah,\* fourteen generations.*

For long generations the Jews have expected Messiah to come from the line of David. It started with a jolt. A prophet had promised King David that his dynasty would be everlasting – that there would be a son of a son of a son of David on the throne forever. (2 Samuel 7) But in 597-587 B.C., Babylonian armies under King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple and the palace in Jerusalem and ended David's dynasty (2 Kings 23-24). As the Jewish people processed that disorienting and even traumatizing event and the exile that followed, some of them began to look for God's answer in this Messiah ("anointed") figure who would be a mighty successor to David. Most pictured a political and military powerhouse who would storm the palace.

A couple things to notice about the genealogy:

- Female and International Presence.  
The mostly male list of Joseph's forebears features people who don't initially seem like central casting – including non-Jewish women like Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth (1.3, 5). So, the first verses of the Gospel highlights Gentiles in the story. The Magi will soon come from other nations to the east, and Jesus' Great Commission in the last verses of the Gospel will be a call to "make disciples of all nations/Gentiles".
- A Late Switcheroo  
The form of the genealogy becomes rhythmic (with the three or four exceptions where mothers are named – see above):

*A was the father of B, B was the father of C, C was the father of D, and so on.*

But when we finally reach the climax at Joseph, things change.

*Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.*

That's what happens to Ancestry.com when the Holy Spirit interrupts the flow! Jesus will come back to this theme when he counter-interrogates the Jewish leaders in Matthew 22.

I told you genealogies are worth our attention! This one sends several signals, but the center is clear: Jesus is Messiah, an indirect David-Son.

### **The Angel's Words to Joseph**

To any Jew of the first century, the name Joseph would have rung a resounding bell of recognition. Abraham and Sarah had a great grandson of that name – a son of Jacob – who began life very cocky and so got himself sold into Egyptian slavery by jealous brothers. Once in Egypt, however, he grew up and became a high-level counselor in the Egyptian government. In that role, he became famous for his prescient dreams. Then his place in government helped him rescue his family from a severe famine years later.

Now we are ready to listen with our ancient Jewish-Christian brothers and sisters to Matthew's story of a second Joseph – the one whose name came last in the genealogy.

*<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law (DIKAIOS), and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1.18-19)*

A couple of things to know here:

1. Adultery was punishable by stoning (Leviticus 20.10), and we know that this practice lived into the first century because John 8 features a mob of men who site Moses to rationalize their attempt to stone a woman “caught in the very act of adultery”. (John 8.1-5)
2. Four chapters from now, when Matthew’s Jesus takes up the subject of divorce in Jerusalem, he will say that Moses allowed it too easily, but that adultery is really the only warrant for a divorce. (Matthew 5.32 – Notice, though, that in this context Jesus does not demand that the adulterous one should be executed.)

Because Joseph is both faithful to the Law and compassionate toward Mary, he chooses not to expose her in the public square and demand vindication (his right under the Law), but rather to “divorce her quietly.”

That’s Joseph’s plan, at least...until he suddenly became the second dreaming Joseph in scripture.

*<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> 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.” (Matthew 1.20-21)*

The angel of the Lord effectively talks Joseph out of divorcing Mary. His argument has two points:

1. Mary did not commit adultery. (It was the Spirit!)
2. Her child will be a major part of God’s future.

The angel’s second piece is important for us, because it is an expectation: “this one will save his people (Israel) from their sins.” We should write that one down somewhere

The angel’s words work, of course, and Joseph and Mary marry.

*<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1.24-25)*

While they don’t all live happily ever after – heaven knows there’s a difficult road ahead for this family – this Joseph, like his namesake, has seen God move mysteriously.

## **The Narrator**

Between the angel's dreamy words to Joseph and Joseph's decision to continue with Mary, our narrator tosses in his two cents about this by linking these events to the anticipations of the prophet Isaiah.

*<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

One more addition to our expectations list: this son will be Immanuel – "God with us."

So thus far Jesus is tagged to some sort of Savior and the very presence of God. It's a lot to put on a kid's shoulders. Parenting manuals would not approve. But I digress. On to the wise men.

### **Foreign Visitors and the Local King (Matthew 2.1-12)**

The next scene takes us from the intimate picture of a new couple welcoming their first child into the world, to the wider world of international politics. Wise Men (Magi) from the east, who seem a lot like foreign dignitaries paying some sort of pre-emptive tribute, bring gifts to Jesus, because they expect that he will be "King of the Jews." They have a star for GPS, but that only gets them so far. They have to stop and ask directions.

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, <sup>\*</sup> and have come to pay him homage.'*

Foreign dignitaries arrive in the holy city asking big questions. It's bound to start the rumor mill rolling, and it does.

*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened [or "troubled"], and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd <sup>\*</sup>my people Israel.'"*

Herod is clever enough to connect the dots:

"King of the Jews" = Messiah = No Good Future for the Current King

So he plays the worshipper, while he is really deputizing the Magi to be his agents:

*<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search*

*diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'<sup>9</sup>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.*

*<sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped,\* they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road (Mt 2.1-12).*

We've added an expectation: this boy will "shepherd [God's] people" – whatever that means.

### **John the Baptist**

The story of John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel is poignant and very relevant to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. John begins as the fiery announcer of the coming Messiah. He ends executed by a petty despot.

John the Baptist may have had the highest, most powerful expectation of Jesus. Here is what he says about the "one who is coming after me" in Matthew 3:

*'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup>His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*

In order to understand the significance of John's announcement, we need to know a bit more about John himself. He was a big deal!

Here is the report about John from a Jewish historian of the late first century called Josephus:

*Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and was a very just punishment for what he did against John called the baptist [the dipper]. For Herod had him killed, although he was a good man and had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue, both as to justice toward one another and reverence towards God, and having done so join together in washing. For immersion in water, it was clear to him, could not be used for the forgiveness of sins, but as a sanctification of the body, and only if the soul was already thoroughly purified by right actions. And when others massed about him, for they were very greatly moved by his words, Herod, who feared that such strong influence over the people might carry to a revolt -- for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise -- believed it much better to move now than later have it raise a rebellion and engage him in actions he would regret.*

*And so John, out of Herod's suspiciousness, was sent in chains to Machaerus, the fort previously mentioned, and there put to death; but it was the opinion of the Jews that out of retribution for John God willed the destruction of the army so as to afflict Herod. (Josephus, Antiquities 18.5.2.116-119)*

Josephus adds a feature to our Bible's explanation that Herod executed John over a petty request from his lover. That undoubtedly factored in, but Herod is a politician and John's popularity has become inconvenient for him. This recognition of John's vast following aligns with New Testament depictions of John's popularity.

- When Jewish authorities in Jerusalem ask Jesus by what authority he acts and speaks the way he does, he traps them by asking, "Was the baptism of John from God or not?" Jesus has them, because if they say the baptism of John is not divine, the people will mob them. John was still very popular in Jerusalem a couple years after his death. If they say that John was from God, they're guilty of not acknowledging it. They feebly reply, "We do not know."
- In the Book of Acts, written near the time of Josephus' writing, John's popularity has continued and spread all the way to Western Turkey.

*<sup>24</sup>Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. <sup>25</sup>He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup>He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. <sup>27</sup>And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, <sup>28</sup>for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus. (Acts 18.24-28)*

- The Gospel of John was also written in the late first century. In his Gospel prologue, this author spends precious column inches dealing with some people's sense that John might be the Messiah. After the splendid poetic start to his reflection on the Word in chapter 1, John interrupts himself:

*<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1.6-9)*



Then, immediately after his revelation that “the Word became flesh and lived among us...” our author again interrupts his flow, because he seems to feel a need to place John a level lower than Jesus:

*(John testified to him and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”’)* (John 1.15)

It seems clear that some in this Gospel’s audience are still confused about the identities of John and Jesus, and who ranks first. Again, John was a big deal for decades after he died and well beyond the confines of Jerusalem and Galilee.

All of this puts John’s self-deprecating comparative in context: sight unseen (in Matthew), this powerful, popular, to-be-revered-and-followed-well-beyond-his-death one, John the Baptist, announces that one who is coming after him is MUCH more powerful than he is. Given the speaker, this is no small claim!

## Summary

In Matthew’s Christmas story and its aftermath, we’ve amassed a pretty strong list of expectations for this child:

- A Conquering King Like David  
(Matthew 1.1 + Genealogy + Visit of the Magi + Herod’s Response)
- One Who Will Save His People from their Sin (the Angel to Joseph)
- Immanuel, God with Us (the Narrator)
- A Shepherd for Israel (the Narrator)
- A Powerful, Head-Rolling, Justice-Bringing Judge (John the Baptist)

## Comparing Anticipations with Jesus’ Reality

John the Baptist was a powerful and popular preacher. He had passion for God’s Kingdom and the future of his people in God’s plan. He fixed his anticipation on Jesus. And then he went to prison. In Matthew 11, we learn about his own ambivalence at who Jesus actually was, compared to the one he had expected.

*2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah\* was doing, he sent word by his\* disciples<sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers\* are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup>And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’*

*7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?’<sup>8</sup> What then*

*did you go out to see? Someone\* dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet?\** Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it is written,

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.”*

<sup>11</sup>Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup>From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence,\* and the violent take it by force. <sup>13</sup>For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came;<sup>14</sup> and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. <sup>15</sup>Let anyone with ears\* listen! (Matthew 11.2-15)

Ask yourself a few questions:

- What does John do with his doubts/disappointment?
- How does Jesus treat John’s question?
- Does Jesus seem threatened by John’s concern? What is the tone of Jesus’ response?

### **A Moment of Reflection on Our Expectations**

Each of us lives life expecting certain things of God. Here are some possible expectations about God.

- God will fix all the trouble in my life if I am just faithful.
- God will find me the right man/woman for me.
- God will clearly show me the right way when I face major decisions.
- God will not let people I love face tragedy.
- God will reward me for good behavior.
- God’s church will always be a clear reflection of God’s love.
- Others?

Can you think of a time when God has disappointed you?

How does Matthew’s picture of Peter’s and John the Baptist’s disappointment help us in the midst of our own theological disappointment?

Given the way Jesus dealt with them, how do you imagine Jesus would treat your questions and disappointments?

### **What’s Next?**

Luke is on deck. In Session Two we'll hear the familiar words of a young couple expecting a child and their Caesar-forced journey to be registered in their ancestral home. In preparation, you'll want to read chapters 1—2 of the Gospel of Luke. Look especially at the scope of this child's significance. See you Monday!