

MATTHEW
for
EVERYONE

PART 1
CHAPTERS 1–15

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

STUDY GUIDE BY M. KATHRYN ARMISTEAD

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

Romans for Everyone, Part 2

1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Christopher Philip Unwin,
priest and teacher of the faith,
with gratitude for the love, support and prayers
of over fifty years*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

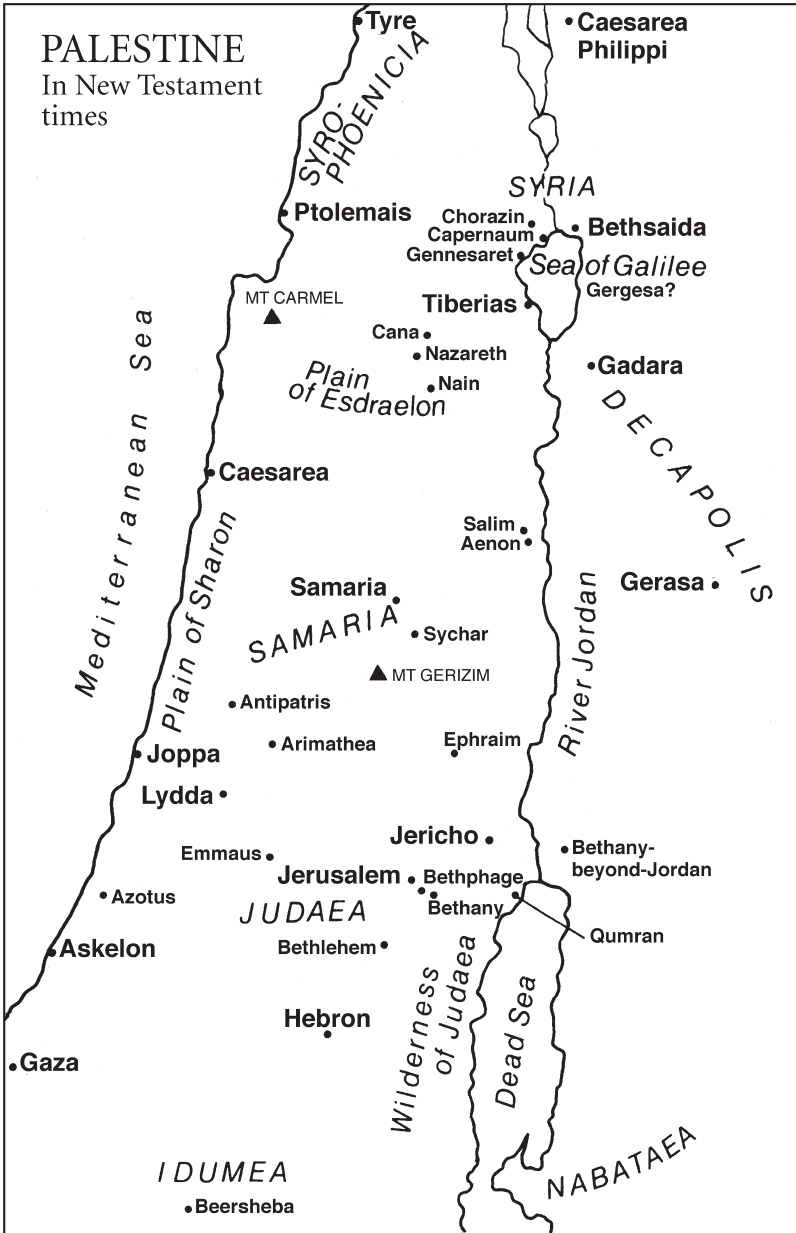
INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus' 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

Matthew's gospel presents Jesus in a rich, many-sided way. He appears as the Messiah of Israel, the king who will rule and save the world. He comes before us as the Teacher greater even than Moses. And, of course, he is presented as the son of man giving his life for us all. Matthew lays it all out step by step and invites us to learn the wisdom of the gospel message and the new way of life that results from it. So here it is: Matthew for everyone!

Tom Wright



MATTHEW 1.1–17

Jesus' Genealogy

¹The book of the family tree of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac of Jacob, Jacob of Judah and his brothers, ³Judah of Peres and Zara (by Tamar), Peres of Esrom, Esrom of Aram, ⁴Aram of Aminadab, Aminadab of Naason, Naason of Salmon, ⁵Salmon of Boaz (by Rahab), Boaz of Obed (by Ruth), Obed of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse of David the king.

David was the father of Solomon (by the wife of Uriah), ⁷Solomon of Rehoboam, Rehoboam of Abijah, Abijah of Asaph, ⁸Asaph of Jehosaphat, Jehosaphat of Joram, Joram of Uzziah, ⁹Uzziah of Joatham, Joatham of Ahaz, Ahaz of Hezekiah, ¹⁰Hezekiah of Manasseh, Manasseh of Amoz, Amoz of Josiah, ¹¹Josiah of Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the exile in Babylon.

¹²After the Babylonian exile, Jeconiah became the father of Salathiel, Salathiel of Zerubbabel, ¹³Zerubbabel of Abioud, Abioud of Eliakim, Eliakim of Azor, ¹⁴Azor of Sadok, Sadok of Achim, Achim of Elioud, ¹⁵Elioud of Eleazar, Eleazar of Matthan, Matthan of Jacob, ¹⁶and Jacob of Joseph the husband of Mary, from whom was born Jesus, who is called 'Messiah'.

¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David add up to fourteen; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; and from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

In Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the hero is asked about his family background, and is forced to confess that he had lost both his parents. He had been found, as a tiny baby, in a handbag. The indignation that greets these revelations is one of the most famous (and funny) moments in all Wilde's work. As one of them comments, 'To lose one parent . . . may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.'

The point is, of course, that tracing one's family pedigree is regarded by many societies as enormously important. Even in the liberal, democratic, Western world, where ideas of equality have long been cherished, tracing one's family roots provides a sense of identity which many find exciting and encouraging. In many more traditional societies, such as parts of Africa, or the Maori culture in New Zealand, family histories and family trees are a vital part of who you are. And of course, in tight-knit families and tribes that have lasted for centuries, there will be a good deal of intermarrying, so that the same person can often trace their descent several different ways. In such a world, telling the story of one's ancestry is as important a way of disclosing one's

identity as producing a good curriculum vitae is when job-hunting in the modern world.

This should remind us of what is going on at the beginning of Matthew's **gospel**. The average modern person who thinks 'maybe I'll read the New Testament' is puzzled to find, on the very first page, a long list of names he or she has never heard of. But it is important not to think that this is a waste of time. For many cultures ancient and modern, and certainly in the Jewish world of Matthew's day, this genealogy was the equivalent of a roll of drums, a fanfare of trumpets and a town crier calling for attention. Any first-century Jew would find this family tree both impressive and compelling. Like a great procession coming down a city street, we watch the figures at the front, and the ones in the middle, but all eyes are waiting for the one who comes in the position of greatest honour, right at the end.

Matthew has arranged the names so as to make this point even clearer. Most Jews, telling the story of Israel's ancestry, would begin with Abraham; but only a select few, by the first century AD, would trace their own line through King David. Even fewer would be able to continue by going on through Solomon and the other kings of Judah all the way to the **exile**.

For most of the time after the Babylonian exile, Israel had not had a functioning monarchy. The kings and queens they had had in the last 200 years before the birth of Jesus were not from David's family. Herod the Great, the old king we shall presently meet, had no royal blood, and was not even fully Jewish, but was simply an opportunist military commander whom the Romans made into a king to further their own Middle Eastern agendas. But there were some who knew that they were descended from the line of true and ancient kings. Even to tell that story, to list those names, was therefore making a political statement. You wouldn't want Herod's spies to overhear you boasting that you were part of the true royal family.

But that's what Matthew does, on Jesus' behalf. And, as though to emphasize that Jesus isn't just one member in an ongoing family, but actually the goal of the whole list, he arranges the genealogy into three groups of 14 names – or, perhaps we should say, into six groups of seven names. The number seven was and is one of the most powerful symbolic numbers, and to be born at the beginning of the seventh seven in the sequence is clearly to be the climax of the whole list. This birth, Matthew is saying, is what Israel has been waiting for two thousand years.

The particular markers along the way also tell their story. Abraham is the founding father, to whom God made great promises. He would be given the land of Canaan, and the nations would be blessed through his family. David was the great king, to whom, again, God made promises of

future lordship over the whole world. The Babylonian exile was the time when it seemed that all these promises were lost for ever, drowned in the sea of Israel's sins and God's judgment. But the prophets of the exile promised that God would again restore Abraham's people and David's royal line. The long years that followed, during which some of the Jews had come back from Babylon but were still living under foreign, pagan oppression, were seen by many as a continuing 'exile', still waiting for God to deliver Israel from sin and the judgment it brought. Now is the moment, Matthew is saying, for all this to happen. The child who comes at the end of this line is God's anointed, the long-awaited **Messiah**, to fulfil all the layers and levels of the prophecies of old.

But Matthew also knows that the way it has happened is very strange. He is about to tell how Mary, Jesus' mother, had become pregnant not through her fiancé, Joseph, but through the **holy spirit**. So Matthew adds to his list reminders of the strange ways God worked in the royal family itself: Judah treating his daughter-in-law Tamar as a prostitute, Boaz being the son of the Jericho prostitute Rahab, and David committing adultery with the wife of Uriah the Hittite. If God can work through these bizarre ways, he seems to be saying, watch what he's going to do now.

Matthew's gospel has stood at the front of the New Testament since very early times. Millions of Christians have read this genealogy as the beginning of their own exploration of who Jesus was and is. Once we understand what it all means, we are ready to proceed with the story. This, Matthew is saying, is *both* the fulfilment of two millennia of God's promises and purposes *and* something quite new and different. God still works like that today: keeping his promises, acting in character, and yet always ready with surprises for those who learn to trust him.

MATTHEW 1.18–25

The Birth of Jesus

¹⁸This was how the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place. His mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph; but before they came together she turned out to be pregnant – by the holy spirit. ¹⁹Joseph, her husband-to-be, was an upright man. He didn't want to make a public example of her. So he decided to set the marriage aside privately. ²⁰But, while he was considering this, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream.

'Joseph, son of David,' said the angel, 'don't be afraid to get married to Mary. The child she is carrying is from the holy spirit. ²¹She is going to have a son. You are to give him the name Jesus; he is the one who will save his people from their sins.'

²²All this happened so that what the Lord said through the prophet might be fulfilled: ²³Look: the virgin is pregnant, and will have a son, and they shall give him the name Emmanuel, – which means, in translation, ‘God with us’.

²⁴When Joseph woke up from his sleep he did what the Lord’s angel had told him to. He married his wife, ²⁵but he didn’t have sexual relations with her until after the birth of her son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

One of the most memorable movies I have seen is the film of Charles Dickens’s novel *Little Dorrit*. It is actually two films, both very long. The two films don’t follow in sequence, telling the first and second halves of the story; instead, each film shows the whole drama, but from a different point of view. First we see the action through the eyes of the hero; then, in the second film, the same story through the eyes of the heroine. A few scenes are identical, but in the second film we understand many things that hadn’t been clear the first time around. Like seeing with two eyes instead of one, the double movie enables the viewer to get a sense of depth and perspective on the whole dramatic story.

The story of Jesus’ birth in Matthew’s **gospel** is seen through the eyes of Joseph; in Luke’s gospel, we see it through Mary’s. No attempt is made to bring them into line. The central fact is the same; but instead of Luke’s picture of an excited Galilean girl, learning that she is to give birth to God’s **Messiah**, Matthew shows us the more sober Joseph, discovering that his fiancée is pregnant. The only point where the two stories come close is when the angel says to Joseph, as Gabriel said to Mary, ‘Don’t be afraid’. That is an important word for us, too, as we read the accounts of Jesus’ birth.

Fear at this point is normal. For centuries now many opponents of Christianity, and many devout Christians themselves, have felt that these stories are embarrassing and unnecessary – and untrue. We know (many will say) that **miracles** don’t happen. Remarkable healings, perhaps; there are ways of explaining them. But not babies born without human fathers. This is straining things too far.

Some go further. These stories, they say, have had an unfortunate effect. They have given the impression that sex is dirty and that God doesn’t want anything to do with it. They have given rise to the legend that Mary stayed a virgin for ever (something the Bible never says; indeed, here and elsewhere it implies that she and Joseph lived a normal married life after Jesus’ birth). This has promoted the belief that virginity is better than marriage. And so on.

It is of course true that strange ideas have grown up around the story of Jesus’ conception and birth, but Matthew (and Luke) can hardly be

blamed for that. They were telling the story they believed was both true and the ultimate explanation of why Jesus was the person he was.

They must have known that they were taking a risk. In the ancient pagan world there were plenty of stories of heroes conceived by the intervention of a god, without a human father. Surely Matthew, with his very Jewish perspective on everything, would hardly invent such a thing, or copy it from someone else unless he really believed it? Wouldn't it be opening Christianity to the sneers of its opponents, who would quickly suggest the obvious alternative, namely that Mary had become pregnant through some more obvious but less reputable means?

Well, yes, it would; but that would only be relevant if nobody already knew that there had been something strange about Jesus' conception. In John's gospel we hear the echo of a taunt made during Jesus' lifetime: maybe, the crowds suggest, Jesus' mother had been misbehaving before her marriage (8.41). It looks as though Matthew and Luke are telling this story because they know rumours have circulated and they want to set the record straight.

Alternatively, people have suggested that Matthew made his story up so that it would present a 'fulfilment' of the passage he quotes in verse 23, from Isaiah 7.14. But, interestingly, there is no evidence that anyone before Matthew saw that verse as something that would have to be fulfilled by the coming Messiah. It looks rather as though he found the verse because he already knew the story, not the other way round.

Everything depends, of course, on whether you believe that the living God could, or would, act like that. Some say he couldn't ('miracles don't happen'); others that he wouldn't ('if he did that, why doesn't he intervene to stop genocide?'). Some say Joseph, and others at the time, didn't know the scientific laws of nature the way we do – though this story gives the lie to that, since if Joseph hadn't known how babies were normally made he wouldn't have had a problem with Mary's unexpected pregnancy.

But Matthew and Luke don't ask us to take the story all by itself. They ask us to see it in the light both of the entire history of Israel – in which God was always present and at work, often in very surprising ways – and, more particularly, of the subsequent story of Jesus himself. Does the rest of the story, and the impact of Jesus on the world and countless individuals within it ever since, make it more or less likely that he was indeed conceived by a special act of the **holy spirit**?

That is a question everyone must answer for themselves. But Matthew wouldn't want us to stop there. He wants to tell us more about who Jesus was and is, in a time-honoured Jewish fashion: by his special names. The name 'Jesus' was a popular boys' name at the time, being in

Hebrew the same as 'Joshua', who brought the Israelites into the prom-ised land after the death of Moses. Matthew sees Jesus as the one who will now complete what the **law** of Moses pointed to but could not of itself produce. He will rescue his people, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin, the 'exile' they have suffered not just in Baby-lon but in their own hearts and lives.

By contrast, the name 'Emmanuel', mentioned in Isaiah 7.14 and 8.8, was not given to anyone else, perhaps because it would say more about a child than anyone would normally dare. It means 'God with us'. Matthew's whole gospel is framed by this theme: at the very end, Jesus promises that he will be 'with' his people to the close of the age (28.20). The two names together express the meaning of the story. God is present, with his people; he doesn't 'intervene' from a distance, but is always active, sometimes in most unexpected ways. And God's actions are aimed at rescuing people from a helpless plight, demanding that he take the initiative and do things people had regarded as (so to speak) inconceivable.

This is the God, and this is the Jesus, whose story Matthew will now set before us. This is the God, and this is the Jesus, who comes to us still today when human possibilities have run out, offering new and startling ways forward, in fulfilment of his promises, by his powerful love and grace.