

Understanding the Bible #8 – Messiah 1

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

Bible Reading

¹ *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan –*

² *The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.*

⁶ *For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.*

*And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷ *Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.*

*He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.*

*The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.*

Isaiah 9:1-2 & 6-7

Recap

For those of you who have been with me for all of this series, sorry... however, we have come a long way.

We started, appropriately, with Genesis, where God creates the universe, and populates a garden with humans made in his image, a place of perfect *shalom*.

But humans rebel against God, and are exiled from the garden, and *shalom* becomes a lot harder to attain.

God calls Abraham to create a people through who 'all peoples on earth will be blessed'. Israel emerges from this, but finds itself enslaved in Egypt.

Moses (with a lot of help from God) brings them out of Egypt, and Joshua (with a lot of help from God) takes them into the Promised Land, potentially the 'new Eden'.

Except it never became the new Eden, even the best of Israel's rulers didn't consistently follow God's commands, and eventually, despite being warned again and again to return to God's ways, God uses foreign nations to punish them, and a large number of the Southern Kingdom are exiled to Babylon.

And yet God never gives up on his people. The exiles eventually return and begin rebuilding their broken nation, and people like Ezra work hard at re-educating Israel in what they needed to do to re-establish their relationship with God.

But by the close of the Old Testament, these visions, along with many others by other prophets, seemed delusional.

The following 400 years were a turbulent time for Israel, they were invaded by the Persians, then the Greeks after which they they governed themselves before that fell apart and the Romans took over.

Most of you will have heard of Alexander the Great, a brilliant Greek military leader who in his brief life conquered huge areas of Europe, Egypt and the Middle-East.

When Alexander died (he was only 32 years old) four of his generals divided his land into four territories.

The Seleucids, one of the four empires, took over the portion in which Israel resided as a part of their empire. These new rulers threatened to obliterate the identity of the Jewish people. Pressures to conform to their pagan culture climaxed when Antiochus IV Epiphanes ruled over the region in the 2nd Century BC.

Antiochus prohibited Jewish practices and forced them to adopt Greek culture. He even plundered the temple in Jerusalem and looted it. He forbade circumcision, sabbath keeping, and temple sacrifice, and those who disobeyed were put to death. As a final provocation, in 167 BC, he set up an altar to Zeus in the Jew's Temple and sacrificed a pig.

One Jew, Mattathias Maccabeus, refused to conform to pressure. When a Greek official tried to make him sacrifice to a pagan deity, Mattathias decided enough was enough, and stabbed him to death.

Soon after, his five sons – Judas, John, Simon, Eleazar, and Jonathan– led a revolt, recapturing Jerusalem three years later, cleansing the temple, and erecting a new altar.

This is how the eight-day celebration that Jews still celebrate as Hanukkah (Dedication) came about, remembering the dedication of the cleansed temple.

The Maccabean revolt was successful, and for a while Israel was an independent nation, expanding its borders beyond those enjoyed under David and Solomon. There were those who saw the Maccabees as the restorers of Israel the prophets had promised, as Israel's messiahs.

But the success didn't last and rivalries increased within the Maccabean rulers that eventually descended into civil war between two opposing groups. By this time, the Roman Empire was the world's super power, and both of the Maccabean groups tried to do a deal with it to destroy the other. The Romans chose one of the groups, massacred the other, and allowed their chosen group to rule Israel, under their command. Once again Israel was under the heel of a foreign nation.

Which brings us to the era that Jesus was born into. Israel's ruler at the time was Herod the Great, whose father had converted to Judaism and allied himself to one of the Maccabees. Herod was a clever and powerful man, who respected the Jerusalem temple, and had managed to negotiate a degree of independence from the Romans, but the Jews realised that he was no messiah.

But there were Jews who hung on to the Prophets' promises that God would send Israel a deliverer, in the words of Isaiah 9:6...

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

These Jews believed this deliverer was going to be like Mattathias Maccabeus, delivering Israel from their pagan overlords, giving them independence and prosperity.

Christians believe that this promise was fulfilled in a child born to an unimportant young woman called Mary in an obscure town called Nazareth in Northern Israel. He was named Jesus, and he became an itinerant teacher in Israel before being killed by the authorities.

And yet two thousand years later, Jesus is worshipped by billions of people as God. Western history is divided by before Christ (BC) and Anno Domini (AD), which is Latin for ‘in the year of the Lord’.

And the Bible we read has two sections, the Old Testament (before Jesus’s birth) and the New Testament (during and after Jesus’s birth).

Something very significant must have occurred for this to happen, and the opening books of the New Testament explain why the authors believe that Jesus is God’s Messiah, the one promised in the words of the Jews’ holy scriptures, and how he is very different from the kind of messiah they were expecting him to be.

Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, opens with...

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers...

OK, I’ll spare you the rest of it.

but Matthew’s genealogy is demonstrating what this series is trying to communicate, that the story of the Bible is woven together in a complex and purposeful way.

God is the God of history, and Matthew provides us with highlights of Jesus’ family tree to show where Jesus fits into that history.

Jesus has some distinguished people in his lineage, counting Abraham as one of his ancestors. But Matthew wants us to see that while Jesus is perfect, his ancestry is not.

His family tree includes people like Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute.

And when he gets to David, he can’t help but (subtly) acknowledge that even Israel’s most loved and famous king was far from perfect,

having committed adultery with Bathsheba and organising the murder of her husband!

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife...

Matthew 1:6b

Jesus' human backstory is like ours, messy and complicated. But in other ways he is very different from us.

John's Gospel opens with...

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:1-5

Where Matthew takes us back to the beginning of Israel's history, John uses the language of Genesis to take us back to the creation of the universe. And Jesus, the Word, is with God, and is God. And he is pure, perfect vibrant life, life that was about to shine light into our dark world.

And, going back to Matthew, this Jesus, who is God, enters our world as a human child!

Most of us are familiar with the Christmas story, the teenage Mary, engaged to be married to Joseph, being visited by an angel and told she is going to give birth to a son who would be the promised Messiah.

Not surprisingly Joseph was not initially convinced by this explanation of why his betrothed was now pregnant, he is a godly man, but he knows how babies happen, and he knows that this is not his baby. And God understands his skepticism...

Matthew 1:20-23 reads

...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. 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.”

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

God even makes the task of naming the baby easy for them.

And the name ‘Jesus’ is significant, it comes from the Hebrew ‘Yeshua’, and it means, ‘the Lord saves’, with the verb ‘yasha’ having overtones of being delivered from oppression and being led into a wide open space. It is the same word that is sometimes spelled ‘Joshua’, the one who led Israel into the promised land.

And Matthew’s quote from Isaiah 7 contains another name, ‘Immanuel’, ‘God with us’. As John 1:14 says ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us’, or as The Message version of the Bible translates it,

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.

God revealed his character to Moses, but Moses had to hide behind a rock as God passed by announcing it.

In Jesus, God has revealed himself as a living, breathing, vulnerable human being. Someone who could be seen and touched. And in Jesus we see God. When he speaks, God speaks. When he does things, it is God doing things.

Luke’s Gospel contains the story of an angel announcing Jesus’ birth to a bunch of shepherds, and telling them that he was their saviour, their Messiah, their Lord.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke 2:8-11

We are used to these terms being used about Jesus, but at the time it was announced, Israel was ruled by the Romans, and their leader was Caesar Augustus. The Roman Empire could be brutal, but its ultimate aim was to create an empire that was orderly and prosperous. The price of enjoying ‘pax Romana’ or ‘the peace of Rome’ was achieved by paying taxes to Rome, and giving homage to Caesar.

Archaeologists working in Turkey in the 16th century discovered a government building dating back to 6 BC with an inscription celebrating Augustus.

Here is some of the what it says...

Providence... has brought our life to the peak of perfection in giving to us Augustus... who being sent to us and our descendants as Saviour, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and having become (god) manifest has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times.

The angels’ announcement is a revolutionary one that directly contradicts the claims of the Roman Empire. Jesus is Saviour, Messiah and Lord, not Augustus Caesar. This wasn’t something that was missed by the authorities, as you can see in some of the gospel passages.

And, even more amazingly, the angel announces this to shepherds, a group of people who were considered to be spiritually unclean and

socially undesirable. Like Matthew's genealogy, it is being made clear that God is not scared of working with people who are less than perfect. And the gospel stories show how Jesus gravitates towards the despised and powerless.

And so Jesus is born, and after a brief trip to Egypt to escape the murderous Herod he grew up in Nazareth, probably learning his father's trade as a carpenter/builder. We know very little about this stage of his life, but as Jesus neared his thirties, his cousin John began preaching by the River Jordan in the same location that Israel had crossed it to enter into Canaan, the Promised Land.

John's message was simple:

'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'...

'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'

Matthew 3:1-3

And when people responded to his message, he would baptise them in the River Jordan.

John used imagery taken from the book of Isaiah, who looked forward to a time when God would return to the earth to rule as the one true king. And John was the herald Isaiah predicted, preparing the way for the promised Messiah.

And the four gospels want us to know that this promised Messiah was very different from who people were expecting.

Before Jesus begins his teaching and healing ministry, there are two significant events, both of which point to him being the promised Messiah.

The first happens after he has been baptised by John. John is reluctant to do this, seeing Jesus as being superior to himself, but

Jesus insists, and just after he's been dunked Matthew's Gospel reads...

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:16b-17

I explored the significance of this in my last series looking at who God is, but for the few people here who haven't downloaded and memorised my notes, this is a trinitarian event, God the Father is preparing God the Son for the next phase in his incarnate life, and empowering him by God the Spirit, using language that is reminiscent of the second verse of Genesis where 'the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters'.

The second event is Jesus's temptation in the wilderness...

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Matthew 4:1-3

Note that it was God the Spirit who led Jesus into this situation. This is because one of Jesus' tasks was to reverse the consequences of humanity's disobedience to God. Adam and Eve should have obeyed God's commands, but instead they ate from the forbidden tree.

Despite his extreme hunger, Jesus refuses to turn the stones into bread, knowing that he didn't need to prove to the devil that he was the Son of God. At Jesus's recent baptism, God had split the heavens open to declare that he was the Son of God. To have broken his fast at the Devil's invitation, with a magic stunt whose only purpose was to

satisfy his own hunger would have been similar to Eve's eating from the forbidden tree. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Matthew 4:4

Jesus refuses the forbidden fruit. He has passed the first test.

For his next temptation the devil quotes from Scripture.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

*"He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."*

Matthew 4:5-6

Jesus knows that the verse the devil quotes is not about how if you throw yourself off a tall building, God will send angels to rescue you. And again he uses Deuteronomy (6:16) to answer him.

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Matthew 4:7

Jesus is aware that he has access to unlimited, supernatural power. Later in the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is arrested, he tells his disciples that he does not need defending...

Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

Matthew 26:53-54

Jesus knew who he was. There were times in his ministry where he demonstrated God's power in him by miraculous acts, including freeing people from demonic possession. But he was aware, thousands of years before the Spider-Man, that with great power comes great responsibility.

For the third temptation...

...the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Matthew 4:8-9

The devil no longer asks Jesus to prove he is the Son of God. For his final temptation he offers the exhausted, hungry, thirsty Jesus a shortcut to world domination. Jesus' response is emphatic...

..."Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Matthew 4:10-11

Jesus' ministry begins with the devil attempting to divert him from his God-given mission. And the devil does it by misquoting the Bible. Jesus, physically weak as he is, defeats the forces of darkness by using scripture properly.

There's a lesson there somewhere.

- - - - -

So, we've covered a lot of ground this session, thank you to those who have stuck with me!

We began with a recap of the series so far, a little about Alexander the Great and the 400 years between the Old and New Testament, which contained disasters like Antiochus Epiphanes, but also highlights like

Hannukah, when the Jews took back the Temple and became a self-governed nation.

But when that unravelled and Rome took over Palestine, some Jews hoped for another Mattathias Maccabeus to emerge, trusting in prophecies like those we read in Isaiah. But we saw that God provided something even better than they hoped for.

Jesus was born at a time of Roman dominance, and within the (quirky) ancestry of Judaism, he was not just a messiah, he was not just a new national leader like Herod or the Maccabees, but instead was the rightful bearer of titles to which human rulers like Alexander the Great and the Roman Emperor wrongly aspired: Saviour, bringer of Peace, God manifest.

Jesus is the true Prince of Peace, the Word of God made flesh, God with us, and worthy of worship.

Finally, we looked at two significant moments in Jesus's life that show Jesus's place in the universe — the voice from heaven, showing God as affirming that Jesus is the promised one, and the devil's failure to deviate him from the task he was born for, to deliver humanity from sin and death.

This is the true deliverance, the Messiah everyone should have been waiting for since Adam and Eve first broke God's loving commands.

Amen. And hallelujah!