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February 10th: Genesis 40 & Matthew 1:1-17

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Joseph interprets the chief cupbearer and chief baker's dreams. The Genesis of Jesus Christ.

Some passages referenced:

Luke 23:32-43 (two criminals crucified with Christ); Esther (Mordecai and Joseph)

2 Chronicles 36:23 (Cyrus' 'Great Commission'); Jeremiah 22:30 (judgment on Jeconiah)

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis chapter 40. Some time after this the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offense against their lord the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in the custody of the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined.

The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They

continued for some time in custody. And one night they both dreamed, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison, each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation.

When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, Why are your faces downcast today? They said to him, We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them. And Joseph said to them, Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.

Then Joseph said to him, This is its interpretation. The three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer.

Only remember me when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit. When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, I also had a dream.

There were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head. And Joseph answered and said, This is its interpretation. The three baskets are three days.

In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat the flesh from you. On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.

But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. In Genesis chapter 40 some time has passed since Joseph has been placed into the prison, and he has risen to a position of considerable responsibility within it, even when reduced in status, God continues to bless him and give him favour in the sight of his superiors.

The king's prisoners are placed in the prison. This is the prison run by the captain of the

guard, it's not just for common criminals. And it would seem from the previous chapter that the captain of the guard, at least initially, was Potiphar himself.

The fact that Potiphar placed Joseph within this prison and gave him such authority, or allowed him to rise to such authority, is probably some indication that he did not take his wife's story at face value. He knew that there was something more to the picture. Now for some reason the cupbearer and the chief baker had offended Pharaoh in some way, and they're placed into the prison until they'll be dealt with at some point.

This suggests that there's a crisis of food in Egypt. These are not just regular servants, but figures presumably with ritual roles to perform and significant tasks to oversee. They're overseeing wine and they're overseeing bread.

The cupbearer is the one who's responsible for keeping the wine and vineyards of Pharaoh operational to give him his fill of wine, and perhaps also to serve as some sort of close advisor to Pharaoh. The chief baker is the one who should oversee the bread production of Egypt. And these characters may stand for something more.

There's a food crisis in Egypt. The chief people tasked with the bread and wine of Egypt are not up for the task. Now as we go through the story we'll see that Joseph becomes, as it were, the baker of Egypt, the chief baker, the one charged with maintaining the production of bread.

He also becomes the cupbearer. He has the cup of divination a few chapters later. So maybe we should see some sort of foreshadowing here.

There are paired dreams and we've already noted the fact that there are many pairs within the story of Joseph and Genesis more generally. Often we'll see two characters juxtaposed with each other or associated with each other in some way. In the story of Joseph we've already seen twins.

We've seen Perez and Zerah. We've seen Joseph and Judah. We've seen two temptation scenes.

And we also have three sets of paired dreams. We have the paired dreams of Joseph earlier on in chapter 37. We have the dreams here and then we have the dreams in the next chapter, the dreams of Pharaoh.

And these dreams should be connected. Each of these pairs, the dreams belong together. The paired dreams of the two royal officials here invite us to compare and contrast their fate and also associate them in certain ways.

There are three sets of three within the dream of the cup bearer. Three branches, three sets of growth, budding, blossoms coming forth and clusters ripening into grapes. There are three actions, taking grapes, pressing them into the cup and putting the cup in

Pharaoh's hand.

So we see pairs are important but also threes. And threes and pairs and sevens are all important within the Joseph story. So pay attention to numerical patterns, to certain pairings, to things that are presented as triples.

These are all patterns that can maybe help us to recognise structures that are playing out on the wider scale. Three is important. Once you've worked out that the three corresponds to days, much of the rest would make sense.

There's a temporal sequence in growth from budding to blossoms coming forth to clusters ripening into grapes. And that suggests a quick passage of time and a movement into life. It's a coming forth of life.

Joseph presumably knows that his Pharaoh's birthday in three days time is a big state occasion. There are most likely rumours and stories going around the prison of what's going to happen on that great day, what the festivities and celebrations will involve. And presumably Joseph recognises there are some important seats empty.

There are some places in the Pharaoh's cabinet that have not been filled and so he needs to deal with that for his birthday presumably as there will be state occasions and other things associated with it that need people in those offices. These aren't rebels or common criminals. They've displeased the king in some way but they have an important role to perform and Pharaoh does not in their absence have the right servants that he needs.

Joseph declares that the chief cupbearer will have his head lifted up. The king will summon him and restore him to his office and the head lifting up suggests his summoning and also some sort of elevation in status. Having performed an important favour for the chief cupbearer Joseph asks something in return that the chief cupbearer will remember him when he comes back to his office and he speaks of his own situation that he has been stolen from the land of the Hebrews.

His position there is not as one of the people of the Egyptians but as a foreigner who has been mistreated and there's no reason for him to be in the pit as he calls it. I've noted previously that the association of the dungeon with a pit, the same word being used as the pit into which he is thrown by his brothers in chapter 37, suggests that we're supposed to hold those two things alongside each other. To see the stripping of his garment and his placing into the pit in chapter 37 as parallel with what happens in chapter 39 and he calls for the chief cupbearer to deal with his situation by bringing him to Pharaoh's mind.

Pharaoh presumably doesn't know about him but he wants Pharaoh to hear about his case and perhaps act to rectify it. Having heard the interpretation of the dream of the

chief cupbearer the chief baker is emboldened to ask about his dream. Once again there is the significance of the number three, three baskets, three days.

On his head his head will be taken up. The cupbearer sees a tree before him. The baker will be hung upon the tree and the birds will eat his flesh like they eat the bread.

They're twins. Both will have their heads lifted up and we see them both being described as having their heads lifted up but one is lifted up in a positive way and the other lifted up in a negative way. As often in the story of Genesis there are pairings of characters that we're supposed to read alongside each other to see for instance the similarities in the story of Abraham's entertaining of the angels and Lot's entertaining of the angels and then to see the differences.

Likewise here there's a pairing and we're supposed to see the similarities and the differences between the two characters. As Christians reading this story we may notice other things. There are two criminals alongside Joseph in the situation of judgment.

One will be lifted up, the other will be hung on a tree and finally destroyed. The chief cupbearer is restored and Joseph in a sense asks him to remember him when he comes into the kingdom. In the story of Christ, Christ is crucified with two criminals, one on the right, one on the left.

One is finally judged and the other is remembered when Christ comes into his kingdom. That theme of remembering in which a prisoner asks another prisoner who will be raised up to a favourable situation to remember him is something that connects this story with the story of Christ. Of course Christ remembers the person who's crucified with him whereas the cupbearer fails to remember Joseph and it's only later on in the story that Joseph actually comes to mind for him.

Then there's deliverance from the pit in both stories. Joseph will be delivered from the pit and in this story Joseph will later be delivered from the pit. Also notice that the raising up from the pit for the chief cupbearer occurs on the third day and again that would be a connection with the story of the Gospels.

We might see in the forgetting of Joseph a connection with the beginning of the book of Exodus as well when a pharaoh arises who does not remember Joseph. In that case, as well as in this, it may seem as if a divinely given destiny that had been declared previously had failed to come about. Following through the story of Joseph there's that movement from the brash young teenager who has the dreams and declares with great assurance that his brothers and his father and mother are going to bow down to him to a figure who has been knocked back time and time again.

He has been doing faithful things. He goes on his father's mission to his brothers, faithful as a son and yet is thrown into a pit and sold into slavery. He is faithful to his master

Potiphar and yet as a result Potiphar's wife is thrown into the prison.

And then in the prison he's faithful and does everything that he should do, rises to influence within the prison, helps out these prisoners and yet the very prisoner he's helped fails to remember him when he comes to a position of influence where he could actually reciprocate. And so Joseph can understandably feel a bit aggrieved. He can feel that maybe this destiny thing is not real after all.

Maybe God has forgotten me. Maybe I'm just stuck in this pit for the rest of my life and there's no more hope for me. But yet that does not seem to be the case.

Joseph time and again draws attention to God as the one that he is looking towards. So how can I do this wickedness against God? That is the ultimate answer that he gives to Potiphar's wife when she tempts him. Not primarily about his master, not primarily about his own honour but about his relationship with God.

And here again he draws attention to the fact that it is God who has the interpretations of dreams. And so whatever his wisdom, whatever his abilities, it's ultimately God that he looks towards. And so that sense of God being active in his situation, even when he's in this lowest state, even when it seems that his destiny has been thwarted in the most complete way possible, is one of the most remarkable features of the story of Joseph.

And at the end of the story when he can say that you meant it for evil but God meant it for good, seeing in all these negative apparent twists of his fate, these chants or small events that all conspired against him seemingly, he can see in each one of those the hand of God charting his course. And he's learned to be faithful to God ultimately. I've mentioned the theme of loyalty that runs throughout Joseph's life and that theme of loyalty ultimately focuses upon God.

It's his loyalty to God even in situations where there's no reason apparently to be loyal to God. When it seems as though he's been stripped of the destiny that God gave him, even at that low point he can look to God and see God as being in control of his situation. A question to consider.

In the story of Joseph there are many parallels with other stories that we find elsewhere in scripture, things like the story of Daniel for instance, another person who interprets dreams in the court of a king and rises to high office within the land as a result. But the character I want to encourage you to think about is the character of Mordecai. Mordecai is involved in unmasking a plot in which there are two royal officials who conspire against the king and displease him.

And he brings them to light, tells Esther and Esther brings it to the knowledge of the king. There are also ways in which the events in Potiphar's house are mirrored in the story of Mordecai. Mordecai is asked day after day why he is not going to bow down or

pay homage to Haman.

And that expression of asking him day after day, an expression that we see in verse 4 of chapter 3 of Esther is found one other place in scripture in the story of Potiphar's wife's temptation of Joseph. Similar themes may be in play. In the story of Joseph he is tempted to keep favour with his master by sleeping with his master's wife, the one thing that is forbidden to him within the house.

In the story of Mordecai he is tempted to bow down to Haman who seems to have pretensions upon the king's office, the one thing that Haman does not have a right to. Haman has been elevated to extremely high office but he does not seem satisfied, he seems to want to take the office of the king and the status and the honour and the glory of the king for himself. And that is one thing that Mordecai is not willing to give him.

So maybe there are similarities there. I would like you to think about some other ways in which Mordecai and Joseph might be similar and how this particular connection might be filled out and then consider what that might teach us about each of the characters as they are compared and contrasted with each other. Matthew chapter 1 verses 1 to 17.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nashon, and Nashon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon, Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiad, and Abiad the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliad, and Eliad the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Mathan, and Mathan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the birth of Christ fourteen generations. Matthew 1, the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, begins in a surprising way.

We might think that moving into the books of the New Testament we get away from the most boring parts of the Old Testament, which are the genealogies. But lo and behold, the first book of the New Testament begins with a genealogy. Genealogies may seem like bare and boring lists of names to us, but within scripture they serve a multitude of different purposes.

They establish the pedigree of certain office holders. They present historical transitions between blocks of narrative. They serve to mark out families and the way that they have expanded and particular lines are developed.

They manifest some of the patterns in history and the larger arcs of God's work over the course of many centuries. They can present that history in a nutshell, bringing to mind the broader structure of the story without going into every single detail. And they also can serve the purpose of bringing to mind certain features of the past, certain characters from the past that are salient in understanding present characters.

All of these things, to some extent or other, are taking place in Matthew chapter 1. Matthew is connecting the story that he is telling with a story that has gone before. This is not a story that has just begun. It's the story that the Old Testament tells, brought to its proper culmination and climax.

His genealogy establishes Jesus' pedigree. It connects Jesus with David as David's true heir. It connects Jesus with Abraham as his true son.

It tells the story of the Old Testament in a way that helps us to see the larger pattern and flow of that story and the way that Christ might relate to that. It's introduced with the expression, the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Now this could be read, and many have read it as the book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ.

And I don't think that's an accident. It draws our mind back to the very beginning of Scripture, in that book where there is a lot of emphasis upon genealogies. Also, as in some of the other Gospels, it highlights the fact that Jesus is the Alpha.

He's the beginning. He's the one who starts all these things off. He's the one who's with God before the creation.

He's the one who is at the very dawn and the first stirrings of Israel's history and story. He is connected with that part of the story. And so as we look all the way back to Genesis, we should be able to see Christ there.

And telling the story in a way that starts at that point, it helps us to recognise just how firmly rooted Christ is within the story of Israel and the story of the creation as a whole. Matthew does not just begin with the book of Genesis. He ends with a reference back to the final verse of the Old Testament in its Hebrew ordering, which is 2 Chronicles 36, verse 23.

Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.

It's the Great Commission of the Old Testament. And what Matthew is doing here is telling his story in a way that is sandwiched by the first verse of the Old Testament, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the last verse of the Old Testament, the verse that speaks of Cyrus' decree. Christ sums up that entire story in himself.

Christ is playing out the story of Scripture himself. Christ is the new Israel. Christ is the one who takes all history into himself.

It's a book-ended narrative from Genesis to Chronicles, from the beginning to the end. And Christ is the one who holds everything together. It's also like a new book of Chronicles.

The book of Chronicles begins with the very beginning with Adam and God's creation of Adam. And then it moves into a focus upon the genealogy of Abraham and of David. And that's what Matthew is doing here.

He's connecting Christ with that very beginning of the book of Chronicles, and he seems to depend upon the book of Chronicles for certain parts of his genealogy, and moving in his story to the very end of the book of Chronicles as Christ fulfills a new Great Commission, a commission that's greater than that even of Cyrus. In beginning his gospel in such a way then, he presents the story as being continued in Christ, as being summed up in Christ, and suggests that the story of the gospel must be anchored in what has gone before. By beginning his gospel in this way, he gives us a sense of just how auspicious these events are, how significant these stirrings in Bethlehem and Nazareth actually are.

In contrast to Luke and Greco-Roman genealogies, but like the Old Testament, Matthew works forward, starting with the most ancient figure and then moving forward to the most contemporary. It ends with the most important name though. Part of this demonstrates the proper lineage of Christ, connects Christ with previous characters, and we might also see it as something that could have been substantiated by genealogical records of important figures kept in the temple, where they could be checked prior to the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

It begins with Abraham, who is mentioned seven times in the book of Matthew, and there's a neat transition between the heading of the book and the genealogy. It's the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, and then Abraham was the father of Isaac. So it leads very neatly into that list.

It isn't just a list of names though. There are people mentioned within it who are not strictly part of the genealogy itself. People like Zerah, or people like Uriah, or the brothers of Judah or Jeconiah.

Likewise, women did not need to be recorded in the list, but they are recorded, and they're not necessarily the ones that you would expect. If you were going to make a list of the women that are important within the Old Testament, you may think of the great matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, etc. And yet that's not what we see here.

We see characters like Tamar, we see Rahab, we see Bathsheba, we see Ruth. These are figures who are outsiders who come in. Bathsheba is associated with Uriah the Hittite, and Rahab is a person of Jericho, Ruth is a Moabites, and Tamar is presumably a Canaanite.

All of these figures are Gentiles who are brought in, and within the Gospel of Matthew this is something that Matthew wants us to see, that the people of God have always included Gentiles to some extent, but this is just preparing for the greater inclusion of the Gentiles that will occur through the ministry of Christ. It's also preparing the way for Mary. Mary is someone who gives birth to Christ in an unusual manner, and all these unusual women who have come into the story in surprising ways maybe prepare us for her and what she does.

The names mentioned are sometimes different from the names that we find elsewhere. So the Septuagint of 1 Chronicles 2, verse 9 has Aram rather than Ram, and here we have Aram rather than Ram, although the ESV changes it to Ram. Amos instead of Amon, and Asaph instead of Asah.

In Jeremiah chapter 22, verse 30, there is a curse upon Jehoiachin, or Jeconiah or Keniah, by Jeremiah. Neither Jehoiakim's nor Jehoiachin's descendants would sit upon the throne. Thus says the Lord, write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah.

So it seems strange that he's mentioned on the list here. James Bajon has suggested that Sheal Teal is adopted by Jehoiachin, or that new life is breathed into the cursed line by taking in this child from without, and so he's protected from the judgement by means of adoption. There are three sets of fourteen, and fourteen is an important number, it's the gematria of David's name.

David frames the genealogy, not surprisingly because Christ is the son of David, he is the greater David. Fourteen of course is seven times two, there are fourteen years from Ishmael to Isaac, there are fourteen years serving for Rachel and Leah, there are fourteen years of plenty followed by famine. But it is also a pattern associated with the moon, there's a pattern of waxing and waning, so the genealogy waxes from Abraham to

David, then it wanes from David to the deportation to Babylon, and then it waxes again as Jeconiah is given new life through Sheal Teal, and then it leads finally to Christ who comes at the climax of this second great waxing of Israel's history.

Forty-two is also six sevens. Christ is the one who brings in the seventh seven, the seventh seven being associated with Jubilee and the arrival of that time. It's also a time, times and half a time, as in twelve months plus twenty-four months, two years, two times, and half a time, six months, it makes forty-two months.

Perhaps we're supposed to see Israel's history to this point as a sort of testing that leads to the deliverance of Christ's arrival. Jesus comes at the fullness of time. He's the one who completes this genealogy, who brings it to its destiny, who completes the movement started in Abraham to David, that first great waxing of Israel's history, and brings it into a second great waxing.

He is the son of Abraham, he's the son of David. He's also the son, more directly, of Joseph, the son of Jacob. Now we've already met a Joseph, the son of Jacob, in the book of Genesis and we'll see similarities between these two characters as we go on.

But for now we should note the fact that Jesus is given to a father, not just to a mother. He is born to a betrothed couple so that he would be raised by that couple, so that he would have as his father, Joseph, and all that Joseph's genealogy gives him. This is part of what gives him the foundation of his title as the Messiah, that through Joseph he's descended from Abraham and David.

Now he's not biologically the son of Joseph, but as in the case of Jeconiah, there is an adoption here as it were. But he is given to Joseph that Joseph might raise him as his own. And the story of Matthew focuses on Joseph in its nativity account, which should serve as a caution against marginalising or downplaying the importance of Joseph as a figure within the story of Christ.

A question to consider, in the way that Matthew structures this genealogy, he is able to pick out certain characters that stand out from the rest, characters that are either paralleled with others, characters that need not be mentioned but are mentioned, characters that are repeated or present in particular moments, characters that frame the entire genealogy, and characters that are present within the genealogy in other structural forms. What characters do you see Matthew particularly highlighting? How is he highlighting them? And how does their connection with Jesus and his genealogy help us to understand who Jesus is when he comes on the scene?