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Matthew's Nativity (with Chris Green)

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Alastair Roberts

Dr Chris E. W. Green, Professor of Public Theology at Southeastern University, joins me for a discussion of the nativity narratives in Matthew's gospel.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by Chris Green, who is Professor of Public Theology at Southeastern. We're going to be talking about the opening chapters of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, and its account of Christ's birth and the events surrounding his nativity.

Thank you very much for joining me, Chris. Thank you. It's an honor.

Thank you. So when we're reading the Gospels, we have different accounts of Christ's coming. We have Luke's account, which is perhaps the most famous, and Matthew's, which would be about the same.

These are the Gospels that we traditionally would hear in a Lessons and Carols service,

for instance, have readings from their accounts of the shepherds, the magi, and the promise made to the fathers being fulfilled in Christ. All of these things are very clearly present within Matthew and Luke. John and Mark, on the other hand, have different approaches to the birth of Christ, his coming.

How can we think about the differences between the Gospels and their account of the incarnation, the nativity, and Christ's coming more generally? Well, my doctoral supervisor convinced me years ago that it's really important to let each Gospel speak in its own voice, let each evangelist have his say, his performance, his solo, rather than trying to smash all of them together into a kind of fifth Gospel that harmonizes all of the seeming differences. Once I had that direction, more and more over the years, I've learned to appreciate they do harmonize, but they harmonize only when we let them do what they do on their own terms. Let Matthew be Matthew and not try to square it with Mark and Luke and John in every way.

Then the overall effect of each voice being allowed to be heard on its own terms is a kind of harmonized witness. But it begins by attending closely, I think, to the individual evangelist. What does Luke say? What I find every year, and this year is no exception, is that when I come to these texts, really try to let them speak on their own terms, I'm caught off guard again by so much that I've missed, that I've not noticed for whatever reason, not heard before.

That contrast between Matthew and Luke every year seems to get deeper to me. The more I read them, the more I preach them and hear them preached and taught, the more impressed I am by just how it is one witness, but the differences are vast and seem always deeper. As you say, even within the metaphor of the harmony, it requires distinct voices.

It's not just an assimilated single voice. When you're reading Matthew and Luke, even though they're both telling the events of Christ's immediate birth, they tell very different stories, not contradictory stories, but very different stories. They have different focus.

They have different chief characters in some ways as well. I'd be curious to hear some of your distinctive features. What would you see as some of the distinctive features of Matthew's account of the nativity? Some of the things that sets it apart from Luke in particular.

Yeah, John Bear has convinced me that it's important to realize the ways in which the Gospels are a new genre. I agree with him, but that said, I think Matthew and Luke are both such careful readers of Israel's scriptures. They both know what they're doing.

They've honed their skills on reading Israel's stories really well. Everybody can see that in the way Matthew talks about Jesus as the new Moses or in the opening chapters of Luke in particular, you can see how he's calling back the stories of the prophets. Mary is

in some ways the culminating prophetic figure in Israel's tradition.

The Lord comes to her as he came to the judges, as he came to the prophets, identifies her as the favored one. I think one of the most striking features of Matthew's account is how he leaves gaps in the narrative that force you to reckon with why you're not being told what you're not being told. Auerbach's famous phrase about the difference between biblical narrative and Homeric epic is that biblical narrative is fraught with background.

I think that's absolutely what Matthew is doing. He's giving us just suggestions that are fraught with background. He's emphasizing Joseph instead of Mary.

Joseph is the central character in the nativity, whereas in Luke it's Mary. He's also not telling us much. Just to open up the discussion, all Matthew says is Mary was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.

Not a word about who found out, how they found out, what finding out meant to them, what Joseph was thinking or feeling, what Mary was thinking, what she said to Joseph. Right from that point, he sets the tone with making a statement that tells us something but hides so much more and draws us into that fraught background. Luke's not only emphasizing Mary as a distinct character, but Luke's telling the story a different way.

His style of storytelling is entirely different from Matthew's. I think this year I found myself thinking a lot about that. Not just the fact that it's Joseph rather than Mary who's foregrounded, but that Matthew's style is so minimal.

That he's just making suggestions and then requiring us to pray into that, to lean into it and imagine what is actually happening here. Joseph isn't really a speaking character. He's someone, things appear to him, he receives visions in dreams that we'll get to in a moment, but he's someone who, for all his importance in the narrative, doesn't really play that much of a speaking role.

In Luke, you have these great speeches, you have Zachariah's prayer, you have Mary and the great Magnificat, or you have her, let it be to me, and you have all these different speaking parts. Matthew is very different in that respect. The characterization is also really quite striking because, as you say, it's fraught with background.

Joseph is presented to us against a certain Old Testament back cloth, as it were, and Mary, another, we read the Magnificat, it's very hard not to think of the prayer of Hannah after the birth of Samuel. This is, again, fraught with background, this expectation that this child is going to grow up to become a king, he's going to be like the story of Samuel, like David, the one who's going to fulfill the promise that was, as it were, at the heart of the story of Hannah, that the birth of a child to her is the promise of a renewal for the nation as a whole, turning of the tables on the rich, bringing them down from their thrones and bringing up the weak. There is this sense that we're on the first page of the

New Testament, but this is a continuing story.

This is something that started just at this point. That's right. I think there's this, there are all kinds of ways in which Luke and Matthew tell their stories to draw our attention to that, drawing up phrases that if we know Israel scriptures, we recognize.

I noticed just the other day, when the angel comes to Matthew, he identifies him as a son of David. There's a kind of irony there, because Joseph doesn't talk. David is the psalmist.

He's the one who sings to God, and he's a man of action. What we know about David is his heart for God, his mouth is filled with praise and prayer, and he's a man of action. Joseph doesn't do anything, really.

In fact, what's important is what he doesn't do, and he doesn't say anything. I think right away we get this kind of irony. In what way is he a son of David? He's so unlike David in some ways.

Then we were called back to the founding stories, the stories in Genesis. It's when Adam is put in under a deep sleep that this decisive moment happens. The most important moment in Adam's life happens when he's asleep.

Then that same deep sleep, that same phrase, shows up in Genesis 15 when God makes the covenant with Abraham. Abraham, a deep sleep falls on him, and deep darkness, an overwhelming, terrifying darkness settles. When he wakes up, God has made this covenant with him.

Then Jacob meets the God of his fathers in his dreams. Of course, Joseph's named for Joseph, the dreamer in Genesis. This culminating figure who is sleeping the sleep of his fathers, of Adam, Abraham, and Jacob.

I think what Matthew is doing is showing the ways in which he's not only a son of David, but he is fulfilling what began with Adam, was carried through in Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. Precisely in simply his yieldedness to the God who never sleeps, the God who is able to do what we cannot, he's doing more than David could ever have done. He's not passive.

He's just open to God. To me, that's a theological thread that runs all the way through the Gospel of Matthew, that this openness to God and what God can do that we cannot, this yieldedness, of course, culminates in Jesus' death on the cross and his being raised from the dead. I think Joseph is already prefiguring that.

He's refiguring all of those stories from Israel scriptures, but he's prefiguring what his own son will do in his death and being raised from the dead. In the telling of the story, in the Old Testament story, in the genealogy, I think there's also a suggestion that it was

never the virility or the strength or the power of David's own life. The women that are mentioned draw attention to key crisis points, whether it's Tamar and the fact that Judah's losing all his sons.

Sheila is not being given Tamar. There's no son being raised up. His family is dying out.

Then Tamar intervenes. Then there's this birth of Perez and Zerah. That reinvigorates his line that was about to die out in Genesis 38.

Then you have Rahab, who again is someone who comes in from outside. You have Ruth, who when Malon and Kilian are dead, you have Naomi coming back to her homeland, devastated, thinking that there's no hope after she's lost to Lamanach. Her line's going to die out.

It's this action of Ruth that leads to the revival of the line. There are all these stories of God's intervention of something of a crisis point and then something that changes things. When you think about the story of Joseph, he is a son of David.

He's a kingly figure or someone in that kingly line, a line that's been wiped out. We read in Isaiah about the idea of a root coming out of dry ground. That's the line of David.

It's been broken down below. David is the stump of Jesse, as it were. Now there's going to be a child coming forth from that line.

James Bajon has a very good piece on the genealogy in Matthew, comparing it with the way we explain the discrepancies. Arguing that part of the explanation is that a child is adopted into the line of Jehoiachin, who was cursed that he would have no seed. A child is adopted in, and that child actually leads to his line continuing on.

In the similar way, there is a child given to the line of Joseph, to the line of David. This is not a natural child of their own power, but it's a child that's given by the power of the Holy Spirit to raise up the whole line of David. I had not thought about this until just now, as you were talking about the genealogy.

But these women who are listed there are not only surprising figures, scandalous figures, but the decisive moment in which God intervenes is a moment of sleep, or a moment in the bed, where Tamar is seducing Judah. Bathsheba, Ruth, going to Boaz and uncovering his feet. That is what Joseph himself does.

He goes to bed. He resolves what he's going to do about Mary. We're not told what he's thinking, or what he knows and doesn't know what she says.

We've said this already, but I do think it's striking the fact that Mary doesn't say anything here. She doesn't defend herself. She doesn't in any way attempt to explain.

Apparently, Chrysostom, Augustine, other fathers argue that this is because Joseph has

to show his worth. She cannot say anything. She's not allowed to say anything, because he has to learn for himself.

But be that as it may, her silence allows Joseph to reckon with what he's going to do. Then he just goes to sleep. Once he's made up his mind, he just goes to sleep.

That's recalling, again, not only the stories that I mentioned earlier, but these women that you're attending to. God intervenes once again in that secret place, although in a new way. Right now, something unheard of has happened.

The fact that this is in sleep, I think the other thing about sleep is it happens in the night. If there's one thing that I think we see in the nativity stories, we imagine when we're reading stories, often we have a sense, this is a daytime story, this is a nighttime story. Even some stories that happen in the daytime, we think of them in darkness in some way.

You read the story, the beginning of the exodus, and you sense these are darkness stories. Even if they're taking place during the daytime, or you read about the story of Jacob in the house of Laban and all the things that are happening there, they are primarily nighttime stories. The mix up of the two daughters of Laban, or the animals drinking at the crops and being confused again at night.

Or you have the dreams of Jacob at night, or you have the fact that the story is introduced with him going to Bethel and the sun going down. Then when he leaves, the sun comes up as he crosses the Jabbok. In a similar way, you begin the story of the gospels in the night.

You have the darkness of John that's trying to comprehend the light, but there's light shining in the darkness that cannot be overwhelmed by that darkness. Or you have the beginning of Luke, you have, again, stories of nighttime. I think you have a similar thing and more pronounced in Matthew.

It may not be the shepherds at night, it may be the Magi following a star, which you see at night. It might be the dreams, several dreams that Joseph has. This movement from darkness to light is already something that's hinted at within the framing of the narrative.

And the story is told, like that fraught with background aspect that we were mentioning earlier, that leaves us in the dark as readers. The story is doing to us what it is the characters themselves are experiencing. It's told in such a way that the style or the shape of the story matches the action.

I think that's some of its genius. It's told so that we as readers are forced to experience some of the darkness. We don't quite know what's going on.

That's the point, that these men and women are faithful in the dark, that they hold true to God when they can't see. We're being trained to do that as we read, as we attend to how the story is being told to us. That's something you find in both of the stories of Luke and Matthew.

Matthew tells the story of Joseph, and Joseph doesn't really know what's going on in a number of ways. He's left pondering and wondering what is the situation with his wife. Then on Mary's side, you have her hearing and not knowing what do these things mean and how will this come about.

Then later on, when hearing from Simon and Anna, pondering the things in her heart, wondering what might be entailed by these things that she's been told. Both of them are trying to figure out what are these things portending. There's something going on here that they can't fully understand and wrap their heads around.

I think that's one of the ways in which these stories, different as they are, harmonize in that whether they're told nothing, as Joseph and Matthew is not, or they're told everything, as Mary is, or as Zachariah is, they end in the same place of not knowing what this means. Because the mystery is too much, whether you hear it or do not hear it. What God is doing has not entered into the heart of a human being.

I think that's a striking, kind of iconic difference. In the light of Luke or in the darkness of Matthew, the work of God is the same and you're overwhelmed by it either way. You're left unsure whether you've been told what is to happen or not.

That's always one of the struggles I find, reading these sort of stories, that we've heard these stories so many times before. Particularly, we've heard them harmonized in various ways. The challenge can almost be to separate out those voices again, hear them on their own terms, and you'll hear the harmony differently.

When you're going to that lessons and carol service or something like that, you will hear the harmony in a way that you would not had you not realized these are the different voices. I had an amazing experience several years back going to a display of Janet Carter exhibition. You have 40 speakers playing Thomas Tallis' *Feminallium*.

You're sitting in the middle or you can walk around them. You hear each part distinctly. Then you can hear them all washing over you at the center.

You never really hear music at the center. Even when you have headphones on, you don't have that sense of being surrounded by and enveloped by music. There's something of the same sort of thing where we're reading the Gospels.

The challenge of hearing them coming at us from the different directions and then also hearing those distinct voices. At certain points, we'll want to go close and hear the voice of Matthew's text. Then we'll hear coming from the sides, the voices of Luke and John,

but they're less distinct.

We're hearing Matthew very clearly. I think that can be our challenge at Christmas time to hear these stories again and also to enter into something of the temporal movement. We know how the story ends.

In some ways, that's appropriate. At many points in the Gospels, it's presumed that you know how the story ends. It's not telling it to be read for the first time.

It's telling it to be read and reread and reread and reread. You're pondering upon it. There is also something to be heard in that initial hearing when you don't know how it's going to end.

You're left wondering what are the different directions this story could take. That sort of questioning, I think, can be very fruitful in some of these stories. It leaves us in an alert position to hear certain things that we might not if we know exactly how the story ends and we're so familiar with it that we don't ask those questions.

How could this come about? Or how is this going to fulfill the story of David? He's introduced to us as the son of David. How is Joseph representing the line of David at this point? What does it mean for someone in the line of David to receive this son? You mentioned this passage earlier, but the seed is in the stump and Joseph really is stumped here, if you'll allow the word play. He's reached the end.

He doesn't have anything left, no resources left. He doesn't know what to do with what he's learned, however he learned it, about Mary. Precisely at that point, I was noticing he's doing what scripture tells him to do.

Psalm 4 says, be angry and do not sin, commune with your own heart on your bed and be still. He's essentially living Psalm 4. He's faced with this scandalous, disastrous news. My wife is pregnant, it's not my child.

We don't know what he knows and doesn't know about what that means. We're not even told that he's troubled by it, but he must have been. He just resolves.

He resolves what he's going to do and goes to sleep. I think he's communing with his own heart and opening himself up to the God who can do what he cannot. He's not only resolving what he's going to do, but of course God is at work waiting for him to make that resolution so that he can speak.

I think this is a striking detail. The angel in Luke appears to Mary out of nowhere. The annunciation happens.

Mary is not looking for it, not asking for it, not anticipating it in any way. The angel appears and says, hail favored one, this is what is going to to you. In Joseph's case,

there's no intervention until after he's worked through the news and made up his mind what he has to do.

I think that's a place where the differences harmonize so nicely, so beautifully. Whether we're told right from the jump this is what God is going to do and then have to let our lives form around it, or we're not told anything until after the fact. There is a way in which God's purposes are realized in us.

We become the people we're called to be precisely as God is working with us in whatever way is best for us, whether it's like Mary or it's like Joseph. I find that so encouraging to know that whether we are living day to day, you and I are experiencing a sense of God's nearness and the sweetness of God's presence, or like Joseph we feel we're left in the dark, unsure of what's happening. Either way, the God who's always working, the God who never sleeps is doing what God alone can do.

The Christmas story is about that too. It's not just about how God has come into the world, but what that God is doing now in our lives. I find so much reassurance in that.

As you say, it's worth attending to the fact that Joseph is told after all of these things are made known to him. He knows that Mary is pregnant. He knows it wasn't him.

He's wondering about these things. God isn't unable to send an angel in a dream before all of this went down. The fact that he waits until afterwards is worth pondering.

Why does he do that? One of the things I wonder about is whether this should draw our minds back to Genesis 38 and the story of Judah and Tamar. There is another situation where there's a woman who is with child and the man is really angry. He, in that situation, wants to go to the full measure of the law and beyond to execute vengeance upon the child.

Then he finds out it's his child. The child's being given to him. It's actually going to continue his life.

Joseph is put in a similar position as his founding ancestor of the tribe of Judah. Yet he does the right thing in this situation. As he does so, he's fulfilling something of that story.

Also, that is the true gift of the child that will continue and raise up the line of faith. I think two things worth noting here for me. One is, in the circles that I've moved in, there's often a quasi-Marcion way of reading these texts that sees all of these characters, Joseph, Mary, Zachariah, Elizabeth, across the nativities, sees them as marking a break with the Jewish past.

Sometimes this is more implied than explicitly stated, but there's this assumption that the faith of Israel was always legalistic, juridical, formalistic, and the gospel announces something new. It's some dramatic shift. I think if you attend closely to the way these

stories are being told, whether we're talking about Simeon, Elizabeth, Mary, and so on in Luke, or we're talking about Joseph here in Matthew, the point is there's such continuity with what God has always been doing right from the start with Israel and with Adam.

The stories are told in ways that resonate so deeply with Israel's stories. I think it's really important that that gets named. There's a newness breaking in, but it is a newness that has always been being prepared for.

It's not a rupture. I think part of that is just telling this story as the story of Joseph, not just the story of Mary. Joseph represents the house of David.

This is the gift of, unto us a child is born, the gift of a child to this house of David that seemed to be utterly lost. When you realize that Joseph is not just a bit player within the story, he's actually really central. He's representing this wiped out line, this wiped out royal dynasty that is being given the air to the whole world.

Read that way, you think at the end of the Old Testament, things are basically in ruins in various ways. They're starting off again on a small scale in Israel, but things are not what they used to be. This is not the full flowering of the kingdom under David and Solomon.

This is something drastically reduced. Then you realize here is the gift to the house of David, the fulfillment of all of the promises in Second Samuel 7 and the covenant or these other promises that are built up over the prophets, particularly some of the Christmas texts that we read, Isaiah 9, unto us a child is born. These statements are all looking forward to something that is fulfilled in the first few pages of the New Testament.

Read that way, this is very clearly the continuation of the story that we've been reading for quite some time. One question I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on is, why dreams? I mean, why, we've discussed this a bit already, but there's more to be said about this, I think. Why not just angelic appearances during the daytime or a voice from heaven? Why angelic appearances in dreams? Yeah, and I think we of course do get direct angelic visitations in Luke, right? Both to Zachariah and to Mary, seemingly in the daytime, as you've said.

I think one of the reasons, maybe this point about darkness, right? That God speaking to Joseph comes up from below, from the darkness of the depth of his own heart. Not darkness in the sense of sinful, but just in the sense of beyond our waking awareness, right? Beyond our day-to-day consciousness. I think also it allows for Joseph to interpret.

I mean, when we read these stories and we hear an angel appeared to him in a dream, I think we tend to imagine it as essentially a conversation, much like what we read in Luke. But that's not of course how dreams work, right? In dreams, you don't get that kind of straightforward account of that straightforward conversation. These are images that Joseph somehow is graced, not only to receive, but to interpret.

So that when he wakes up, he somehow knows, this is what has happened to me, right? And I think it's a way of pointing to Joseph's skill and his wisdom as an interpreter, like as someone who's able to read the signs that God is giving him. And of course, as you know, it's not just this one dream. I mean, over and over and over in these chapters at the beginning of Matthew, God is working in dreams.

And I think that may have something to do with the darkness is so heavy. And here, not only the darkness of unknowing, but as you've hinted, the darkness of what has happened to the kingdom, Herod's rule, the wickedness of Herod, the oppressiveness of that wickedness there is making it so that for God's word to get in, it so to speak has to come from below. It has to come from the unconscious.

It has to sneak past the defenses and it comes in dreams, not only to Joseph, I think four times Joseph has a dream, but also to the Magi, they have a dream. And I would start there, I think with why the dreams, it's the beginning of something, a kind of counter-offensive from the kingdom of God under the cover of dark working up from below. And you mentioned the fact that Joseph is an interpreter of dreams.

He's not the first Joseph interpreter of dreams that we've encountered. And he's also a son of Jacob. He also leads his people into Egypt to protect them.

And there's a sense of, again, resonance with the Old Testament story that you would not get if it were just an angelic appearance. Joseph does not have any, the Old Testament Joseph has no angelic appearances to him. His father, Jacob has several, but Joseph in the biblical text at least is not told of any.

And so it seems that this is someone in the case of Joseph, Joseph had to operate the Old Testament Joseph in darkness, in many respects, he was suffering a tremendously unjust experience. And it seemed like everything was against him, that God's purpose for some reason had failed in his case. And so it was only faithfulness and trust in that bringing him through that led to the salvation of all of the family.

And there's maybe something about his namesake to be observed in Jesus' father, that this new Joseph is also someone who in the darkness of unknowing, is able to be faithful, nonetheless, to do the right thing. And through that to come to an awareness, and also someone who has, as you say, the wisdom to interpret dreams and visions to understand what is the right thing to do. And the other thing that I find interesting is where we have dreams in Scripture, they are overwhelmingly the dreams of kings.

So you have Nebuchadnezzar, you have the dreams of Herod's wife, actually, later on in Matthew, you have the dreams of Pharaoh, you have other dreams mentioned in early parts of Genesis with, is it Pharaoh who has a dream concerning Sarai and Abraham in chapter 12. And so dreams are usually associated with kings, you have dreams, for instance, for Jewish kings, kings like Solomon, who has his famous dream. And so Joseph

having a dream, he's sort of a kingly figure.

He's in the Davidic line, and he's now receiving this dream that sets him apart, maybe from a prophet would generally have the Word of God coming to them, or you'd have some other expression used of that kind, you can have the priests occasionally would have some sort of knowledge come to them. But the king is generally the dreamer, he's associated with wisdom, interpretation, and with this, with a greater power that he has to determine from the signs how he's going to act and rule and lead. And Joseph is in the line of David.

And so maybe that's part of it as well, he received. And as you know, like often, when a king dreams but can't interpret it, it's a sign of of wickedness, right? It's, you know, thinking of the Belshazzar or Nebuchadnezzar, like they have dreams, but they don't know what they mean, and it takes a prophet. So what you have then with Joseph is he's kingly in that he can dream, but he's prophetic in that he can interpret it.

And is therefore drawing together the offices in the way that David himself did, right? I mean, that's how Hebrews identifies David, David is the prophet. And so I think that's another way in which, in which he is like, he is truly like David, you know, in the, in the tradition, Joseph, one of his names is the terror of demons, that he's, he's, he's pictured in saintly tradition as this great warrior. And I love thinking of that the reason that he's such a powerful warrior is that he knows not to talk, right? He knows when to rest.

And in, in keeping his own counsel and communing with his own heart on his bed, like he is doing this kingly work, but his hands are not bloody because he knows how to, how to be restrained. He has a kind of patience and self-control that enables him to make up his heart, make up his mind, and then leave room for God to act. And as you said earlier, the fact that this draws our mind back to Adam and to Abraham, and the fact of God making a covenant with them or acting on their behalf in miraculous ways, apart from their agency.

This I think is similar. I think the situation of Solomon who's given wisdom in a dream, he's in a situation where he's not actually exercising his strength primarily. This is a gift of God.

And it highlights the fact that the child of promise was always going to arise from God's gift, from God's action on his people's behalf, not from anything of their own. But we can see this, I think, throughout the biblical narrative, particularly Genesis with these themes of childlessness. And then the opening up the womb miraculously by the Lord.

This is not something that is just the natural fertility of Sarah or Rebecca or Rachel and Leah. This is something about God's action on his people's behalf. He's the one that's going to open up the womb and most miraculously and tellingly of all the womb of the virgin, that even if there is no earthly or human hope, he can act in that sort of situation.

Now, one thing I'd like to hear your thoughts on is we've talked a bit about harmonization and the fact that we have Mary's story very much within Luke and Joseph's story very much within Matthew. And we think in scripture of the principle of the two or three witnesses and the confirmatory witness that occurs when two witnesses get together and speak of the same matter. What are some of the ways that we can take those two stories together and maybe imagine the sort of conversations perhaps that Mary and Joseph would have and think about some of the ways in which they each have different parts of the puzzle.

And sometimes they give them the same part of the puzzle, the name of the child, for instance. How can we think about the interaction between these two witnesses and how it can maybe enrich our understanding of Christmas? Yeah, so I think I mentioned this before, but some of the fathers in preaching these texts do exactly that. And some of them imagine that Mary has been told she cannot tell, right? Because Joseph must be allowed to show faith.

And if he knows what Mary knows, then he can act in this virtuous way. And I think that's possible. I think it's also possible to think maybe Mary does say what she's been told, but Joseph just doesn't know what to do with it.

I mean, if you put yourself in that situation, I mean, I think he wants to believe her in some way he probably does, but she heard from the angel, right? And was still unsure how could this be? So if you're Joseph and you're hearing it from her, even if you believe her, even if you take her seriously, what do you make of it? I think we on this side of the story, as people who perceive this faith and trust it, we're assuming a world in which this has already happened. But that's not the world that Joseph and Mary live in. I mean, they believe in a God who does the miraculous, but this is not simply a miracle, right? This is unthinkable.

And this is why I think Luke draws our attention to the contrast between Zacharias question, how will I know that this has happened? And Mary's question, how can this be? Like his question seems to be faithless, but hers is not faithless because there's no, there's nothing for her faith to hold to here in the story. So even though it's the same story, the same God working out the same purpose, there is a newness here that has to be taken into account. So I think one thing we might do is just imagine that they are talking all the way through it, but just aren't sure what to make of it.

Either of them, Mary or Joseph, just not sure what does this mean? Okay, this has happened. What do we do now? How do we move forward? And I think one thing that underscores that is Matthew tells us, you know, that the angel appears to Joseph in the dream and says, do not be afraid to do this, which I think is important detail. And when Joseph wakes up, he takes Mary as his wife.

And then when the child is born, he names him, which may suggest that he's finding out

late in the process, right? That this is, you know, not, not the first trimester. I mean, we're well into her pregnancy before he learns and puts it all together, but be that as it may, then Matthew tells us that Joseph does not have sex with Mary until the child was born. And I think some of what we're getting there is the sense in which Joseph has decided to be hands-off in this whole process and that this is his wisdom, right? To know that I just cannot lean on my own understanding here.

And I think even if we imagine him having all the information from Mary, that's still going to be his default mode. I'm just not going to intervene. I'm going to leave room for God to be God.

I think also we can maybe think about does something that is for our sake, that if you had just Mary telling this story, you could be maybe dubious, but when Joseph is telling the story too, when it's backed up by Zachariah and Elizabeth, this high standing priest and held in very good esteem among the people, it's very clear something has happened here that is not just trying to cover up some liaison or something like that. There is—speaking again, if you think of this literarily, the Hannah who's praying at the beginning of Israel's story, Samuel's mother, and now this Hannah who appears in the court as the true king of Israel is born, David's heir is finally born. I think you get the sense in which you have a cloud of witnesses forming in natural and supernatural ways to bear witness to the truth of what has happened here.

Indeed. Any of this skeptical or antagonistic questions that people would have doubting the genuine character of this child and the fact that it is truly a gift of God, not a natural born child, I think would be laid to rest by just the array of witnesses that we have coming forward. I'll be curious to hear your thoughts on there are in Luke a number of particular pieces of Old Testament prophecy that I've picked out.

We might think about the way that he uses out of Egypt, I've called my son, a surprising piece from Hosea or Micah 5 verse 2 being born in, well that's in Matthew 2. Matthew has these particular pieces. In Luke, you have different ones. You have the references to Hannah and her prayer after the birth of Samuel.

You might have other details in Zachariah's statement prophecy where he talks about the day spring from on high visiting us. You have many, even in the form of the text, it seems to allude back to Isaiah with all these texts punctuated by periods of ecstatic prophecy or song that give you a sense of those great chapters of Isaiah where you're being told about this one who's to come and it's constantly punctuated by song or worship and there's a sense that this is an act of divine grace on such a magnitude that you can't help but burst out in some sort of rejoicing in the midst of telling it. Whereas in Matthew, you have these particular selected texts, the Micah 5 verse 2, you have the Jeremiah 31, the weeping of Rachel, you have the text from Hosea 11, you have the Emmanuel statement.

And so why those particular texts do you think? What is Matthew trying to help us to see within the Old Testament background that those texts really serve? Yeah, he says outright that all this happened to fulfill the prophecy to King Ahaz that a virgin would conceive and the child would be named Emmanuel. And the oddity there is that that prophecy itself, if you go back to that text, it's ambiguous, like deeply fraught. It's not quite clear why Ahaz doesn't want the sign.

He says he doesn't want to offend God. And it's not even entirely clear what the prophecy means. And so both Jewish and Christian scholars have argued forever about what is being prophesied here.

What is actually being predicted? What is the promise in the prediction and so on? And I think that's intentional on Matthew's part. I think he's drawing attention to this darkness that we keep mentioning, the ambiguity, the ways in which even when we know we don't really know what it means. And that we simply have to hold true to this God whose word proves itself over time and yet is always surprising.

So I think one reason he's attending to those particular passages and saying to us, this was done to fulfill is not to say, this is not some kind of knockdown argument proving the point. I think he's drawing attention to the fact that when God speaks and when God acts, it still has to be interpreted. And it still has to be interpreted in faith and requires the guidance of the spirit.

And that has always been true. In all of these cases, when God is acting, it takes prophetic awareness. It takes deep humility and patience to discern what God has done and what God has said.

And so I think that's one of the things Matthew wants us to know all the way through his gospel. And he's starting us with Joseph showing us that. It's setting the tone for what's going to be true.

I mean, think about the ways in which that plays out with John the Baptist in Matthew. He begins with this certain awareness, Jesus is the one. But as time passes and he finds himself in the darkness of Herod's oppression, he asks, are you the one or do we look for another? And Peter is certain.

He feels certain that he knows you're the Christ, the son of the living God. But of course, he's deeply misunderstood what this means. I think one of the dominant themes in Matthew is this theme of who knows what and how well do they know it? And ultimately, and this is much like John, I think, the ones who know best are the ones who know they don't understand fully, but clinging to God nonetheless.

Like the Canaanite woman who says, I'll take the crumbs. She's the one who best understands Jesus first. And she calls him son of David.

She recognizes that he, who he is, he's Israel's true heir. She's a Canaanite who recognizes this. And I think in these ways, she's like the women in the genealogy.

The surprising voice is the one that names Jesus rightly first. And so I think Matthew wants, we often say this about the gospel of Mark, especially those of us who think the gospel ends at 16, eight with, they fled very much afraid and said nothing to anyone. But I think that same theme is there in Matthew too, that our lives are lived, much of our lives are lived in this darkness, whether it's just the darkness of unknowing or the darkness of evil's oppression.

And we have to be patient as God works out his way in the world. And that is one of the things I think we can lose when we have a loss of a sense of temporality within the narrative. I mean, one of the most obvious places is we don't tarry in the feeling of Holy Saturday.

What does it mean for Christ to be dead? How does that feel for the disciples? What is the weight of that event? And then when we have the dawn of Easter day, how does that resonate against the background of the feelings and the fears and the anxieties and the horror and the loss of Holy Saturday? Then we might also think about in terms of stories where we have the initial stage and then there's 40, 80 years before something really happens. Think about the beginning of the story of the Exodus. Moses is an eight, he's 80 when he comes back to Egypt.

And so you have all these events that are taking place and then 80 years pass. And we don't actually think about that enough. Or we don't think about the time that it takes for Samuel to grow up and you've got the battle of Aphec and everything going crazy and wrong.

In Israel. And you've had this one glimmer of light, this one slight star on the horizon. And then that is the hope for many years hence.

But it is something that takes a lot of patience and you will be in the darkness for much of the time. Same in the stories of Joseph or stories of Jacob. The feeling that we have as we jump through the narrative and seeing the highlights, we don't have a weighty enough understanding of those periods of uncertainty and doubt.

Think another thing here on the prophecy front is just reflecting on the way that Matthew is using the Old Testament. So for instance, when he's using Hosea, out of Egypt I've called my son, he's not using it saying this means that, that prophecy is predicting Jesus coming out of Egypt in this particular way. Rather he's using it in a more poetic way that fits with the way that God crafts history.

That just as the Lord would bring his people out of Egypt, and that's an event referred to in Hosea 11, so he would bring his son, his firstborn, his only begotten son, out of Egypt

in a way that rhymes with that. And in the same way I think what we have in this statement concerning Emmanuel is not a prophecy of the birth of Christ directly, but indirectly. It's a prophecy of a child born to the line of David in its original context that spells hope for the dynasty faced with the possibility of being wiped out or suffering this huge setback that this child being born is hope.

And as you go through the story you see that within Isaiah, Isaiah has a number of different horizons in view and those horizons resonate with each other. And so something prophesied on one horizon can speak also to the next horizons. And so I think this is part of what's going on with that sort of prophecy.

And if we're just seeing it as we have to work out how this refers to Christ directly, I think we're missing part of what Matthew is doing with the Old Testament, which is far fuller than that. Yeah, and I think part of, to talk theologically for just a moment, I'm convinced that the form of scripture matches the ways of God. So the way stories are told to us fit the ways God has not only has worked but is always working.

And so you mentioned the difference between direct and indirect fulfillments. But when you're talking about a God who's infinite, a God who's eternal, of course the direct and the indirect turn out to be one. So as far as we're know, we can experience it in the way that we learn it as temporal finite creatures.

We have to have that difference between direct and indirect and honor it. But for God, those things are one. And I think that's what's happening with Isaiah's prophecy.

That's what's happening with all of these prophecies. That's how prophecy is possible because of who God is and what his life with us is. And trusting that is what we mean when we talk about faith and patience and humility and openness.

And why I'm thinking too about, I don't think this was intentional on the author's part, but I can't help but notice Psalm 126 talking about God restoring Israel, restoring Zion. And our mouths were filled with singing, we were like those who dream. Well, that's Luke and Matthew brought together.

God has restored the fortunes. And so we get the singing, Luke, and we get the dreaming, Matthew. No one had to intend that.

It happens because of the faithfulness of God, the consistency of God's way with us. And so the song of the Psalmist gets taken up into the nativities of the gospel writers, and then gets taken up into our reading of it because God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And I think that's some of what's so delightful about being entrusted with this faith is recognizing that nobody had to intend it because God is attending to it.

And as you say, that there is this, this is not just literary trickery or artistry. This is something that is, it conforms to the manner in which God works in history. And so it's

also attuning us thereby to be attentive to the fact that God is overall of history, that he's not just someone trapped within time, who is the victim of time as we can often feel, but he's one who's orchestrating all things to his glorious end.

And so as we're going through that history, reading it in biblical testimony, or even living it in our own lives, we can have a sense that this is not just random, this is not just chance. There is a divine orchestration of all things towards the end of the glorification of his son, and for his people's good. So I would like just to take some time very briefly to talk about Herod and his part within this story.

We're running out of time. So I thought the story of Herod and the Magi is an interesting one. And what's going on there? Well, again, I think we have Herod, the darkness of Herod, and the remarkable wisdom of these Gentiles, right, these kings from another land, who are able to see, because they're outside of that realm of darkness, they can see through the darkness, because they're not immediately oppressed by it.

I think this, and I've mentioned this in passing already, but in Matthew, he just keeps drawing our attention to the ways in which the outsider is the first to see what God is doing inside, right. So the Canaanite woman, the women in the genealogy, the centurion at the end, but the Magi, I think, are front and center there, right. They're the ones who understand Israel's story best, even though they are marginal or even external to it.

And I don't think that's new. I think that takes us right back to Genesis. It takes us back to the fact that Hagar is the first to name God, right.

This Egyptian slave, not Abraham, but his Egyptian slave is the one who really starts to identify the character of this God who's called Abraham. And Melchizedek is this priest who's able to bring the gift of God to Abraham from outside of what it is that we think of as the chosen people. And so on right down through Israel's scripture, you know, it's again and again and again, attention is drawn to the fact that the chosen people are chosen, not because they're superiorly righteous or superiorly faithful, because very often the most faithful come from outside or elsewhere, but they're bearing witness to this God who always has someone to bear witness, even if it is, again, somewhat external to the covenant or external to the camp.

And I think the book of Hebrews presses this point sharply. And that's why at the end of Hebrews, we're told we have to go to him outside the camp, that he's a priest of the order of Melchizedek, that Jesus is the one who kind of draws together into one family, all of those who before were thought to be outside and inside. And so I think Matthew in some ways is anticipating that.

He's telling the story in such a way that we realize God is always and has been the God of Israel, and yet God is also the God of the nations. And there are these outsiders who are recognizing what God is doing on the inside. And so Herod, even though he's the

king of the Jews, he's not a faithful king.

He's an outsider who's taken a place inside in a way that's unfaithful. But we have outsiders who are faithful and room is made for them in what God is doing. I think that's at least a place to begin with why Matthew draws our attention to them.

And there really does seem to be a twist again upon familiar stories. You have here a king killing the baby boys, but he's a king who's situated in Israel. He's their king.

He's not Pharaoh in Egypt. This is a situation where the faithful Israelites flee to Egypt to escape from the king in Israel. You think also of the fact who are the great antagonists in the story of the Exodus, the magicians of Egypt under Pharaoh.

Now you have Magi coming from the east, following this light through the wilderness as Israel followed the light of the pillar of cloud and fire. And they're following this light to the king who's caught. They spend time in and yet they are the ones who following this star as pagans are better able to see the signs of the times and what they mean than the very people the center of the, of Jerusalem.

And you can think also of the way that there is calling back to a number of old Testament events. The wisdom of the Magi is connected to the stories of Daniel and Joseph, or we think of the story of Balaam, the star that's going to rise in Jacob. And this is the star rising and it's the fulfillment of what pagans have seen, what they've learned from the faithful people of Israel, people like Daniel and Joseph who have led them in the past.

And now they're able to see something and come in, in fulfillment by Zion and other places with the, the Kings coming from afar, bringing their riches and their treasures to the Messiah and Israel being raised up by the Lord. And so again, we're having this deep resonance, biblical array of images and array of events and fulfillment of prophecy and, and Old Testament hope in this situation where very few people are situated to recognize what's going on. But as readers, we're being invited into this place where there was this deep darkness and now this glorious light has shone.

And we've seen that light grow. We can look back into that period where it was first appearing and recognize things that no one else at those times, except for a very select few could have seen. That's right.

And it's fulfilled. So if we, if we go to the end of Matthew, you know, we get this line, the poor you have with you always, but me, you do not always have. Right.

And then just a bit later, Jesus describing the separation of sheep from goats. And I think it's, it's telling that they could not separate themselves, right? They have to be separated. They don't know the difference.

Only, only the shepherd can make that distinction. And he makes the distinction based on what they did unknowingly, right? Neither the sheep nor the goats recognized when he was hungry, when he was naked, when he was in prison. And yet the sheep went to him in prison anyway, somehow, and they fed him because what they do to the least of these you do to me.

And then the very last scene in the gospel again, fraught because we're told that some doubted they see Jesus, the resurrected Jesus at the moment of the ascension, some doubted, whatever that means. And then he says, I'm with you always even to the end of the world. And then he vanishes.

So the last line of the gospel is, is in a sense humorous because he's saying I'm with you always and then disappears. But what ties all that together is he said, you won't always have me. You'll always have the poor, but what you do to the poor, you do to me.

And then the last word is I'm with you always. How am I with you? I'm with you in the poor. And Maximus is the one who draws all that together.

The one who I saw first drawing it together. And Maximus says, God is the poor man. Christ is the poor man.

And that is the way in which he is always with us. That's why people don't recognize him though. So Matthew's entire telling both in form and content is about the ways in which this has always been true, right? When God comes, those who are closest to the action seem to miss it.

And it takes these, you know, these outside figures, Hagar, the Magi, the Centurion, the Canaanite woman to see what we're too close to notice. That's a very good note to end on, I think. Thank you so much for joining me, Chris.

Oh, it's been a joy as always. And to all of you who have listened, I hope you have a wonderful Christmas. May God bless you richly and your families and in the new year.

God bless and thank you for listening.