In evaluating whether Matthew was himself Jewish or not — the theme of my current thread — it is important to get a sense of his distinctive emphases in his portrayal of Jesus. Here there can be little doubt. The focus of attention in Matthew’s Gospel is on to the nature of Jesus’ relationship to Judaism. You see this off the bat in chapter 1. Whereas Mark’s Gospel begins with Jesus as an adult being baptized by John the Baptist, Matthew’s begins with a clear resonance of Jewish Scripture — with a genealogy of Jewish and Israelite ancestors. And before he begins the genealogy, Matthew tells us that it will be one that traces the line of Jesus back to David and Abraham (“The Book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham”). And why does he highlight these two names in particular? Because David was the greatest king of Israel, whose descendant was to be the “messiah” (as Jesus is called here: Jesus “Christ”), and Abraham was “the Father of the Jews.” This is a genealogy that intimates the author’s concern: to stress the Jewishness of Jesus.

This impression is confirmed in the birth narrative that follows (chs. 1 and 2). What is perhaps most striking about Matthew’s account is that it all happens according to divine plan, as set forth in the the Jewish Bible. The Holy Spirit is responsible for Mary’s pregnancy and an angel from heaven allays Joseph’s fears. All this happens to fulfill a prophecy of the Hebrew Scriptures (1:23). So does everything else in the narrative: Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem (2:6), the family’s flight to Egypt (2:14) Herod’s slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem (2:18) and the family’s decision to relocate in Nazareth (2:23). These are stories that occur only in Matthew, and they are all said to be fulfillments of prophecy.

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