AFTER voicing my gratification and real sense of gratitude at having been invited to contribute a lecture to this distinguished series dedicated to the memory of a man I greatly liked personally and deeply admired as a scholar, the next thing I must do is to express the hope that I shall not prove to have misled any of you by my title or brought you here under false pretences. If you are looking for further light on the various vexed questions which beset the detailed exegesis of Matthew i. 1-18—the precise meaning of biblos geneseōs or of genesis in verse 18, the reasons for the inclusion of the four women, the meaning of the omission of the fourteenth name in the third section of the genealogy and so on—you will be disappointed. I know my own limitations too well to venture opinions on such points in a University which contains Professor Barr and Professor Bruce!

My concern this afternoon will be rather different, and perhaps I could express the difference provisionally like this. I shall be asking not so much: What are we to make of Matthew’s genealogy, and of the rest of the Gospel material in the light of it? but rather: What are we to make of the genealogy and so of the rest of this material? What can Matthew i. 1-17 be expected to mean for us or do for us today? What can they say to us? There is one answer which is given implicitly by almost all ordinary readers, who simply skip the genealogy, and which has also been given by many scholarly readers, namely that it has nothing to say to us at all. Thus Bishop Barnes, for example, could declare roundly of the genealogies in both Matthew and Luke, “it is now generally agreed that they are valueless.”

1 The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Manchester on the 20th of November 1975.
Today, however, few serious students of the New Testament will agree with that. Modern exegetes will retort sharply that whatever the eventual judgement on the historicity or probative force of these verses may be, they at least have the value, the very considerable value, of helping us to understand better the mind of St. Matthew and so some of the beliefs and attitudes of the earliest Christians.

This retort is the more significant because it is now generally accepted that the first task of the New Testament scholar is to "feel his way", as the Germans put it (Einfühlung), into the mind of the author he is studying. The issues here were put with characteristic trenchancy by Dr. Austin Farrer in a Hulsean sermon he preached many years ago at Cambridge about St. Mark. I should like to protest, he said, "at a manner of interpreting the evangelists which neglects, and attempts to destroy, their living individuality... We make haste to shoulder him [sc. Mark] out of the way, that we may lay our hands upon an impersonal and disjointed mass of tradition, which he is supposed to have had in his desk, or in his memory. We pull the Marcan mosaic to bits, and then it is amazing how free we find ourselves to reconstruct the ikon of Christ according to enlightened principles, whether it be scientific probability or transcendent Neo-Calvinism that lies most near our hearts." On the positive side he goes on, "We are not concerned to reconstruct St. Mark as a missionary priest or a husband and father, or as anything save the author of a gospel. The only Mark we want is the Mark who became, for an unknown number of days and hours, the inspired act of meditating and writing this book. We want nothing but his mental life, and of his mental life no more than is enclosed between the first verse of his first chapter and the eighth of his sixteenth. If this is a whole, living, personal and continuous mental act, and I can touch it, then I can touch a vital and significant part of that web of life which made up the substance of Christian origins; and from it my thought can spread to other connected parts of the web...."

Vintage Farrer that, and as such a thought over-stated! In

practice it is not so easy to separate Mark the evangelist from Mark the man in his other capacities. Nevertheless the general point is well taken and if so, if what we are after in the first instance is the "mind" of the evangelist, in this case Matthew, what better starting-point than his own starting-point, the exordium of his Gospel? It is now generally agreed that the first two chapters of the Gospel form a sort of prologue to the rest, and of this prologue the first pericope will be not the least important. In the case of Mark, Luke and John, H. J. Cadbury, R. H. Lightfoot and others have shown the importance of a right understanding of the opening section for a right understanding of the Gospel as a whole and Wilhelm Michaelis in his commentary on Matthew seems to have established that the same is true of him. Indeed the matter is simply one of the psychology of authorship. According to the traditional interpretation of what Euphorion and Panaetius say, Plato drafted and redrafted the opening passage of the Republic innumerable times before he was satisfied that he had the appropriate opening for his work. Plato may have been a perfectionist of unusual intensity, but every writer takes care to get things right in his opening sentences; no one begins a book with a passage he regards as insignificant or expects his readers to skip.

Although the principle is sound, its application in Matthew's case is somewhat disappointing because it is not easy to be sure how exactly he meant his opening pericope to be understood, and a variety of interpretations of it have been offered. The reasons for this uncertainty and variety are worth a moment's reflection. Whether it was J. A. Turretini in the eighteenth century, or some earlier writer, who first explicitly advised his fellow-Christians to read the New Testament books as if they were ordinary writings, the advice contained far-reaching implications. For it has come to be realized, and is still recognized, despite the protest of the so-called "new critics", that in the case of an "ordinary" book emanating from an earlier culture, reading it seriously involves setting it against the background of the cultural milieu in which it was written. We have to enquire into the assumptions and presuppositions, and also the conventions as to style, imagery, word-usage and the
like which the author shared, partly consciously and partly unconsciously, with his contemporaries and immediate pre­
decessors. His work roots, as it were, in that soil, and only as the product of that soil can it be properly interpreted in the first instance, whatever further meaning may legitimately be found in it subsequently. The most sensitive exploration of the sort of thing involved known to me is that by the American critic Rosemond Tuve in her book *The Reading of George Herbert,*¹ but New Testament scholars need no instruction in this matter from a critic in the field of English literature. It is arguable that they were originally responsible for suggesting the type of approach Professor Tuve advocates, and they have certainly followed it in connection with all the New Testament writings, including Matthew i. 1–17.

The results, however, have been rather perplexing and even perhaps paradoxical. W. D. Davies in one of his books quotes T. S. Eliot as asserting that to understand any situation we must know its *total* setting, and he comments: “This is also true of any document we have to study, and it is especially true of the documents of the New Testament.”² He is absolutely right, even if the ideal is never completely attainable in practice, and it is a pity that New Testament scholars have not paid more heed, but tended, at least in recent years, to confine their background studies to Old Testament, or at any rate, Jewish sources. In the case of Matthew’s genealogy, for example, no study of it known to me makes any serious attempt to look at the general background; and yet even a nodding acquaintance with the relevant literature is enough to show that in all pre­modern—and indeed some modern—societies the genealogy has been a standard medium of propaganda, a way of demonstrating the true status or character of some individual or group. That is documented, to cite only a few scholars, by Professor Ian Cunnison for the Luapula tribe in Central Africa, by Dr. Emrys Peters and Professor Dorothy Emmet for the Bedouin Arabs, by Professor J. H. Plumb, among others, for the Pharaohs, the Memphite priests and the Sumerian kings, by Sir Steven

¹ Faber, 1952.
Runciman for the Ottoman dynasty in Turkey in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and by Sir Thomas Kendrick even for the Welsh-Tudor monarchs in England as late as the first half of the sixteenth century. These and other authors also make clear how the process normally worked. The genealogist started—or was paid to start—with a preconceived notion of the true status or character of his subject and framed the genealogy accordingly. An acquaintance with the facts in this broader area will at least predispose us in favour of Loisy's comment on the Lucan and Matthaean genealogies: "Les généalogies ont été créés pour servir d'argument; elles ne contiennent en réalité qu'une assertion".

Of that more later; meanwhile, if we want to know what exactly Matthew's genealogy asserts and how it purports to get there, then certainly we must look at the more immediate background, and it is here, as so often with the New Testament, that our difficulties begin. For the New Testament authors are among the most unselfconscious of writers, and, apart from the Old Testament, give little direct hint as to their backgrounds or assumptions. Consequently it is often possible with perfect plausibility to set their writings against different backgrounds and so arrive at very different interpretations of them. So far as Matthew's genealogy is concerned, it is now generally agreed that the immediate background is the Old Testament and, still more, the studies of it by the early rabbis and their predecessors. These latter have been described by one modern scholar as "the vast continent of the rabbinical sources"; as you will know, they are voluminous in the extreme, and often very difficult either to interpret or to date; and even where they clearly belong to the post-Matthaean period in their present


2 Les Évangiles Synoptiques (Chez l'auteur, Ceffonds, 1907), i. 329.

3 Davies, op. cit. pp. 184-5.
form, they often contain material which may be old enough to have formed part of Matthew's *milieu*. It is therefore possible for different scholars to point to different areas and traditions within this material as the background of various elements in the genealogy, and so to arrive at very different conclusions. Possibly some of you are not aware of the extent of the problem. Apart from the lengthy discussions in all the commentaries, there is a considerable periodical literature on Matthew's genealogy and it is discussed in the course of many monographs. And the book of 1969 by the American scholar Marshall Johnson, entitled *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, is in effect a full-scale, book-length discussion of Matthew i. 1-17.¹

I venture to labour the point because it seems to me one of general application. You might well think that there could not be much doubt about the interpretation of a simple list of names extending to only sixteen verses in all, but if so, you would be wrong. There are in fact a number of uncertainties. To deal with only one, the question why Matthew took the unusual course of including the names of women—no less than four women—in his list: Marshall Johnson distinguishes at least four different types of answer, each supported by a number of considerable scholars. It is true that Professor Krister Stendahl, in an article published in 1960, comes down firmly in favour of one of these answers and states categorically: "that this is the only possible interpretation has been demonstrated beyond doubt... by Renée Bloch".² Yet nine years later Marshall Johnson gave reasons for thinking that Mlle Bloch's account was not in fact the true story, or at any rate the whole story, and wrote of her explanation, "The inclusion of the four women demands a more explicit explanation".³ What biblical scholars have got to accept, it seems to me, is the, admittedly rather paradoxical, fact that the very increase in our knowledge and improvement in our techniques of investigation mean, certainly in the short run, and very probably in the long run, that we are less, rather than more, sure about the exact meaning of many biblical

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¹ C.U.P. Society for N.T. Studies, Monograph Series, 8.
passages. If that is true, it is a truth which I commend for reflection especially by those of you who have occasion to use the Bible normatively or are training to do so, whether as clergy or teachers. How often is the Bible used normatively in the course of preaching or teaching by those who are apparently unaware that the interpretation they are commending as authoritative is uncertain at best and at worst has been rendered improbable or untenable by scholarly work with which they are unacquainted. As Dr. Ward Gasque has written recently, "The number of New Testament scholars who are aware of the complexity of the problems which face them in their study is few indeed".¹

Matthew's genealogy affords only a rather trivial, and, as we shall see presently, imperfect, example, but there are many more perfect examples which are less trivial. Anyone familiar with the relevant literature knows, for example, how very uncertain is the background, both historical and interpretative, of the Lord's Prayer; and on a wider scale the book by W. D. Davies on the Sermon on the Mount, from which I have quoted, provides a useful object-lesson. Is Matthew's Gospel as a whole deliberately structured on a five-fold pattern centring on the five main discourses, with a view to representing the Gospel as the new Law of the new Israel and Jesus as the new Law-giver? After an exhaustive study of this and similar questions extending over 480 long pages, in the course of which he investigates the plausibility of setting each section against the various backgrounds which have been suggested for it, Davies is forced to conclude that only a tentative answer is possible; and anyone who takes the trouble to follow him through the countless nicely balanced questions he has had to confront will recognize how right he is to be tentative—and may indeed think that he would have done well to be more tentative still; and that example is only one chosen at random out of almost innumerable others. Just recall, for example, the uncertainty about the meaning of the stories of Jesus' baptism or transfiguration or of the feeding of the five thousand or the ceremony at the Last Supper.

After all that, I hope it will not seem too much of an anti-climax if I say that in broad terms the meaning of Matthew’s genealogy is clear enough. You will all know what Matthew does: he traces Jesus’ ancestry in lineal descent from Abraham through David and Zerubbabel. He seeks in this way to show that Jesus fulfilled at least some of the necessary conditions for being regarded as the “seed” promised to Abraham (see Gen. xii. 7 and Gal. iii. 16) and also the messianic Son of David many Jews were expecting—his claim to be the latter being strengthened by the fact that his descent from David passed through Zerubbabel, the great leader of the revived post-exilic Israel. Obviously in seventeen verses the evangelist could not go further and show that Jesus fulfilled all the necessary conditions for messiahship, still less that he fulfilled the sufficient conditions; that was left over for the remainder of the Gospel.

At least one other thing, however, Matthew did do in his genealogy which he regarded as extremely important; we can be sure of this because he more or less tells us as much in so many words. In verse 17 he explicitly points out that according to his list, the number of generations from Abraham to David was precisely fourteen, and so was the number between David and the deportation to Babylon, and the deportation and the time of Jesus, respectively. (I leave aside the problem that on the most plausible interpretation of the most likely form of the text as we have it, the third period contains only thirteen names; Matthew clearly intended, or understood, it to contain fourteen.) Whatever the precise background or significance of the number symbolism here—and the question is a much disputed one—Matthew clearly attached great significance to it, and there can be little doubt what, in broad terms, that significance was. I can hardly improve on W. D. Davies’s statement of it. “The genealogy,” he writes, “is an impressive witness to Matthew’s conviction that the birth of Jesus was no unpremeditated accident but occurred in the fullness of time and in the providence of God, who overruled the generations to this end, to inaugurate in Jesus a new order, the time of fulfilment.”¹ As Matthew saw it, history was under the direct and detailed control of the divine

providence, and in the providential scheme the call of Abraham, the accession of David and the Babylonian exile and return were pivotal points of great significance. This significance was revealed by their being separated in each case by exactly the sacred number of fourteen generations; and it was therefore to be expected that when a further fourteen generations had elapsed, as it had exactly by the time of Jesus' birth, the time would have arrived in the divine providence for a further and even more significant—or rather for the final and ultimately significant—event to occur. The genealogy had already shown that Jesus had several of the characteristics of the messianic saviour; the fact that he was born precisely at the moment when that saviour was to be expected greatly enhanced the probability that he was in fact the saviour in question. The genealogy thus witnesses to two further important theological convictions: the implicit conviction that history is continually subject to the sovereign hand of God, so that his faithful people have no ground for fear, and the explicit conviction that the time of Jesus' birth was precisely the moment when it could have been foreseen that "the time was fulfilled and the Kingdom of God would draw near." Once that is grasped, there will be no doubt that the Matthaean genealogy is a theologically highly-charged document and that the Jewish-Christian church members to whom it was most probably directed will have drawn much comfort and edification from it. As G. A. Buttrick says, "the genealogy unfolds the treasure of the good news".

All of which makes it the more incumbent on us to ask an idiot-boy question at this point, the question namely: How did Matthew know all this? The question is clearly an important one because Matthew's belief in the divine government of history, for example, obviously depended in part on his belief in the balanced set of $3 \times 14$ generations; but it is a question which immediately brings us face to face with the problem of the almost total inconsistence and incompatibility which is pretty well universally agreed nowadays to exist between the genealogies in Matthew and Luke. (See e.g. the treatments of the matter

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1 For a different view see Johnson, op. cit. p. 255.
by Frs. J. L. Mackenzie and C. Stuhlmueller in the modern Roman Catholic *Jerome Biblical Commentary.*¹) The relatively conservative Protestant scholar Joachim Jeremias, who possesses an unrivalled knowledge of the relevant historical circumstances and who advances some very modest claims for the authenticity of a few of the later names in the Lucan genealogy (claims, incidentally which would not be accepted by the majority of his New Testament colleagues), makes no serious attempt to argue for any historical basis for the Matthaean list.² It may well be true, as Jeremias suggests, that, especially in Jerusalem, some non-priestly families of the period kept a record of their ancestry for some generations back, for various legal and ritual purposes, but he himself makes no attempt to suggest that any such record in the family of Joseph underlies Matthew’s list of names. Marshall Johnson speaks for the overwhelming majority of New Testament scholars when he writes that “the N.T. genealogies do not come from the earliest strata of the gospel tradition”, that they are not “the result of accurate genealogical records” and that “the use of the genealogical Gattung in Judaism renders it highly improbable that either [Matthew’s or Luke’s] list preserves the family records of Joseph.”³

If then Matthew had nothing which we should regard as authentic genealogical information to go on, how did he draw up his genealogy? So far as the first two groups of names and the first two names in the third group are concerned, he seems to have drawn them from the LXX, mainly from 1 Chronicles ii–iii, supplemented, or interpreted, by Ruth iv. 18–22 and possibly Haggai i. 1—an intelligible enough procedure if you believed, as presumably Matthew did, that the Old Testament was inerrantly accurate on all matters, including matters genealogical. It is also intelligible that the descent from David was traced through Solomon, rather than through Nathan, as in the Lucan genealogy. In 2 Samuel vii, David was promised by God that his descendant should rule his people and it was natural to suppose that it was from the kingly line, descended

¹ Geoffrey Chapman, 1968.
through Solomon, that this descendant would spring. Matthew
may even have meant to suggest that the glory which had
departed from Israel with the cessation of the kings at the Exile,
was now restored in fullest measure.

When we come to the last eleven names in the third list,
the vital names which specifically link Jesus with the acknowledged
kingly line in Israel, we are completely in the dark. The most
that can be said with certainty is that all the names mentioned
occur in one context or another in the late Old Testament
writings, that three of them are known to have been current
among the Jews in Egypt in New Testament times but that
there is not enough evidence to show whether they were current
in Palestine in Matthew's day. Jeremias, it is true, writes: "It
is hardly likely that the list in Matthew is a pure invention; in
default of exact information he has used the material of another
Davidic list." He gives no grounds for his statement, however,
and it is hard to see what grounds he could have. If, as he
himself agrees, the family of Joseph is unlikely to have pre­
served a pedigree of any great length, some early Christian must
have made up this list and there seems to be no grounds for, or
point in, ascribing the action to someone other than Matthew.
In any case the point does not affect our argument, for if Matthew
did not make up the list, he took it over from someone else,
fully knowing it, as we shall see, for what it was.

Meanwhile we may ask: if Matthew drew on the Old
Testament because he regarded it as authoritative, how comes
it that he felt free to deviate widely from it in the way he does,
for example omitting four names from the list it gives and
assigning Rahab to a date fully three hundred years later than
that to which both the Old Testament and later Jewish tradition
unmistakably and unanimously ascribed her? It has often been
suggested that the absence of the names of three of the kings may
simply have been accidental, the result of an error on the part
of a copyist; in which case we should presumably have to say
that the balanced numerical structure which so impressed the
evangelist was fortuitous and factually baseless. Although this
suggestion of a scribal mistake is not without plausibility on

palaeographical grounds, to suggest that such a symbolic numerical structure was simply the result of an accident surely stretches our credulity rather far, and we may notice that if we accept it, we shall have to suppose that Matthew cared so little about accuracy in such matters that he did not know, and did not bother to check, whether the numbers he regarded as so significant were really derived from the Old Testament. Particularly in view of the facts about Rahab, of which Matthew must surely have been aware, it seems better to assume that the omission of the three names was deliberate, especially as we know that artificial interpretations of the Old Testament genealogies which strained the evidence, were quite common in rabbinic circles in Matthew's time. One of the best known of these, which also uses the list of names in Ruth iv. 18–22, is so pertinent that it is worth quoting. It comes from Exodus Rabbah on xii. 2, the words to Moses and Aaron: "this month shall be unto you the beginning of months ", and the relevant part runs as follows:

just as the month has thirty days, so shall your kingdom last until thirty generations. The moon begins to shine on the first of Nisan and goes on shining till the fifteenth day, when her disc becomes full: from the fifteenth till the thirtieth day her light wanes, till on the thirtieth it is not seen at all. With Israel too, there were fifteen generations from Abraham to Solomon. Abraham began to shine . . . When Solomon appeared, the moon's disc was full . . . Henceforth the kings began to diminish in power . . . With Zedekiah . . . the light of the moon failed entirely. . . .

The force of such rabbinic parallels is much strengthened if Johnson and other scholars are right in arguing that other peculiarities of Matthew's genealogy reflect contemporary rabbinic concerns and practices. In particular Johnson puts up an interesting case for thinking that Matthew's inclusion of four women, and his choice of the four women he includes, are related—almost certainly deliberately—to debates which we know to have been current at the time in rabbinic circles.

The widely held view is therefore probably to be accepted according to which Matthew's list is an artificial one arrived at by a sort of midrashic use of the Old Testament. As Johnson puts it: "Both of the lists [i.e. those in Matthew and Luke]

1 Soncino translation, pp. 196 ff.
fall into the category of Midrash, which has a homiletical and hortatory function, and thus may be considered part and parcel of the tendency towards historification of 'non-historical' materials... In Matthew this midrashic quality emerges most clearly. The genealogy has become a means of structuring history which finds its closest parallels in similar schemes that appear in the apocalyptic literature. This structure serves to communicate the author's deep sense of eschatological fulfillment...

Such statements are by now commonplace, and most of us already accept them, or are perfectly willing to do so. What I want to suggest is that we usually do it without stopping to consider sufficiently all that it implies. Put in the abstract scholarly language I have just quoted, the point seems innocuous enough, but I ask you to consider for a moment its implications for our primary concern this afternoon, the discovery of the mind of the evangelist, of the nature of that spell of mental activity which constituted the composition of his Gospel. In this context it makes little difference whether he composed the genealogy himself or took it over without demur from others, for in either case he must have been aware of the clashes and inconsistencies it appears at least to involve. Will he not have been conscious, for example, that on any normal human reckoning, or indeed on that normally presupposed in the Old Testament, the thirteen names in the third section of his genealogy would not have begun to fill the period of nearly six hundred years they are supposed to cover? It may be that he was not aware of it—it is always dangerous to judge men from other cultures by the standards of one's own—but it is perhaps significant that where he has thirteen generations, Luke has nineteen. In any case, Matthew cannot have been unaware of the prima facie inconsistency between his tracing of Jesus' descent through Joseph in his first pericope and the virgin-birth story contained in his second. It is significant for what we have been saying that he gives no clear hint, or at any rate nothing which constitutes a clear hint for a modern reader, of how he thought the two pericopes should be reconciled. Of the many suggestions

1 Op' cit. p. 254.
that have been made on the subject so far, the best is probably that of Krister Stendahl, who thinks that i. 18 was meant retrospectively and intended as a bridge verse; and that verses 19–25 were intended by the evangelist not primarily as a birth narrative in the way that has usually been supposed, but as an account of how God engrafted Jesus into the Davidic line, through the agency of Joseph directed by an angel, just as he had earlier engrafted into the Davidic line some of the non-Davidic figures mentioned in the genealogy. On this showing Matthew’s first two pericopes are virtually two parts of a single whole.

Assuming, as we surely may, that Matthew was an honest man, and not a deliberate deceiver, and that he intended his genealogy as a serious and accurate account of the past, we must ask what it would have been like in all the circumstances to be able to write as he did without loss or lack of integrity. What frame of mind will have been involved?

In detail I do not profess to have the answer to that question, even if it is in principle answerable. To answer it would need, at the minimum, a length of time and a really intimate knowledge of the workings of the rabbinic mind which I—and probably most of you—do not have. Suffice it for now if we recognize that, whatever exactly the frame of mind may have been, it will have been one quite alien to our experience. G. E. P. Cox quite rightly says in his commentary that “the Jewish character of the genealogy and its purpose are foreign to our minds.” Nearly all of you will probably have read enough of the rabbinic writings to be aware how totally unconvincing a large proportion of their argumentation seems when judged by our standards of logic. So much so that translators and interpreters of rabbinic writings frequently have to insert words into the text in square brackets in order to make what the rabbis deemed a valid argument even intelligible, let alone cogent, to our minds. It is interesting in this connection to find Dr. L.

1 It is surely difficult to suppose, as is done by T. H. Robinson for example (Moffatt Commentary on Matthew (Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), p. 3), that Matthew did not intend his genealogy to be taken as an account of what had actually happened in the past.

Finkelstein, an authority on the rabbis, writing à propos one rabbinic argument: "This may seem a weak argument for the authenticity of a tradition; but antiquity was apparently prepared to be impressed by it. So impressive indeed was this argument, that in the Gospel of Matthew, the early Christian apologist, directing his argument against the Pharisees (and also the Sadducees) adopted a similar claim for Jesus, and traced his genealogy back to Abraham in a series of three chains of fourteen links each (Matt. i. 17)."

If we attempt to characterize the frame of mind briefly from a logical, as distinct from a psychological, standpoint, perhaps we may say that what the rabbis and Matthew were saying in effect was: "Given our understanding of how things are now, the past must have been of such and such a character." Matthew was saying: "Given that Jesus was in fact the Davidic saviour, then this is how things must have fallen out in the past, and this is what the Old Testament must originally have said and meant." Thus, according to Yehezkel Kaufmann, "after the Babylonian Exile the tradition grew that messiahs were sons-of-David not because they were descended from David, but were sons-of-David because they were messiahs." To put it thus baldly is inevitably to misrepresent. Professor Amos Wilder speaks of "imaginatively objectifying" contemporary beliefs, Krister Stendahl talks of "the tendency to describe what was originally believed," and we have already seen how Marshall Johnson speaks of "the tendency towards the historification of 'non-historical' materials." The following quotation also seems to me illuminating, although it refers explicitly to early medieval, rather than biblical, thinkers and writers. It comes from a book on Church history by one of our most distinguished medievalists, Sir Richard Southern. "The primitive age had

1 For the reference see W. D. Davies op. cit. p. 304 n. 1 and p. 302 n. 1.
3 Stendahl, art. cit. p. 94, italics mine; Johnson, op. cit. p. 254; cf. W. D. Davies's comment on the Mishnah, "by itself the evidence from the Mishnah on historical matters is always uncertain, because of the possibility that it is imaginatively coloured and creates a past which never existed" (op. cit. p. 283 n. 1).
few records, but it had clear ideas of the past. These ideas were based on accumulated traditions, legends, pious fabrications, and above all on a reluctance to believe that the past is largely unknowable. Hence even learned and critical men easily believed that the past was like the present. Documents were therefore drawn up in which the theories of the present were represented as the facts of the past... the authors believed that they enforced truths which could not be abandoned without grave danger to their souls."

Without meaning to suggest that the outlook of New Testament writers was at every point like that of early medieval thinkers, I venture to hope that all that may set you thinking about the mind, or frame of mind, of the author of Matthew's Gospel. We will not quarrel over the possibility that the first two chapters are an addition to an originally shorter Gospel. That once popular hypothesis is now largely discredited, mainly through the efforts of those who have worked on the prologue and shown that its concerns and motifs are those of the Gospel as a whole. Even if this suggestion is adopted, however, it remains true that the frame of mind we have outlined was that of the redactor of the Gospel in the form in which we have it, and we have no particular grounds for supposing that those responsible for the material he utilized were of any different mind.

So I am brought to one of the main things I want to say this afternoon. If what we really have in i. 1-17 is what Matthew thinks must have occurred in the past, given his present situation, may not the same be true of other pericopes in his Gospel? So long as we remember that we are confining ourselves simply to an abstract, logical analysis of what Matthew was doing, and not attempting to probe the workings of his mind psychologically, or discover what it felt like to be Matthew, may we not suggest that what he was saying in some of the pericopes in the body of the Gospel amounts to something like this: Given my understanding of my position now as a member of a community created, forgiven, instructed and watched over by Christ, things in the days of his flesh, must have fallen out thus

and so? Put like that, it sounds far too individualistic. No doubt it was usually the community's beliefs rather than his individual view that Matthew was transmitting. In any case please do not misunderstand me: I am not suggesting that Matthew's mind worked in connection with every pericope in the way it seems to have done with the opening pericope. That it did work in some such way for the rest of the prologue is fairly widely agreed. So far as the rest of the Gospel is concerned, the work of scholars such as Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson must be given its full weight. I am only suggesting that in the case of any pericope Matthew's mind could have worked in this way, and that given his background and cultural milieu, it would have been perfectly natural for it to do so. My point is simply that if anyone says to you: "the evangelist would never have made up such and such a story or altered the tradition in such and such ways", you must always bear in mind that the evangelist about whom this claim is made was the author, or at least the willing transmitter, of i. 1–17 and the rest of the prologue. And the point of some of my earlier remarks was to make clear that we cannot attempt to shrug off the genealogy as trivial or hardly integral to the Gospel. On the contrary, it is the exordium of the whole work and, as such, the author will have lavished a good deal of care on it; it must therefore be taken very seriously as an indication of the way his mind worked.

There that particular matter must be left if I am to have time to allude even briefly to another, much wider, question to which the genealogy gives rise. Those who write about Matthew i. 1–17 often betray, even if only involuntarily, a sense of regret that the passage does not stand up better to being judged by modern standards of historical and genealogical accuracy. Quite apart from the fact that such an attitude implies the lack of a truly historical, or historicist, perspective—why, after all, should a writing emanating from a first- or second-century Jewish milieu in the middle-east, stand up to criticism by the quite different standards of twentieth-century western Europe?—it surely raises the following question.

Suppose that by some unexpected turn of the wheel of
fortune you and I became convinced that Matthew was right and that Jesus was beyond any peradventure descended from Abraham through David and Zerubbabel. Even suppose that *per impossibile*—or at any rate *per improbilissimum*—we became convinced that his descent was structured in three lots of fourteen generations, each beginning with one of Matthew's high moments, what difference, if any, would it make to our beliefs? I will not ask whether we should be convinced thereby that Jesus was indeed the looked-for messianic figure because, as we have seen, even Matthew did not expect the genealogy alone to produce *conviction* on the point; but should we even be more predisposed to believe it?¹

That is a question you must all answer for yourselves. So far as I and several people with whom I have discussed it are concerned, it would make no difference to our beliefs at all. If that should be the case with you too, you would surely have to ask the further question *why* it is the case. It is presumably not for the sort of reasons which might have prevented a contemporary of Matthew from being convinced. It is not, for example, that you share beliefs of a messianic sort generally similar to Matthew's, except for holding, let us say, that what God had in mind was to raise up a messiah from the house of Levi, rather than from the house of David; or that what he planned was to send the messiah, not $14 \times 3$ generations after Abraham but $11 \times 7$ generations after creation, as Luke perhaps intended to suggest, or anything of that sort.² The reason would rather be that you no longer share the general outlook and assumptions which both Matthew and Luke took for granted; you no longer think God ever intended to begin the closure of world-history $42$ generations after Abraham or even that his purposes require what Vögtle calls "the special conception attested from the time of Daniel onward, that the will of God is manifested in a secret, established numerical periodization of "

¹ The same sort of point is made in Johnson, op. cit. pp. 144–5, a passage which was not in mind when the above was first written.

² On the uncertainties about the correct text and interpretation of Luke's genealogy see the commentaries; also J. Jeremias, op. cit. pp. 292 f., and Johnson, op. cit. pp. 231 ff.
world events ". Such a way of conceiving God and his workings is foreign to your modern Western-European outlook. You no longer inhabit a universe of discourse in which messianic claims of the traditional sort make sense.

In his book *The Death of Christ* the American scholar Dr. John Knox has a passage which I find very thought-provoking. In it he describes an occasion when a New Testament scholar was discussing with a colleague the difficulties he found in supposing that Jesus ever regarded himself as Son of Man. In response to some of the difficulties he voiced, the colleague countered, "But suppose he was the Son of Man?" Knox comments, "I find such a question very hard to deal with, not because of what it asks for, but because of what it seems to presuppose. It seems to ascribe to the 'Son of man' objective and personal reality. It seems to assume that there was, and is, a Son of man. But what does the phrase 'Son of man,' in the context of apocalypticism (and no one can deny that context in many of the Gospel statements) really designate? Must we not say that it stands for an idea, or an image, in the minds of certain ancient Jews? One can trace to some extent the beginnings and development of this idea or image in Jewish culture. But do we for a moment suppose that it is the name of any actual person—that the Son of man in fact exists or ever existed?"

If this attitude to the Son of Man is justified, the same sort of attitude must presumably be adopted towards the title Son of David and the other titles of Jesus in the New Testament which may be described as messianic in the broad sense of the term. If so, what prospect opens up?

Our immediate subject this afternoon is Matthew's genealogy, so let us begin from that. As we have seen, its essential purpose is to vindicate a messianic status for Jesus. If Professor Knox is right, we should have to say, not only what we have already said, that the evidence on which the genealogy rests is inadequate by our standards to justify acceptance of it as historically accurate, but also that the belief it bodies forth—that it "objectifies imaginatively", as Amos Wilder might say—is itself not something

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1 See Anton Vögtle, *Biblische Zeitschrift*, ix (1965), pp. 36-68.
we can take over as it stands. And should we not have to say something else as well? If Matthew's genealogy, with its precise structure of three lots of fourteen generations, is not historically trustworthy, it constitutes in itself no evidence of God's sovereign control of history. It is of course evidence of Matthew's, and the early Church's, belief in God's sovereign and detailed control of history, but that is something quite different and raises the question of the nature and solidity of its justification.

I think you will agree that if this passage were to prove typical of many others in the Gospels, what we have been saying would constitute a formidable and thought-provoking agenda for the New Testament exegete, and indeed the doctrinal theologian, to ponder. You may, however, feel that in spite of my suggestion that the exordium to a work is likely to prove characteristic, and indicative of its writer's mind and way of proceeding, Matthew i. 1-17 is in fact an uncharacteristic passage which raises questions that do not arise, at any rate to anything like the same extent, in connection with other passages in the Gospels.

You may well be right, and in any case you will of course want to decide for yourselves. May I, however, just to start you thinking, make certain points? The aim of vindicating a messianic status for Jesus is one which Matthew's genealogy shares with a large number of other passages in the New Testament; if there should prove to be anything in Professor Knox's point of view, then in that respect, at any rate, what applies to Matthew's genealogy would apply equally to all these other passages. Perhaps the problems in this area can be illuminated a little if we indulge for a moment in the following fancy: suppose that by some magic device you and I, with all our modern western attitudes, standards and knowledge, could be enabled to go back and stand in Matthew's sandals as he stood preparing to write the first seventeen verses of his Gospel. Faced with the data, indeed with the whole situation, which led him, coming as he did from a first-century Jewish-Christian background, to compose his genealogy, it seems clear that we should not have been moved to make those claims, or probably indeed any claims, about Jesus' ancestry; nor should we have wished to make messianic claims for him, at any rate in the
sense of the word messianic which Matthew shared with Jews and Christians of his day. What claims, either natural or supernatural, should we have been moved to make? It is often suggested that that is the question we should ask. The issue is posed, for example, in the form: “What must the truth be now if people who thought as they did put it like that?” In the case of Matthew’s genealogy, however, I see no way of answering such a question; we do not even know enough about the data and situation by which Matthew was faced at that point to know whether on that basis we should have wanted to make any claim at all.

How far then does the same thing apply to other passages in the Gospels? Here there is—quite legitimately—a wide divergence of opinion, and my concern this afternoon is only to see that the question is asked and fully faced. Suppose that you—exactly as you are now—were faced with the situation or the data which led Matthew to write the stories in the rest of his prologue, or indeed the later part of his Gospel as a whole, which led Mark to write his accounts of the stilling of the storm and the Gerasene demoniac, or Luke his account of the events on the road to Emmaus, what account of the past would you be led to give and what claims for Jesus would you be led to advance?

My concern is not so much with the details of any historical or theological claims you might make, as with the prior question whether you feel you are in a position to make any claims at all on the basis of the material now available; but I should be very sorry to end a lecture in memory of T. W. Manson of all people on anything which sounded like a negative note. It is a fairly open secret that in my view the sort of questions I have in mind can be answered only to a very limited extent in the case of a good deal of the Gospel material, and it would be idle to deny that the very novelty of the resultant situation sometimes makes it appear somewhat daunting.

Yet I do not find it daunting in any absolute sense. The case of Professor John Knox seems to me a very significant one in this connection. As those of you who are familiar with his writings will know, in spite of his views about the culturally conditioned character of the messianic and allied categories in
the New Testament, his awareness of all that has sprung from
the life and activity of Jesus, and his experience of reconciliation
and communion with God in the community which resulted
from that life and activity, compel him to assign to them a vitally
important part in human history and indeed in the providence
of God and the history of our salvation.

If I understand the situation correctly, two points must be
specially noticed here. The first is that Knox must be free to
understand and expound the significance he finds in Jesus in
his own way, that is, in terms and categories which are as
consonant with his modern western outlook as messianic
categories were consonant with the outlook of Matthew's time
and place. The second point is that in discovering what these
terms and categories should be, he will take account of what has
happened since New Testament times as least as much as of
what happened before. In one of his books he speaks of "a
new community in which are found a new forgiveness, victory
and hope", and he says that the existence of this community
"is a matter of empirical knowledge in the Church". 1 In view
of that, the question which constantly engages him is what the
activity and significance of Jesus must have been that his life
should have given rise to such a community as the vehicle of
such an experience.

If I am right in what I have been saying, in asking that
question Dr. Knox is following closely in the footsteps of the
New Testament writers. They constantly, though no doubt
unselfconsciously, asked some such questions, and a great deal
of what they wrote was written to convey their answers to it.
Very often their answers were cast in the form of historical, or
purportedly historical, accounts because, as we have seen, it
was natural in their cultural circumstances to objectify one's
beliefs imaginatively, to "historify . . . non-historical materials,"
"to describe what was originally believed". 2

But if that is the way Dr. Knox approaches the matter—and
I certainly approach it in some such way myself—that does not
in the least mean that either he or I attach diminished importance
to the New Testament, and the detailed exegesis of it, whether

for religious or any other purposes. The difference, if there is one, lies in the perspective from which, and the expectations with which, we approach the text.

Our starting-point is a relationship with God in his Church now. We recognize that, if it is a genuine relationship with God, it can never be fully articulated in human terms, but such articulation of it as we can achieve must be an account in our own terms of our response to the divine initiative; we certainly do not expect to be able to borrow from the very different culture of New Testament times categories and modes of articulation which can serve our turn just as they stand. The situation is rather that our relationship to God is so central for us that we cannot rest content until it informs and controls the whole of our lives in every area and at every level. In the attempt to see that it does so we are constantly seeking for help, and where is it more natural to look than to the accounts of relationships between men and God given in the New Testament?

Because we approach the matter from this perspective we are not greatly troubled if the New Testament exegete cannot uncover in detail the historical facts behind the various New Testament accounts; and, as I say, we do not expect him to be capable of the impossible feat of expounding New Testament categories in such a way as to make them immediately acceptable to us. Indeed we become suspicious if he claims to be able to do so. It is such claims on the part of a scholar like C. H. Dodd, for example, that seem to us, welcomed though they have been by many, to be the least satisfactory part of his remarkable work.

What we ask of the New Testament exegete is that he should uncover as far as possible the beliefs and experiences of relationship with God of which the various New Testament theologies and accounts of the past are the expressions and historifications. We want to be able, by an appropriate “suspension of disbelief”, to enter into those beliefs and relationships, to think the thoughts, and experience the experiences, of the New Testament Christians after them. We appreciate that we shall never be able to do that fully, and in any case that we cannot make those beliefs and experiences our own as they stand; we recognize that
they will remain "incapsulated" elements in our modern experience, to use Collingwood's term. Nevertheless we have been convinced, most recently by the brilliant writings of Father J. S. Dunne,¹ that it is possible to "pass over", as he puts it, into the faith and way of life of another culture in such a way that one returns to one's own time and culture with one's outlook, faith and understanding, deepened and broadened in ways which may not be specifiable, even after the event, but which are none the less vitally important for that. We ask the New Testament exegete to help us to pass over into the beliefs and relationships with God witnessed to in the New Testament, not in the belief that they were necessarily better than our own, but in the faith that they will prove complementary to our own, revealing to us new insights, new dimensions of relationship with God, and also gaps, lacks and superficialities in our present relationship both with God and men which, once they are revealed, must, and can, be dealt with in our own terms.

If I return in conclusion to St. Matthew's genealogy it is to emphasize that if we approach such a passage in the ways I have just been describing, none of the very real problems I have been raising with regard to it need be seriously or ultimately daunting. There is in principle no difficulty about our thinking St. Matthew's thoughts in such a passage after him and entering deeply, for example, into his sense of God's sovereign control of history. Perhaps I can make clear something of the value I see in that if I cite once again a passage which I frequently find myself quoting from R. G. Collingwood's Autobiography:

"If what the historian knows is past thoughts, and if he knows them by re-thinking them himself, it follows that the knowledge he achieves by historical inquiry is not knowledge of his situation as opposed to knowledge of himself, it is a knowledge of his situation which is at the same time knowledge of himself. In re-thinking what somebody else thought, he thinks it himself. In knowing that somebody else thought it, he knows that he himself is able to think it. And finding out what he is able to do is finding out what kind of a man he is."²

¹ See especially his book The Way of All the Earth (Sheldon Press, 1973).