

# **Jesus Christ, Son of David, and Son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1–17)**

*By Jacob D. Gerber*

If I were writing a biography of a famous person, the last thing I would do is to start with a genealogy. Instead, I'd want to open with a snapshot into a particularly crucial moment of that figure's life, or to give a glimpse into the power of his legacy. But, when the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew, one of Jesus' own disciples, to write a biographical account (a Gospel) about Jesus Christ, the Spirit directed Matthew to begin with the genealogy we have in Matthew 1:2–16. Matthew, indeed, has a profound purpose for this genealogy, using it to show the sweep of history leading up to Jesus, and presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of everything that God had promised to do for his people in the Old Testament. In this book, we are reminded of Israel's victories and defeats, pride and scandal. Ultimately, though, Matthew is demonstrating the point that Paul articulates in Galatians 4:4: *in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son.*

## **The Renewal of the Covenant (Matt. 1:1–6a)**

Among the four Gospels, the opening words of John's are probably most famous: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). These words explicitly echo and expand upon the very first words of the Bible in Genesis: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The opening words of Matthew (Βίβλος γενέσεως; *biblos geneseōs*; ESV: “book of the genealogy”) have a very similar effect, even if they are not the most famous, as R. T. France points out: “The first two words of Matthew’s gospel are literally ‘book of genesis.’...The effect on a Jewish reader is comparable to that of John’s opening phrase, ‘In the beginning....’”<sup>1</sup> Even beyond the mere translation of the opening words in Matthew, the words are a direct quotation of Genesis 2:4 and 5:1 in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), translating the Hebrew phrase, “The book of the generations....” סִפְרַ תּוֹלֶדֶת (sopher tolēdōt; Gen. 5:1).<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word “generations” (תּוֹלֶדֶת; *tōlēdōt*) is an important word that structures the whole book of Genesis, signaling the beginning of a “family history” that follows (Gen. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2).<sup>3</sup> Here in Matthew, the use is slightly different—not to narrate the family that descends from Jesus, but to show the genealogy that *leads* to Jesus; however, “it is obvious that by this beginning Matthew wishes to call attention to the

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<sup>1</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 18–19.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), xxi–xxii.

momentous, even sacred, character of the genealogy and therefore also of the narrative to follow.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Jesus, the Christ (Matt. 1:1b)*

Before Matthew jumps to his fuller genealogy to account for the “generations” of Jesus, he begins with a summary statement: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (v. 1). That is, this is the book of the genealogy of *Jesus*, and then Matthew makes three significant assertions about Jesus: that Jesus is (1) the Christ, (2) the son of David, and (3) the son of Abraham. These statements, along with the declaration that this is the “book of genesis” for Jesus, gives us “key themes of chaps. 1–2...in a nutshell. Matthew’s names for Jesus present him as the fulfillment of the hopes and prophecies of Israel but also as one who will extend God’s blessings to Gentiles. His birth marks a new epoch in human history.”<sup>5</sup> The word “Christ” (*Χριστός; Christos*) is the Greek version of the Hebrew word “Messiah” (*מֶשְׁיחָ; māšîach*), both of which mean, “Anointed One.” In the Old Testament, Prophets, Priests, and Kings were anointed to their respective offices in order to serve as mediators between God and his people (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:16; Ex. 29:7; 1 Sam. 16:13). Jesus, as the rest of the Gospel of Matthew will explain in great detail, is the ultimate Prophet, Priest, and King.

### *Jesus, the Son of David (Matt. 1:1c)*

An immediate affirmation of Jesus’ kingship comes in the next phrase: “the son of David.” God made a covenant with David, swearing to establish David’s royal dynasty for an everlasting kingdom: “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:13–13). Together, the claim that Jesus is both Christ and the son of David is a very explicit claim that Jesus is the rightful king of Israel.<sup>6</sup>

### *Jesus, the Son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1d)*

The phrase, “son of Abraham,” also invokes covenant promises God made to his people in the Old Testament. While God did promise Abraham that “kings shall come from” him (Gen. 17:6), that particular promise is probably not most clearly in view in Matthew 1:1. Instead, the significant promises to Abraham had to do with God’s covenant with Abraham and his offspring after him (cf. Gen. 12:1–2; 15:18–21; 17:1–14), as well as the Gentiles who would be blessed through Abraham (Gen. 12:3). D. A. Carson notes, “Genesis 22:18 had promised that through Abraham’s offspring ‘all nations’ (*panta ta ethnē*, LXX) would be blessed; so with this allusion to Abraham, Matthew is preparing his readers for the final words of this offspring from Abraham—the commission to make

<sup>4</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, ed. by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and Ralph P. Martin, 33A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 53.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:89.

disciples of ‘all nations’ (Mt 28:19, *panta ta ethnē*).<sup>7</sup> Matthew will list these three assertions again at the end of the genealogy, but in reverse order: “So all the generations from *Abraham* to *David*...to the *Christ*...” (v. 17).<sup>8</sup> Thus, this section is dominated by a clear theme: “Jesus the Messiah came in fulfillment of the kingdom promises to David and of the Gentile-blessings promised to Abraham (see Mt 3:9; 8:11).”<sup>9</sup>

### From Abraham to David (Matt. 1:2–6a)

When we come to the genealogy itself, one issue we must consider is that both Matthew and Luke (3:23–38) both offer a genealogy to account for Christ’s ancestry. Commentators have long observed several differences, so that even John Calvin noted four general differences: (1) Matthew’s moves chronologically forward, but Luke’s backwards; (2) Matthew’s begins with Abraham, while Luke traces his all the way back to Adam; (3) Matthew’s genealogy omits some names along the way, while Luke’s is more complete; (4) Matthew and Luke sometimes refer to the same person with different names.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond these general differences, commentators give particular attention to the specific differences in the names listed in the few generations immediately leading to Jesus, and these differences have been accounted for by two major explanations. D. A. Carson helpfully summarizes the two: (1) that Matthew gives Joseph’s genealogy, while Luke gives *Mary’s* genealogy, but simply substitutes Joseph’s name in Luke 3:23. Carson argues though, that “The theory stems, not from the text of Luke, but from the need to harmonize the two genealogies. On the face of it, both Matthew and Luke aim to give Joseph’s genealogy.”<sup>11</sup> (2) “Others have argued, more plausibly, that Luke provides Joseph’s real genealogy and Matthew the throne succession—a succession that finally jumps to Joseph’s line by default.”<sup>12</sup> Even so, Craig Blomberg rightly notes, “Knowing which of these solutions is more likely probably is impossible unless new evidence turns up.”<sup>13</sup>

It is important to remember, though, that ancient genealogies were not produced with quite the same goals as we might have if we were to try to write genealogies today. Where we seek perfect, full, precise completeness of information, the biblical writers often shaped their genealogies to bring out theological points.<sup>14</sup> This does not mean that the genealogies are false, but that they write them with a purpose that goes beyond regurgitating bare census data. For this reason, they made deliberate choices to begin and end, and to include or exclude, in ways that would underscore the point that they were making.

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, vol. 9, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 88.

<sup>8</sup> Hagner calls this a “chiastic inclusio.” (Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 5.)

<sup>9</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 88.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. by William Pringle, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 84.

<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, vol. 9, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 89.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 89.

<sup>13</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 53–54.

<sup>14</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 8–9.

Matthew, then, makes a deliberate choice to begin with Abraham (rather than Adam; cf. Luke 3:38). This choice reflects Matthew's burden to reach the Jews in particular with the message that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. We can even see this burden in the way that Matthew records his genealogy in a manner reminiscent of Old Testament genealogies, tracing a lineage from father to son, "X begat Y" (e.g., Gen. 5:1ff).<sup>15</sup> The word "begat" (KJV; ἐγέννησεν; *egennēsen*; from the verb γεννάω; *gennaō*) is closely related to word "genealogy/generations" (γένεσις; *genesis*), and refers to the father's active, biological role in procreation. At the same time, the word does not always refer to a man's immediate son, but sometimes to a descendent two or three generations down the family tree.<sup>16</sup> The ESV translation ("was the father of...the father of...") is a little too weak; however, there is no good equivalent in modern English to replace the antiquated word "begat."

Matthew's genealogy from Abraham to David, then, follows a fairly straightforward lineage of fathers, without excluding any father along the way (cf. 1 Chron. 2:1–15). There are, however, a few interesting observations we might make of this lineage. First, Matthew selectively excludes some siblings along the way (e.g., Ishmael, the brother of Isaac, and Esau, the brother of Jacob), while noting other siblings ("Judah and his brothers"; "Perez and Zerah"). The exclusion of Ishmael and Esau, and the inclusion of the siblings of Judah, make sense, given Matthew's intended audience of entire nation of Israel. Ishmael and Esau were excluded from the covenant promises to Abraham's offspring (Gen. 17:19–21; 21:13; 25:23).<sup>17</sup> It is less clear, though, why Matthew should include Zerah.

Second, while it is the chain of paternity that drives this genealogy ("begat...begat...begat..."), Matthew draws special attention to certain mothers along the way: Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), and, in the next section, Bathsheba ("the wife of Uriah"; v. 6b). Of the mothers who may have been listed (Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, etc.), it is extraordinary that Matthew chose these four. Each of them is a reminder of some kind of scandal: Tamar, because she deliberately seduced her father-in-law (Gen. 38); Rahab, because she was a Canaanite prostitute (Josh. 2:1); Ruth, because she was a Moabitess (Ruth 1:22; cf. Deut. 23:3); and Bathsheba, because David committed adultery with her and murdered her husband, Uriah (2 Sam. 11). At a very basic level, this deliberate choice to include scandal demonstrates some of the magnitude of Christ's grace, so that he did not consider it beneath himself to come from such a compromised set of ancestors.<sup>18</sup> At a deeper level that probably gets us closer to Matthew's specific purpose, the scandal and shame of these women anticipate the (undeserved) scandal and shame of Mary's pregnancy out of wedlock, which Matthew will describe in the next passage.<sup>19</sup>

## The Rightful King (Matt. 1:6b–11)

By the end of the previous section, Matthew has traced the connection of Jesus' ancestry, from Abraham to David. While this is enough to show the fulfillment of Matthew's assertions in the

<sup>15</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1943), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 27–28.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:89–90.

<sup>19</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 56.

opening verse (“the son of David, the son of Abraham”), Matthew has more to demonstrate—namely, that Jesus is not merely *a* descendent of David (for David had many wives, and many children; 2 Sam. 3:2–5; 5:13–14; 1 Chron. 3:1–3), but a descendent of the *royal line* of David, through Solomon.<sup>20</sup> So, Matthew traces Jesus’ lineage from David through Jechoniah. The line stretches across the full stretch of the kings of Judah up through the Babylonian deportation; however, Matthew freely omits a few kings along the way. Between Joram and Uzziah/Azariah (v. 8), Matthew skips Ahaziah (reigned one year; 2 Kgs. 8:25–27), Joash/Jehoash (reigned 40 years; 2 Kgs. 11–12), and Amaziah (reigned 29 years; 2 Kgs. 14). Then, between Josiah and Jechoniah/Jehoiachin (v. 11), Matthew skips Jehoahaz (reigned three months; 2 Kgs. 23:31–35) and Jehoiakim (reigned 11 years; 2 Kgs. 23:36–24:7).

Why does Matthew exclude these kings? Certainly, Matthew is not selectively removing kings based on the length of their reign (ranging from three months to forty years) or their relative wickedness (among those excluded, Joash and Amaziah were largely good, while the others were evil; and among those included, kings like Uzziah, Hezekiah, and Josiah were godly, while kings like Ahaz and Manasseh were exceedingly wicked).<sup>21</sup> Much of the reason for this has to do with the fact that Matthew is shaping this genealogy to include fourteen generations in every section (Abraham to David, David to Jechoniah, and Jechoniah to Joseph), as he will reveal in v. 17. We will discuss that issue more when we get to that verse.

## The Restoration of Israel (Matt. 1:12–17)

The final section of this genealogy is notable for at least three reasons. First, while we have some of the names after the Babylonian exile (Jechoniah through Zerubbabel) recorded elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah), the other names appear only here in the Bible.<sup>22</sup> Second, this section seems to give significance to the time after the return from Babylonian exile and intertestamental period that is on equal footing with the period of the patriarchs through David and to the period of the David kings. Craig Blomberg gives a plausible reason for this: “The Babylonian exile appears centrally as well, perhaps because Jesus is seen as the climax of the restoration of the nation of Israel from exile.”<sup>23</sup>

The third reason is the most important to Matthew’s purposes. After the unbroken chain of paternal begetting, the final figures in this sequence stand out: “Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (v. 16). The fact that Joseph’s father is Jacob has some significance, since Matthew will draw from the Jacob/Joseph story in Genesis in the pages to come.<sup>24</sup> More significantly, though, is the fact that we do not see Joseph as the father who actively “begat” Jesus. Rather, we see the same verb ( $\gamma\epsilon\nu\nu\acute{\alpha}\omega$ ; *gennao*) in a passive form

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:83–84.

<sup>21</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 93.

<sup>23</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed by. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 85.

(Ἐγεννήθη; *egennēthe*) in relation to Mary: “Mary, of whom Jesus was born” (v. 17). After so many uniform instances of “begat” in a row, the change in syntax is striking, abruptly declaring that Joseph may be the legal father of Jesus, but not his biological father.<sup>25</sup> We are not told immediately why this is, but we will only need to wait until the next section, when we see that Jesus is born to the Virgin Mary, conceived from the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20), and without any human father.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the “was born” is a “divine passive,” which indicates “an activity of God.”<sup>27</sup> It is this unique parentage that explains, in part, the reason that Jesus is “called Christ” (v. 16).

It is here that Matthew makes a particular note about the uniform “fourteen generations” in each of the three sections of his genealogy leading up to Jesus (v. 17). As we have noted, the first section is a very complete record, while the second section has some notable omissions of generations. As for the third generation, we do not have any other biblical record to compare against, so we do not know how many generations Matthew may have skipped over if he did so at all. The amount of time is also of varying degrees, with roughly 800 years from Abraham to David, only 400 years from David to exile, and then another 600 years from exile to the birth of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Again, this is not a historical problem, because Matthew knows as well as we do (better, given that we do not have the records from the exile to Christ’s birth) that he has omitted certain generations. Furthermore, it is a little difficult to know how Matthew is attributing fourteen generations in each section. If we look at each generation in terms of *begetting* (e.g., *Abraham* is not first, but *Abraham’s begetting of Isaac* is first), then Matthew alternates between inclusive and exclusive counting, where an exclusive counting approach (the way we typically count) would yield thirteen generations in the first section, fourteen in the second, and thirteen in the third.<sup>29</sup> Or, if we count the names themselves, then David must be counted only once (in the first section), while Jechoniah must be double-counted in both the second and the third section. At least one commentator argues for this method of counting, on the basis that Jechoniah had two very different circumstances: as king (in the second section), and then as deposed king (in the third section).<sup>30</sup> These difficulties aside, though, why does Matthew organize the generations of Jesus into these three sets of fourteen generations at all?

Some have suggested that this is a subtle wordplay (called a *gematria*) on the Hebrew name

<sup>25</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1 – 13*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1973), 107.

<sup>27</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 24–25.

<sup>28</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 53; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ed. by Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), 60.

<sup>30</sup> “Does not the history of the United States of America provide us with a similar instance of counting one man twice? Do we not call Mr. Nixon “the thirty-seventh president”? Nevertheless, beginning with Washington, we soon discover that there were only thirty-six men who were elected to this high position. The solution is: we count Cleveland twice because of his two terms (1885–1889; 1893–1897). Defeated for re-election after his first term, he was subsequently re-elected to office. His circumstances change. Though to be sure, the two cases are not identical—for example, Jechoniah never returned to his throne in Judah—yet in both instances the sequence is: *high position-defeat-high position*.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 125–26.)

“David.”<sup>31</sup> Hebrew words are written in consonants (with vowels marked above and below the consonants), so that David’s name is three letters: D-V-D. Then, certain numbers are associated with these letters, and, in this case, D-V-D corresponds to 4-6-4. Adding these numbers together  $4 + 6 + 4 = 14$ . This is an ingenious solution, especially since Matthew is making so much of David in this passage; however, Matthew does not explicitly make this connection, and it depends on a rather strange move from the Greek language in which the Gospel of Matthew is written, into a Hebrew numerology.<sup>32</sup>

In my view, the better solution is to see the fullness suggested by the numbers at play. Fourteen is *seven, twice* over. Seven is clearly a number of completeness, which we see especially clearly in the creation week. The fact that each section is *seven, twice* over, reflects the total completion of each of these periods.<sup>33</sup> Then, three is also a significant biblical number, which we see in the Trinity, the three days between Jesus’ death and resurrection, etc.—several key concepts that will play a significant role in Matthew’s Gospel. Here, then, each section of Matthew’s genealogy marks a significant part of Israel’s history, starting from Abraham to David, and then from David to the end of the Davidic kingship, and then from the exile until Christ. These three sections of fourteen ( $7 \times 2$ ) weeks is a vivid depiction of the fact that Christ comes in “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4). This view still relies to some degree on the concepts Hebrew numerology; however, it does not require the bilingual move from Greek to a Hebrew word.

## Discussion Questions

1. Where else in the Bible does the phrase “book of the genealogy” occur (v. 1)? What is the significance of casting this story of Jesus in those terms? What does Matthew mean when he attributes to Jesus the title, “Christ”? What does it mean that Jesus is the “son of David”? What does it mean that Jesus is the “son of Abraham”? Why is it so important to Matthew to trace Jesus’ lineage first from Abraham through David (vv. 2–6a)?
2. Which specific sons of David does Matthew list in vv. 6b–11? What aspect of Jesus’ genealogy is Matthew bringing out by tracing the precise way in which Jesus is the “son of David”? Why do you think that Matthew includes mothers like Tamar (v. 3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), and Bathsheba (v. 6)? Who were these women, and what do they have in common? How do these mothers prepare us for the story of Mary in the next section (Matt. 1:18–25)?
3. Why does Matthew record Jesus’ genealogy from Jechoniah in Babylon, through those who returned after exile? Is it right for Matthew to present this period of time after the exile on an equal footing with the period from Abraham to David, and the period of Davidic kings in Judah? How does the “begat...begat...begat...” language suddenly change in v. 16? Where is Matthew trying to

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<sup>31</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 22–23.

<sup>32</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> R. T. France raises this possibility; however, as with the suggestion about the *gematria*, he dismisses this as conjecture on the basis that Matthew does not explicitly state this rationale. (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 31–32.)

direct our attention through this?

4. What is the significance of the three sets of fourteen generations that Matthew describes (v. 17)? How many ways has Matthew shaped this genealogy in order to organize according to these three sets of fourteen generations? What do you think Matthew is trying to bring out through this organizational strategy? What do you think about Jesus? Who is he to you, and how do you respond to the claims Matthew is making about him here?