

A Christmas Origin Story

Matthew 1:1-17

“...you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”

Introduction: Origin stories are important. They provide connection and context for people that we know and actions we observe. They are designed to build an emotional link, trust, and understanding, while making a person feel authentic, relatable, and memorable. In fact, Marvel Studios has built a billion-dollar industry beginning with and telling origin stories of comic book characters (making \$29-31 billion since 2008). Iron Man restarted a stagnant franchise in 2008, telling the backstory of Tony Stark and eventually Peter Parker. Others have produced whole movies to tell why Batman did what he did and why Wolverine mattered.

For those of you who have no idea what I just talked about, origin stories are also told about ‘real life’ people, brief stories that help humanize famous characters. **Louis Braille** was a French educator and teacher who helped revolutionize reading and writing for the blind, allowing millions to communicate in ways they never could before. His origin story started at three years old with an accident in his father’s workshop and losing one eye to a sharp object and the other to a subsequent infection. This provided Braille with empathy, motivation, and opportunity to innovate. Or the brilliant and polarizing leader of **Winston Churchill**, who though born in the aristocracy, childhood was marked by distant parents, a formative bond with his nanny, poor academics, and bullying, all of which fueled a deep desire for greatness, action, and proving his worth, shaping his rebellious spirit, love for history, and drive to succeed despite early failures, eventually leading him to military action, journalism, and politics. Or knowing the beginning of **Apple or Amazon**, companies started in garages, facing mammoth challenges, and expected to fail, only to overcome odds to reshape the technology sphere and how each of us process and operate today.

Origin stories are helpful. It’s why every biography starts with some sort of childhood recap, and why every new dating relationship starts with questions about upbringing, beliefs, experiences, and background (or at least they should). This is why it is **significant how the New Testament starts**. It basically tells the origin story of Jesus, giving the backdrop of a dramatic event which many anticipated and almost as many missed. It has always fascinated that after 400 years of silence on the prophecy front and no new word from the Lord during that stretch, the first written words we have come in the form of **genealogy**, the part of the Bible that we often breeze over or skip all together. But in the **origin story of Jesus and Christmas**, we gain a new perspective of the greatness of this event, of the deep love that God had for His people, of His magnificent grace, and the fact that **though God was not giving a Word, He was not silent!** God gave and Jesus willingly condescended through the work of the Spirit, so that **Matthew 1:21** could say:

“She will bear a son, and you will call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

So we will look at the beginning of Jesus’ story BEFORE the manger, arcing back to Genesis 12 and moving to the events leading to the birth of Jesus, which closes the chapter.

Genealogy: *The foundation of the origin story (1:1-17)*

In modern times, we do not place a ton of value on genealogies, and most of us can only go back a few generations. I have documentation of great-great grandparents, but not much beyond that. But in Biblical terms, genealogies provided far more than mere intrigue. They offered **validation and historical documentation**, since the Bible is NOT a book of myths and legend but is ground in space and time. It also linked **identity**, which was valuable since only certain families could be priests. It gave **credibility and credence**, showing God's promises and prophecies being kept throughout the generations. Matthew wrote an especially long one in order to show **two important realities**: *Jesus WAS the prophesied Messiah that fulfilled the requirements as the Jewish King, and that He was a Savior for ALL people.*

Can we really glean that from a genealogy? Yes, and actually more. Notice that the first verse of the New Testament states: *"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the **son of David, the son of Abraham**",* two OT saints through whom God made everlasting and unconditional promises to. Let's delve into these and see **the origin story Matthew wanted to tell**:

Generations from Abraham to David:

Matthew 1:2-6 *"Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, 4 and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by **Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by **Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of David the king."*

Right off the bat it's important to note that Matthew gives three sets of "14 generations" (1:17), that give a tight literary structure that was NOT intended to be exhaustive. The point was theological and to show connections, not for dating or to add every descendent. But in each set of 14, there are standout parts of Jesus **origin story**. **Why would Matthew want to go all the way back to Abraham to show Jesus' chronology?** The first is to show that Jesus was truly Jewish, tracing his lineage back to the father of all in Abraham. But there are a couple other glaring and beautiful reasons:

1. **Abraham was promised to be a blessing to ALL** – Way back in Genesis 12, Abraham was promised a great number of offspring, a vast swath of land, but more importantly, it would be from him that *"all the families of the world would be blessed"* (12:3). We know that Abraham was an example of someone who was *justified by faith alone* (Genesis 15:6; Rom. 4:3), meaning that God does NOT only save His covenant people Israel, but will save ALL who would believe. Jesus is a universal Savior for sinful mankind of all nations, tribes, and tongues. When He came as a light to shine in the darkness, it signaled hope for ANYONE who would come to Him by faith alone
2. **Highlights Biblical Honesty & Divine Grace** – One of the impactful realities of the way Scripture is written and presented is the fact that God does not sanitize stories to edit out the unbecoming parts. Abraham's offering up his wife to a foreign leader (twice!), David's adultery, and Peter's denial are all given without addendum or caveat. This allows us to not only relate, but see **God's divine grace lavishly displayed**. In the first part of Matthew, he not only includes women in his genealogy (a rarity among Jewish chronology), but he includes **three non-Jewish women who had less than becoming pasts**. These are part of Jesus' origin story:

TAMAR (Genesis 38) – The story, like a lot of the OT, is R-rated. Judah, the son of Jacob and the one of a Promised line, took a Canaanite wife and bore him 3 sons. He took a wife for his oldest son named Tamar. But his son, with the unfortunate name of "Er", was wicked, so God killed him. According to the

Law, Tamar was transferred to the second son Onan, but he was wicked as well, so God killed him too. Not wanting to be sonless, Judah did NOT give Tamar to his youngest named Shelah, but instead kept Tamar a widow. When Judah's wife died, he sought comfort in another city. When Tamar found out Judah was in Timnah, she dressed as a **prostitute, covering her face**, and was approached by Judah for her services. To work out payment, Judah offered his **signet, a cord, and his staff** to prove the transaction. She then went back home, and in 3 months it was found out that she was 3 months pregnant. Judah was indignant and sought to have her burned, **UNTIL she produced the property of Judah himself** (we so easily get indignant about OTHER people's sin more than our own, don't we!!!). Out of this sinful relationship came Perez, who is in Matthew's genealogy.

RAHAB (Joshua 2; Hebrews 11:31) – Rahab was a career prostitute in a pagan city, but was saved when by faith, she rescued the spies of Israel from sure capture and death.

RUTH – A whole book is devoted to her story, but she was an idol worshipper and **Moabite**, a people that God had cursed because they were inhumane to Israel in the desert, not even offering water, and for hiring Balaam to curse Israel (Deut. 23:3-4). Because of this, not Moabite could enter the assembly of the LORD, even to the 10 generation. Ruth was from a despised and cursed nation.

For good measure, the next woman on the list was **Bathsheba**, who carried with her the shame of adultery with David. Again, Jesus saves those who are sick, not those who are well. We are never defined by our past but can be *redeemed and restored from it*. We should never walk in **shame and guilt** since Jesus knew all that we had done and will do, and died in our place anyway. These ladies, who are proudly included in the Messiah's genealogy are products of God's grace through faith, just like everyone who believes. Jesus' family line, like all of ours, is not pristine because he came to save those who have been ravaged by sin and the brokenness of the world. That lack of a pristine nature is put on display in the next grouping of **14 generations**.

Generations from David to Jeconiah

Matthew 1:6-11 *"And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon."*

There are three distinct aspects to see in this section:

- 1) **Jesus could trace lineage back to David** – Jesus was seen as the "son of David" and David was referred to as "David the king". Though he was not Israel's first king, he was the most significant. He was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; 16:7) through whom God brought great victory and prominence for Israel as a nation. But MOST significantly, it was through David that God established an **eternal and unconditional covenant** (conveniently named "the Davidic Covenant") in **2 Samuel 7**. In this, God promised the offspring of David would be on the **throne and establish his kingdom FOREVER** (7:13). Jesus came to fulfill in part this covenant, and will truly fulfill it one day as He sits on David's throne, giving rest from His enemies in Jerusalem, just as was promised to David.
- 2) **Jesus could trace his lineage through Solomon** – **Solomon** was NOT the oldest son of David, so he was not the natural heir to the throne, but it was who God chose. It is significant that **Luke's**

genealogy traces this through **Nathan**, not Solomon (Luke 3:31). It was Solomon who was Israel's most powerful and prominent king, and lineage that went back to him would truly show a **royal line**

- 3) **Jesus could trace his lineage through the problematic Jeconiah** – Jeconiah was referred to as *Coniah or Jehiochin* in the record who had the unfortunate role as the last 'king' of Israel, though by the time he took control it was little more than a puppet regime. After Solomon's rule, Israel's united monarchy ended by a split, known as the "Divided Monarchy", with ten tribes splitting off in the North and two tribes remaining in the south (Judah & Benjamin). Over time, both kingdoms fell prey to idolatry, which led to God raising up nations around to defeat them – Assyria in 722 B.C, and Babylon in 586 B.C. As Babylon carried off a bulk of the people back to their native land, God put a **curse on the kingly line and Jeconiah**:

Jeremiah 22:30 (cf. 1 Chron. 3:14-16; 2 Kings 24:6; 2 Chron. 26:8) – "Thus says the LORD:

*"Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days,
for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David
and ruling again in Judah."*

So the problem is obvious: *how can Jesus be a king from a cursed line?!?* The answer is simple (ish). Jesus could point out that he came from **royalty**, noting that he was from David's kingly line through Solomon. But He was also an "adopted" son, not carrying the blood of the line. Look down at verse 16: *"and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ."* If you follow the narrative, you'll notice that in every line, the phrase **"father of"** is written, but when it came to Joseph, it stated he was the **"husband of"** Mary. We know that Jesus was NOT the blood relative of Joseph, but adopted into his line, while He WAS a blood relative of Mary through David via Nathan. In this, Jesus was able to claim a **royal line but NOT the curse carried with it, solving the problem of Jeconiah and a failed monarchy**. This speaks to a partial reason why Jesus had to be born of a virgin, which Mary fulfilled.

Generations from Jeconiah to Joseph

Matthew 1:12-16 *"And after the **deportation to Babylon**: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15 and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ."*

When Judah (the Southern Kingdom) was deported to Babylon, it ended the monarchy and any semblance of Jewish independence. Even when a group of 50,000 returned to the land after 70+ years in exile under Zerubbabel, it was a relatively small group who rebuilt a lesser Temple and who faced opposition constantly. During that time, God rose up prophets to give encouragement and hope. But then a funny and shocking thing happened after Nehemiah strengthened the city of Jerusalem. God spoke through the prophet Malachi, promising a messenger (Mal. 3:1) who would come in the power of Elijah (Mal. 4:5-6), before the great and awesome day of the Lord, and prepare the way and turn the hearts of the people. This happened sometime between 433-424 B.C, and then.... **nothing**. **For the next 400 years, God no longer spoke through His prophets, no longer gave a Word of special revelation, no longer guided the people through divine decree**. It would not be until **John the Baptist** came on the scene that Malachi would be fulfilled. It begs the question: *what happened in those 400 years*. We leave Israel back in the land at the close of the OT, but a completely different scene when we read the first

chapters of the gospels. It's important to have at least a cursory grasp of that time, since it shows that Jesus came in real time, among real people, ground in history, and though His birth was miraculous, the circumstances were not.

In Daniel 7, Daniel had a dream of **four fantastic beasts**, which laid out in impeccable detail the coming nations that would rule the earth. These nations rule would shape the **cultural, political, and spiritual context in which Jesus was born**.

Babylon, especially under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, was depicted as a lion with wings. It was Babylon that carried Israel off into exile and rules with vicious ferocity. They only lasted less than 90 years before **Cyrus the Great** and the **Medo-Persia** empire (depicted by a bear) rose to power for about 200 years. It was under this nation that allowed the Jews to return to the land, rebuild the temple, and restore worship in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chron. 36:22). This lasted about 100 years into the **400 years of silence**, and Israel enjoyed a tolerant religious policy. They had the Temple, Scripture, and priesthood. It was here that the Law became prominent, structures solidified, oral tradition codified, and traditions magnified. This was an era of **stability and identity, but NOT autonomy**.

By **334 B.C.**, a new power arose. A pupil of Aristotle and desirous to avenge his father, Philip of Macedon's death, young **Alexander** (who would become 'Great') lead Greece into prominence. Depicted in Daniel 7 as a **leopard with four wings**, showing the swift nature of Greece's ability to conquer and Alexander's military strategy. A few important features resulted from the far-reaching rule and influence of Greece: 1) **Hellenism** – This affected all of the known world as the goal of the Greek leaders was to infuse a **worldview** that was *polytheistic, man-centered, philosophy based, and God-excluding*. It shaped minds, practices, mythology, academics and sports. Hellenism was a threat to Judaism, a monotheistic belief in One God, which caused all kinds of obvious tensions for people living IN that culture (much like today). 2) **Koine Greek** became the universal language – Much like English today, Greek became the common language around the conquered world, which allowed globalized dealings from commerce to the exchange of ideas. 3) **Greek translation of Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint** – This moved the Hebrew Scriptures from a local level to universal access. When Jesus quoted the OT, He would often quote the Septuagint. On top of all of this, the Greeks improved roads and travel, connecting the world.

But there was a cost to Jews living in the world at the time. Many tried to combine Greek Hellenism with Jewish Law, but that only creates syncretism, diluting the exclusivity of a sovereign God, which ALWAYS happens when people try it. But it also helped solidify the *scribes and rabbi's, the importance of the synagogue* even over the Temple, and caused others to live out the truth with conviction rather than convenience. As the kingdom as split into 4 kingdoms after Alexanders death, the Ptolemies rules Judea from **301 – 198 B.C.**, and the Jews had religious freedom but economic oppression. But it all came crashing down in **198 B.C.**, as Antiochus III the Great came to power, and Antiochus Ephiphanes IV came to power in 175 B.C, who saw the Jews private practice as a threat and began systematic persecution, desecrating the Temple, and ordering the "Hellenization" of Palestine. He forbids keeping the Laws and Sabbath, stopped festivals and circumcisions, and burned OT scrolls.

This persecution lead to **2 important historical formations: 1) The Hamonean or Maccabean revolt, led by Judas the Hammer**, secured freedom in Israel for about 100 years (140-37 B.C). Once they got into power, however, it was less about purity of religious practice and they embraced Hellenism, which led to **2) The origination of the Pharisees & Sadducees** – The Pharisees were a religious party called "holy ones", with a goal of ridding the land of Hellenistic elements. They sought to interpret the Law strictly

according to oral tradition and wanted to make it binding for all Jews. Though their intent was good, their practice fell short by the time of Jesus' public ministry.

Finally, in **63 A.D.** Pompey, a Roman general was called in to help a clash between two Hasmonean generals, and instead, ended the dynasty and instigated Roman rule. Because of unrest in the area, **Herod the Great** was given 'kingship' of the area of Israel, and was known as 'king of the Jews' when Jesus was born (Matthew 2:1-2).

Why is this important? That was a LOT of information in a short amount of time?!! Though God was not speaking through prophets, **He was not silent.... just like today!** God was moving history to culminate at the perfect time, place, and opportunity for Jesus to enter the world. *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."* (**Gal. 4:4-5**). **The world was set up in language**, the Pax Romana of Rome allowed for open travel along great roads and trade routes, to allow the gospel to spread. The world was open to ideas since Hellenism had taken root, but people were still walking in darkness. They needed a Savior, one who could fulfill the Law, who was divine, without a sin nature, who was a King, and who was willing to take our place on the cross.

So when we celebrate our king born of a virgin, who was adopted by a righteous father in Joseph, it was to fulfill Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants, coming from a royal line and able to save any and all who believe.

The chapter ends with a reminder of a prophecy of God's presence, as Jesus was to be called "*Immanuel*", which means **God with us**. This is the ultimate present, and one that we long to experience one day:

1 John 3:2-3 *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that **when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.** 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."*

The surety of Jesus' origin story means that we can be assured of what He promises to come, which includes Him dwelling with us, being our God, and wiping away every tear, doing away with death, mourning, crying, and pain (Rev. 21:2-4) That is the hope for Christmas for all who would believe.