

Matthew 1:1–17 gives the genealogy of Jesus. The chief aims in writing it are hinted at in the first verse, namely, that Jesus is truly in the kingly line of David, the heir of the messianic promises, and that He is the one who brings salvation to all nations (Carson, 63).

These verses also function as the prologue for Matthew's gospel, and the purposes of the prologue in every gospel is to tell the reader who this Jesus really is; in the rest of the book we then see the participants (e.g. the leaders, the crowds, the disciples, and the demons) wrestling with these truths. The genealogy sets the tone for the book but especially for the birth of Jesus in the next scene, telling us that it is no ordinary event but the birth of the expected Messiah, the Anointed one in the line of ancestry from Abraham and David. Thus it is no wonder that the Magi make a state visit to this King of kings and that they bear royal gifts (2:1–12); it is also natural that Herod is so threatened by this God-sent Messiah that he tries to kill him before his reign can replace Herod's (2:13–23). Yet in it all God is sovereign and supernaturally intervenes in world history to protect his Chosen One (2:12, 13–15, 22). This basic theme (to be seen again in the resurrection narratives) will dominate the opening and closing scenes of Matthew's gospel (Osborne, 61).

1:1 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

The book of the genealogy (Βίβλος γενέσεως) literally means “book of genesis” (France, 28). In Genesis 2:4 of the Septuagint the same expression is used of the origins of the heavens and of the earth, and in 5:1 of the list of the descendants of Abraham.

Genealogies like those in Genesis typically list a person's descendants after this phrase, rather than his ancestors. Matthew's point here is profound: so much is Jesus the focal point of history that his ancestors depend on him for their meaning. In other words, God sovereignly directed the history of Israel and preserved David's line because of His plan to send Jesus (Gundry 1982:10, 13; Patte 1987:18). (IVPNTC)

Matthew is writing about the origin of Jesus Christ, His ancestry. He is giving a survey of the history of the people of God from their beginning with Abraham; his intent is to locate Jesus within that storyline (France, 29, 33).

“Jesus” was a common name in Bible times (Col. 4:11) and was the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Joshua” (cf. Acts 7:45; Heb. 4:8). In its long form, Joshua (Exo. 24:13—יְהוֹשֻׁעַ) means “Yahweh is salvation” and in its short form (Neh. 7:7—יֵשׁוּעַ) it means “Yahweh saves.” Though there are a number of Joshuas in the OT, two are types of Christ: Joshua the successor of Moses who led people into the promised land (cf. Heb 3–4) and Joshua the high priest, the contemporary to Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; 3:2–9; Neh. 7:7), the “Branch” who builds the temple of the Lord (Zech. 6:11–13). However, when the angel announces that the child of Mary would be called Jesus, he associates Him with Psalm 130:8, “It is He (Yahweh) who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities” (Matt. 1:16, 18, 21—Carson, 76). Others who bore the same name testified of Yahweh's salvation; Jesus was His salvation (Matt. 1:21).

Because the name Jesus was so popular at the time, He was called “Jesus of Nazareth” or “the carpenter's son,” or “Jesus the Galilean” to distinguish Him from others who had the same name. Matthew, however, identifies Him by His theological status: He is Jesus the Christ (Messiah).

“**Christ**” is roughly the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew “Messiah” or “the anointed one.” In the OT, people were anointed with oil as a sign of consecration for a special function. But as early as 1 Samuel 2:10, “Messiah” parallels “King”: “The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; He will give strength to His **king**, and exalt the power of His **anointed**.” With the rising number of prophecies concerning the specific individual in King David’s line (2 Sam. 7:12–16; Ps. 2:2; 105:15), “Messiah” or “Christ” became the title of the promised person who would bring in the kingdom of God and rule over the earth. There is no doubt that this is who Matthew has in mind for he deliberately links “Christ” with “son of David” (Carson, 61; also see Kaiser in *Toward an OT Theology*, 148–149 for a good discussion).

Although, strictly speaking, “Christ” is a title, it started to be used as a name by the early church who often referred to Jesus as “Jesus Christ,” “Christ Jesus,” or simply “Christ.” However, even then, it is doubtful that its original meaning ever completely disappeared (Carson, 61–62). “The colorless translation “Jesus Christ” here and in v. 18 in many English versions does not do justice to the excitement in Matthew’s introduction of Jesus under the powerfully evocative title ‘Messiah,’ the long-awaited deliverer of God’s people, in whom their history has now come to its climax” (France, 35).

“**Son of David**” is a particularly important title in Matthew. He refers to David 17 times (Morris, 20) and uses the title “Son of David” of Christ 9 times. God promised that through David’s descendant He would establish his kingdom that would last forever (Isa. 9:6–7; 2 Sam. 7:12–16; Psa. 17:23). The reoccurrence of David’s name again in verse 6 prefaced with the word “King” makes this connection explicit. “David’s royal authority, lost at the Exile, has now been regained and surpassed by ‘great David’s greater son.’” (Carson, 66).

David was the greatest of the kings of Israel. Since he was a mighty warrior, the title would have pointed to a conquering Messiah, one who would destroy the enemies of Israel and establish God’s kingdom with its capital at Jerusalem. It may well be that its militaristic associations account for the sparing use of the title among Christians. To have made it central would have been to invite misunderstanding among those who dwelled on David’s military feats . . . Its use here shows that Matthew plans to bring out what is meant by the Davidic Messiah.

Interestingly, he uses it most frequently when people are appealing to Jesus for help (9:27; 15:22; 28:30–31). But it also appears in the story of the triumphal entry (21:9, 15), indicating that Matthew is not unaware of the royal associations of the term. His book is about one who fulfilled all that is meant by being the descendent of Israel’s greatest king. (Morris, 20).

“**Son of Abraham**” was also important. “Being a son of Abraham means that Jesus is a true Israelite who can trace his ancestry back to Abraham. Yet Jesus, as a descendant of Abraham, also fulfills the promise to Abraham that says, in him ‘all peoples of the earth will be blessed’ (Gen. 12:3; 15:5; 18:18; 22:18). The two great covenants, that of Abraham and of David, come to full expression in Jesus, and the purpose of this genealogy is to make this evident” (Osborne, 62).

“Jesus the Messiah came in fulfillment of the kingdom promises to David and of the Gentile-blessings promised to Abraham.” (Carson, 62).

Verses 2–16 continue by giving an account of Jesus’ ancestry.

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

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

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

¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

Studies of genealogies in the Ancient Near East have shown that they were used in widely diverse functions: economic, tribal, political, domestic and others. While no twentieth century Jew could prove that he was from the tribe of Judah, let alone the house of David, that doesn't appear to be a problem in the first century when lineage was important in gaining access into the temple for worship (Carson, 62–63). It's interesting to note that since the destruction of the temple in 70 AD no genealogies exist that can trace the ancestry of any Jew now living. Anyone claiming to be Messiah today could never prove his ancestry. Jesus died in 33 AD and was the last person who could verify His claim to the throne.

The entire genealogy will not be looked at, but it should also be noted that “to bear” or “to be father of” (*gennaō*—γεννάω) does not always mean immediate relationship, but often means something like “was the ancestor of” or “was the progenitor of” (Carson, 65). Therefore, one need not assume that the genealogies are trying to list every single ancestor. The generations between David and the exile, for example, omit four members of the Davidic dynasty (France, 29). After Zerubbabel (1:12), the nine names from Abiud to Jacob are not recorded in the Bible, but it is reasonable to assume the royal line of David would be preserved (France, 39). Listing the generations in a convenient scheme was common among the Jews and probably aided in memorization (Carson, 68).

Matthew starts with Abraham, but divides the list into three periods of fourteen generations (1:17). “The reason for this is not clear, but it must have been important because Matthew has to omit some names to get his numbers” (Morris, 22). However, we can see that the genealogy moves from Abraham to David (1:2–6a); from David to the exile (1:6b–11); and from the exile to Christ (1:12–16). David is

named twice and at the center of the genealogy giving him a prominent position in the genealogy. Perhaps Matthew is seeing the generations from Abraham to David as the rise of the house of David, the generations from David to exile as the fall of the house of David, and the generations from the exile to Christ as the rise to the fulfilment of God's promises to David in the Davidic Messiah.

Judah also deserves notice (Matt. 1:2, 3). Judah was one of the sons of Israel and the tribe that "bears the scepter" (Gen. 49:10; i.e. the royal scepter being indicative of the line through which the king would come; cf. Heb. 7:14). Both David and Jesus Christ were of the line of Judah.

The danger of a detailed study of Matthew's genealogy is that Matthew's intentions may be overridden by colorful backgrounds of doubtful relevance (Carson, 62). It was typical for Jewish genealogies to list men, but it was not unprecedented for women to be listed—fourteen mothers were mentioned in 1 Chronicles 2 alone (France, 36). However, the women Matthew lists are certainly unconventional and unexpected in the list of the pedigree of the Messiah.

Tamar (Matt. 1:3) enticed her father-in-law into an incestuous relationship (Gen. 38), **Rahab** (Matt. 1:5) was a prostitute and a Gentile (Josh. 2), **Ruth** (Matt. 1:5) was a Moabitess (Ruth 1–4), and the wife of Uriah (**Bathsheba**) (Matt. 1:6) was an adulteress and possibly a Gentile (2 Sam. 11–12).

Why these women were included is debatable, but they do remind us of a number of things. (1) The blessings of Abraham extend well beyond the nation of Israel. In other words, "When Matthew cites these four women, he is reminding his readers that three ancestors of King David and the mother of King Solomon were Gentiles. Matthew thus declares that the Gentiles were never an afterthought in God's plan but had been part of His work in history from the beginning" (IVPNTC). (2) They also emphasize God's grace and providential working in spite of man's sinfulness. "God works His will in the most unlikely ways, and that is exactly what has led to the birth of Jesus" (Osborne, 63, 64). In short, "God in His providence saw fit to include women who are foreigners and sinners in the royal lineage of Jesus so as to show that He is God not only of righteous Jews but of all humanity and that He has come to bring salvation to the whole world of humanity. (3) Moreover, they foreshadow Mary and provide a rationale for God's choice of an unwed mother to bear the Messiah" (Osborne, 64). Although we cannot say for sure why Matthew selected these women for his genealogy, they were all familiar to any Jewish reader who would naturally associate a multitude of images with their names.

The genealogy ends on this critical note: Joseph is the husband of Mary, but not the father of Jesus (1:16). This prepares the reader for the virgin birth in verses 18–25.

In comparing Matthew's genealogy with Luke's genealogy there are a number of differences that have been explained in various ways. According to Morris, "The best suggestion is that Matthew's list represents the legal descendants of David, those who would actually have reigned had the kingdom continued, while Luke gives the descendants of David in the line to which Joseph belonged. But we have no way of being certain" (Morris, 22). In support of the view that the genealogy of Luke is Mary's genealogy see the footnote in my notes on Luke 3.

IN SUM:

In a gospel written primarily for Jews, a royal genealogy is the perfect way to begin; it is one of the important Jewish evidences that show that in Jesus, God's promises in the OT have come true. Jesus' birth did not arise in a vacuum, nor was it devoid of any historical context; it was part of the unfolding of God's plan and purposes and the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, David, and the Jewish people.

Among other things, the genealogy shows us:

1. The Messiah is Now Here

For the Jewish people (and the disciples during Jesus' life) that meant He would come as a conquering king. David was the great warrior-king who won great battles for his people. So when they thought of the royal Messiah, what they contemplated was the destruction of the Romans with the Jewish people as the new world rulers. Yet for Matthew this is not the main point; Jesus would first come as suffering Servant, dying for the sins of humankind and would not return to defeat his enemies until His second coming.

The genealogy here has both aspects in mind. The Christ has arrived, and the time of fulfillment is here. At the same time, Matthew has a great interest in the return of Christ. For the church today this means that we are living in the last days. Our Messiah, the divine warrior, is near, and the great victory is coming soon.

2. Divine Providence at Work

Matthew is interested in salvation history and wants to show how God is in sovereign control of world history and guides it for His own purposes. This will be carried out in the infancy narratives, when every attempt to thwart God's will by Herod is overturned as God supernaturally intervenes, first in the dream of the Magi (2:12) and then in the angelic messages to Joseph in the dreams of 2:13, 19. This, of course, is one of the primary messages of Scripture, but the average Christian shows all too little awareness of this in his or her daily life. For example, consider trials and faith. Most of the time we trust ourselves more than God to take care of life's difficulties, yet we claim to believe that He is sovereign. The same God who has guided the process of the coming of the Messiah guides the progress of our lives.

3. God's Focus on the Outcasts and Downtrodden

The four women mentioned in 1:3, 5, 6 prepared for God's choice of Mary to bear His Son. All were outsiders, most encased in scandal, yet all were chosen by God and made an essential part of the greatest story in all of history. This same truth was evident in Jesus' choice of the 12 disciples; He did not select the great teachers like Gamaliel or leaders like Nicodemus. He turned to peasant fisherman (Simon and Andrew, James and John), despised tax collectors (Levi), and insurrectionists (Simon the Zealot). For the mother of the Messiah, God chose a peasant in a small town, and then had her give birth in suspicious (scandalous) circumstances as an unwed mother. This genealogy tells us that God has worked in this way throughout history. Paul catches it well: "if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Cor. 11:30). The point is that when God works through our low status and weakness, the glory goes to Him. None of us should ever feel inferior or inadequate. Rather, we should rejoice in such, for God turns human weakness into divine strength.

4. Worldwide Mission

The four women were all Gentiles or related to Gentiles, and this leads into a major motif in the first gospel, the preparation of the new community of God to fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant (to be a blessing to all nations) by taking the gospel directly to the Gentiles. The Jewish people had no concept of direct mission to the Gentiles. When “they travel[ed] over sea and land” to make converts (23:15), they went only to the synagogues to talk God-fearers into becoming full proselytes. Jesus introduced a whole new movement in salvation history, the universal mission to all nations. Yet it took a decade for the disciples to understand its implications, and only after the lengthy process of Spirit inspired events in the steps of the Gentile mission of Acts 7–11. In our time this lesson has been learned, but it is still a lengthy process in turning believers today into “world Christians.”

(Osborne, 68–70)