

MATTHEW 1:1–17—THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS

¹An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

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 Aram, ⁴and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab 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 King David.

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 Salathiel, and Salathiel 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 the Messiah.

¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Who are some of these guys? Hezron, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon? If you compare the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:23-38, which works backwards from Jesus to Adam, “son of God” you will find quite a different list of names. Based on the Hebrew scriptures, it is hard to account for many of these names, and even when we have names, we have very little narrative. How familiar are you with Salathiel, Zerubbabel, Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan and Jacob?

Why a genealogy? Genealogies establish identity, for the identity of person is always based on family, clan, tribe. Biblical genealogies sometimes are used to confirm status, especially for the offices of king and priest, for which lineage is important if not crucial. Genealogies help to frame and structure history. They emphasize the biblical concept of collective personality, for something of one’s ancestry reappears as familiar heritage in the descendants, reflecting on one’s character, personality, even destiny. For the Hebrew people, one could say that history is just an expansion of genealogy.

Why does Matthew provide this genealogy, and do so right at the beginning? For what purpose? First, note how Matthew titles his genealogical account: “The *genesis*, origin, or birth record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.”

The name “Jesus Christ” binds the title “Messiah” to Jesus and serves as a good preparation for a genealogy and narrative which will stress that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes. The 1st-century Psalms of Solomon exemplifies these hopes:

“O Lord, raise up for them their king, the son of David, at that time in which you, O God, see that he may reign over Israel your servant.” (Ps. of Sol. 17:21)

- The sonship of David will be a special theme of Matthew’s first chapter; for not only is the Davidic theme clear in the genealogy, but it reappears in the angelic revelation to Joseph who is addressed as “son of David” (1:20). It is imperative in Matthew’s mind that Joseph, of Davidic descent, accepts Jesus as his son.
- The theme of the “son of Abraham” is more subtle. If you will recall Yahweh’s promise made to Abraham was a promise not only to his lineage but to all peoples of the world, then you might sense what Matthew is getting at. E.g., in Mt. 8:11, by way of comment on the faith of the Roman centurion, Jesus says, “Many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” In Mt. 3:9, when the Pharisees and Sadducees claim, “We have Abraham as our father,” Jesus warns them that God is able to raise up new children to Abraham. Thus, for Matthew, the designation of Jesus as “son of Abraham” indicates that Jesus is the child of Abraham by whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; cf. also Acts 3:25 and Gal. 3:8)

A special relation of Jesus to David and Abraham is attested also in Paul’s letters (Rom. 1:3; Gal. 3:16), written well before Matthew’s gospel account. But Matthew weaves in both themes, not only into the genealogy but into the succeeding narrative: ‘son of David’ in 1:18-25 and children of Abraham in 2:1-12. Thus, Matthew appeals to the mixed constituency of his community of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jesus is heir to the promises made to David and kept alive in Judaism. He is also heir to the wider promise of blessing to the Gentiles made through Abraham. Jesus is an authentic “king” as well as an authentic Jew. The genealogy is a demonstration of God’s providence at work, reflecting the working out of God’s plan of creation in a history of salvation.

Why the pattern of 14 generations—14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the Babylonian Exile, and 14 from Babylon to Christ? Is it really all that neat and tidy? Biblical history tells us that there were actually 18 generations of kings of Judah from David to the exile in Babylon, a period of about 400 years. The first period, from Abraham to David, was at least 750 years if not 1000. The third period, from Babylon to Jesus, was around 600 years. Why does Matthew insist on three eras of 14 generations?

Many scholars suggest that Matthew is making a wordplay. Hebrew letters (consonants) must do double duty as counters or numbers. The Hebrew “D” stands for the number 4 and the “W” or “V” represents 6; thus the name D_aV_iD has the numerical value of 14 (4+6+4). Matthew seems to be underscoring that Jesus is not just *a* son of David but is *the* son, the long-awaited Messiah.

Why the women? Not only Mary, the mother of Jesus, but Matthew includes four other women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah’s wife (Bathsheba), the women underlined in the above reading.

What function do the women play in Jesus’ genealogy? The presence of mothers in a Jewish genealogy is exceedingly unusual. Rahab is nowhere else connected with the Davidic line and that she should be the mother of Boaz is surprising, for she lived at the time of the conquest, nearly two centuries before the time of Boaz. In Rabbinic tradition, Rahab married Joshua. Why does Matthew go to such lengths to include the women?

Tamar Genesis 38

Rahab Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-25

Ruth Ruth 2—4

Bathsheba 2 Samuel 11—12

First proposal comes from Jerome (ca. 347-420), who points out that the four women were commonly regarded as sinners. Jerome suggests that they are foreshadowing Jesus' role as the Savior of sinners. Some add that Matthew is taking power from the claim that Mary was a sinner who conceived Jesus before she married. Do the scriptures consider these four women sinners?

Luther makes the second proposal, noting that the four women are foreigners, Gentiles. Matthew is naming these women to show that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, is related by ancestry to the Gentiles and that his birth is indeed for the whole world. Rahab is a Canaanite, as is also likely for Tamar. Ruth is Moabite. Bathsheba is not identified as a foreigner, but she is listed by Matthew as Uriah's wife, and Uriah was a Hittite. Yet, Mary is not a foreigner. How do these other women relate to Mary's role as mother of Jesus?

The third proposal, most popular today, finds two common elements in the four women, elements which also apply to Mary:

1. There is something extraordinary or irregular in their union with their partners, a union which may have been scandalous to outsiders but which continued God's covenant of blessing.
2. The women showed initiative or played an important role in God's actions, and so came to be considered instruments of God's providence. Tamar took initiative, which led to the scandalous union with Judah. Although we know nothing of the sexual union between Rahab and Salmon, we do know that Rahab was a prostitute who took initiative to help the people of Israel come into the Promised Land by protecting the Israelite spies who stayed with her. The union of the Moabite Ruth with Boaz was accomplished by Ruth following the advice of her mother-in-law Naomi, leading to Ruth's seduction of Boaz. Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, had an adulterous union with David the king, who then also had Uriah killed in war.

That there was something scandalous in the pregnancy of these women is further reason for these women serving to foreshadow Mary. God, you see, had used scandalous circumstances before.