

Back to the Beginning

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1).

Matthew does not waste any time hooking us into this Old Testament story. In fact, before he mentions a single name in Jesus’ family tree, Matthew’s very first words, “The book of the genealogy,” bring us all the way back to the beginning of the Bible, the Book of Genesis.

Matthew 1:1 can be translated literally, “*The book of the genesis* of Jesus Christ.” This is significant because similar expressions were used in Genesis to announce great beginnings that took place at the dawn of creation. For example, a similar formula was used to sum up the story of how God created the universe: “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created” (Genesis 2:4). This formula also was used to introduce the family tree of our first parents, Adam and Eve: “the book of the generations of Adam” (Genesis 5:1). In Genesis 10:1 the same phrase introduced the genealogy of Noah’s family—the new human family who survived after the flood.

In each of these cases—Adam and creation, Noah and the flood—the phrase “the book of the genealogy” signals a significant starting point in God’s plan for humanity. By opening his Gospel with these words, Matthew announces that another new beginning is here. The child at the end of this genealogy will bring about a new genesis: the renewal of all humanity and the restoration of the entire created order into harmony with God.

Worldwide Blessing

Matthew 1:1 goes on to describe Jesus as “the son of Abraham.” For an ancient Israelite, such a description means a lot more than

being a physical descendant of this great patriarch. Being a son of Abraham is at the very heart of Israelite national identity.

God promised Abraham that his descendants one day would become a great *nation* (see Genesis 12:2; see also 15:18) and that *kings* eventually would come forth from Abraham's line (Genesis 17:6, 16). Jews in the first century would have seen that these two promises already were fulfilled when Israel became a *nation* in the time of Moses and a *kingdom* in the time of David.

However, there was one promise made to Abraham that had yet to be fulfilled, and it was the greatest promise of all. In response to Abraham's faithfulness, God swore that Abraham's descendants eventually would serve as *an instrument to bring blessing to all the peoples of the world*: "And by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:18). This third promise gave rise to the Jewish belief that, one day, people from all the pagan nations would come to worship the one true God and be reunited with Israel in one covenant family.

By tracing Jesus' lineage specifically to Abraham, Matthew is drawing our attention to this worldwide mission of Israel. And such an allusion might stir hope that the child at the end of the genealogy will be the one to fulfill the long-awaited third promise and bring blessing to the entire human family.

"The Son of David"

While many names are mentioned in the genealogy, David and Solomon stand out together as one of the highest points in this family tree. A first-century Jew reading about "David the king" and his son Solomon certainly would recall the glory days of the kingdom of Israel. These men were the royal heroes of old who

brought Israel to its greatest moment in history. In the time of David and Solomon, three important symbols of Israel's national identity—the land, the king and the temple—shined most brightly.

The Land

The Promised Land was more than a place for God's people to dwell. It was like a new Eden, the home for the covenant family of God. It was the place where Yahweh would bestow blessings on his people and where he one day would regather the pagan nations to himself. Israel first entered the Promised Land in the days of Joshua but the nation struggled against foreign invaders for several generations. Through David's military victories, the people of Israel found rest from all their enemies (see 2 Samuel 7:1) and finally were able to dwell securely in the land for the first time in several centuries.

The King

The Davidic kingdom, however, was much more than a political and military entity leading the Israelite people. The kingdom was based on a covenant God made with David's family, and it had a universal scope. God promised David and his descendants an everlasting dynasty. And the Scriptures foretold that this kingdom would extend to the ends of the earth.

In fact, a glimpse of the kingdom's international influence already can be seen in the time of David and Solomon. At that time foreign nations became servants of Israel, made covenants with Israel and even came to the Israelite king to learn of the wisdom God had given to him (see 2 Samuel 8; 2 Samuel 10:14; 1 Kings 9–10; Psalms 72, 89 and 132).

The Temple

For the ancient Israelites, the temple in Jerusalem was not just a place of worship; it was the center of the universe. The Jews believed that the one true God who created the entire cosmos dwelt in a unique way with the Jewish people in this sacred spot.

God's presence first came to Israel in the form of a cloud in the time of Moses. The glory-cloud of the Lord hovered over the ark of the covenant, which was kept in the portable sanctuary known as the tabernacle or "tent of meeting." When David became king, he brought the ark to the capital city of Jerusalem. There he wanted to build a permanent sanctuary—a magnificent temple—to house the ark and God's presence.

David's son Solomon carried out these plans. He had the ark brought into the innermost chamber of the temple, known as "the Holy of Holies." When Solomon dedicated the temple, God's glory-cloud filled the sanctuary, signifying that the God of the universe dwelt in a special way among the Jews in Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 8:1-13).

All this—Israel's land, the Davidic kingdom and God's presence in the temple—were associated with the two foundational kings mentioned in verse 6, David and Solomon.

The Downfall of Israel

However, the genealogy in Matthew 1 does not stop with David and Solomon. The subsequent verses introduce their many wicked successors, who led the kingdom to its downfall: Rehoboam, Abijah and so forth (see Matthew 1:7-10). The painful memories of these unfaithful Jewish rulers reach their lowest point in verse 11, which says that Josiah was "the father of

Jeconiah and his brothers, *at the time of the deportation to Babylon.*"

This line represents the most somber note in the genealogy, recalling the tragic events of 586 B.C. Matthew does not mention "the time of deportation to Babylon" simply as a chronological marker. Rather, this verse brings to mind all that the Jews lost when Babylon invaded Jerusalem and carried the people away into exile. This was the moment when Israel lost the three great symbols of their national identity: the land, the king and the temple.

First, the exile represented the loss of *the land*. The Jews were driven off the Promised Land and sent to Babylon, where they became slaves among the pagans. Even though they returned in 515 B.C., the Jews never really recovered control of their land. Rather, one foreign nation after another ruled over them. This is why Jewish leaders who were rebuilding Jerusalem in this time period described themselves as being slaves in their own land (see Ezra 9:8-9; Nehemiah 9:36).² In Jesus' day the oppressive conditions continued, as the Romans controlled the land that once had been the prized possession of God's people.

Second, the events of 586 B.C. marked the end of the Davidic *kingdom*. When Babylon invaded Jerusalem, the troops targeted the royal family, capturing the king and his sons. Before plucking out the king's eyes and carrying him off into exile, the Babylonians gave him one last sight: that of his own sons being slain before him (see 2 Kings 25:6-7). No son of David ruled on the throne in Jerusalem for the next six centuries, up to the time of Christ. Thus the everlasting dynasty appeared to come to an abrupt halt with Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem.

The Lost Ark

Third, one could argue that the destruction of *the temple* represented the most devastating blow to the Jewish people. Babylon destroyed the temple, desecrating God's holy house and carrying away many of the sacred vessels used for liturgical worship. Israel's most important treasure—the ark of the covenant—was spared when, just before the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah brought it out of the temple and hid it in a mountain (see 2 Maccabees 2:4-8). However, God's presence left the temple, and the ark was never found again.

The Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple in 515 B.C., yet the new house of God was missing its most revered vessel—the ark of the covenant, which carried God's presence. Although the temple still represented the holiest spot on the face of the earth, the Jews were longing for God's presence to return to Jerusalem and to be with his people again, as it did in the days before the exile.³

All this was lost in 586 B.C.—the land, the king and the temple—and Israel was still suffering the consequences at the time of Jesus' birth. A Jew reading about “the deportation to Babylon” in verse 11 could not help but bring this to mind. The Jews still did not have control over their land. They still did not have a son of David to rule them. And they still were longing for God's presence to be with them again in the temple.

The Hope of Zerubbabel

Nevertheless, God offered the Jewish people hope in the midst of their sufferings. Through the prophets he announced that one day he would send a new royal descendant of David, a new anointed

king called “the Messiah” (meaning “anointed one”). This Messiah-King would usher in a new era in which the Jews would regain the land, the kingdom would be restored to its former glory, and God’s presence would return to Israel (see Ezekiel 43:2-5; 44:4).

Matthew’s Gospel calls upon those hopes when it introduces a man named Zerubbabel, who stands as a turning point in the genealogy. As one of the leaders in the rebuilding of Jerusalem in 515 B.C., Zerubbabel represents the last Davidic descendant in Matthew’s genealogy for which there is any public record in the Jewish Scriptures. What happened to the sons of David from this period all the way up to the time of Jesus remained somewhat of a mystery, for the Old Testament offered little genealogical record for the royal line of David after Zerubbabel.

This is what would make verses 13-16 so exciting to the original hearers of Matthew’s Gospel: The royal line has continued for many generations after Zerubbabel! With each new name—Abiud, Eliakim, Azor and so on—Matthew’s genealogy introduces another Davidic descendant previously unknown in the Hebrew Scriptures. The genealogy thus picks up momentum in these verses, building hope that at the end of this family tree we might find that ultimate son of David whom the prophets foretold would return Israel to its former glory.

The Return of the King

Finally the genealogy’s rushing crescendo reaches its peak in verse 16, which resounds with the joyful presentation of “Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.” Here the royal line culminates with the child who will bring Israel’s history to its ultimate destination.

The significance of this child can be seen in the three titles he receives in this opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel: Jesus, Christ and Emmanuel. Perhaps one could see in these three names hope that the three Jewish symbols that were shattered in the exile now would be restored: the land, the king and God's presence in the temple.

First, in Hebrew the name *Jesus* itself means "Yahweh saves." And Matthew highlights that the child is given this name for a specific reason: "for he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). This is significant because, according to the Jewish Scriptures, it was Israel's sin that led to their losing the Promised Land. Sin led to the exile. Hence, the deepest problem that Israel faced was not exile from the land but exile from God. Matthew 1:21 underscores the fact that this child Jesus has come primarily to save Israel not from the Roman forces occupying their land but from a much deeper form of oppression: "He will save the people from their sins."

It is also significant that the child's name, "Jesus," is a shortened form of the name "Joshua." This might recall the famous Old Testament Joshua, Moses' successor who brought the Exodus story to its climax by guiding the people into the Promised Land. Just as the Joshua of old led Israel out of the desert wilderness and into the land, so now Jesus—the new Joshua—will lead the people out of their spiritual exile from God and into the true Promised Land of heaven.

Second, Jesus is given the royal title "Christ" (1:16). In the New Testament the Greek word *christos* commonly translated the Hebrew word *messiah* ("anointed one"). This was the title for the future son of David, whom the prophets said would restore the dynasty and bring to fulfillment the promises about a worldwide, everlasting kingdom. Matthew's genealogy joyfully proclaims

that Jesus is that Messiah-King—the first Davidic Son to reign in over five centuries and the one who would restore the kingdom to Israel.

Finally, perhaps the most profound title given to Jesus comes at the end of Matthew's opening chapter. In Matthew 1:23 Jesus is called "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." We cannot overestimate how much this title would have meant for the first-century Jewish people.

Recall how God's visible presence had not dwelt in the temple for more than five hundred years. Without a king, without control of their land and especially without the glory of the Lord dwelling among them, the Jews in the first century might have felt somewhat abandoned. After six centuries of foreign oppression, many would have been wondering what had happened to God's commitment to Israel and all the great promises he had made to their ancestors. They certainly would have been longing for God to be with them again.

In the midst of this uncertainty, Matthew announces that the child at the end of this genealogy is "Emmanuel, which means God with us." In other words, God is with his people again! What is most astonishing, however, is that God is with his people in a way like never before. In ages past, God manifested his presence in the form of a cloud in the temple. Now the God of the universe actually dwells among them in the person of Jesus Christ.

We, too, can delight in this mystery of Emmanuel as God continues to be present to us today. He is present in the Scriptures, in prayer, in the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1373). In fact, we can see Christ's desire to be with us until the end of time in his very last words to the apostles in Matthew's Gospel: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Matthew 28:19–20, emphasis added).

Reflection Questions

1. For most modern readers a biblical genealogy seems like a long, dull list of names. How did ancient Jews view genealogies? Why would they find them so interesting?
2. Why would Matthew begin his Gospel with *this* genealogy?
3. Read Genesis 12:1-3. What promises did God make to Abraham and his descendants in these verses? In light of this background, why do you think Matthew showcases Jesus as “the son of Abraham” in the very first verse of his Gospel?
4. How does Matthew 1:6 represent a high point in this genealogy? Consider the promises God made to David in 2 Samuel 7:10-14.
5. In what way does Matthew 1:11 represent a tragic moment in this genealogy? Consider what happens in 2 Kings 24:10-14; 25:8-9.
6. Who is Zerubbabel (Matthew 1:12)? Why would the names that come after him interest and excite the ancient Jews?
7. What is the meaning of the title *Christ* given to Jesus in 1:16?