

Reasons to read on. Matthew 1:1-17

Wow!

Did you go Wow! when the first seventeen verses of Matthew's gospel was read?

Not Oh?!

And not Oh No! A genealogy, a list of names that mean nothing to me!

But wow!

Matthew's first audience, first century Jewish people, would have gone wow!

Matthew has written these first few verses of his gospel to tell his readers that his book will be a real page turner

That this is what they have been waiting for

The story of the LORD and the man He has chosen and sent

The story of the LORD their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob their forefathers, and the story of the man He has chosen and sent into the world to rescue them, to bring to fulfillment all that He has promised them

To bring what they longed for as they languished under the oppressive rule of their Roman conquerors.

Matthew has introduced his book to let them know his gospel is a must read.

You didn't pick that up?

Well let me help you hear it through first century ears, and in doing that maybe you will pickup some of the excitement, get the Wow

And know this is a must read for you as well.

The story of Jesus, the Christ

Let's start with the first sentence: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

Each phrase makes great claims for Jesus

v. 1 A new creation [Genesis 2:4, 5:1]

Matthew's gospel was written in Greek, and Greek speaking Jewish readers, readers of the Old Testament in Greek [LXX], would know that he has modelled his first line on Genesis, on Genesis 2:4 and Genesis 5:1.

The phrase is used in both those places to introduce important new beginnings in the story.

Genesis 2:1 says in English "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created"

And Genesis 5:1 says 'This is the book of the generations of Adam'

IN both cases generations could be better understood as history, or the family history of – say Adam.

In all its uses what follows is not the ancestors of the person named, or in Gen 2 the origins of the heaven and earth, but what the person named and their descendants did, or in Genesis 2 what happened in the Creation, the creation of the man and woman and the Fall.

So v. 1 is not introducing the genealogy. The genealogy is there to support, as we will see, the claims of Jesus to be son of David, son of Abraham.

v. 1 is introducing the whole book, telling us that what follows is what Jesus will do personally and through His followers.

And by echoing Genesis Matthew is saying that this is an episode of history at least as important as the creation of humanity, and Jesus is a person as important as Adam.

Matthew is saying that because Jesus is who He is, this is a new creative episode in the history of the world, there is a new creation breaking in with the coming of this one.

A big idea and a big claim

But who is Jesus that this should be the case?

A claim to universal significance

Christ [1 Sam. 10:1, 16:13; Ps. 2:2,]

Matthew with a couple of phrases locates Jesus squarely in the history of God's dealings with his people Israel and at the same time says He is the Israelite who has significance for all people and all time, significance for us.

First he says he is the Christ.

Christ is a title that comes from an act.

In Israel's history when someone was made King – like Saul or David – he was anointed, and the verb for anoint in Greek is chriw. So you could think of being anointed as being 'Christed'. Christ means the one who has been anointed, and as it was primarily Kings who were anointed the term came to mean the King, the one God had chosen to be King over His people.

You see it used that way in Psalm 2

The kings of the nations take counsel against the Lord, and against His anointed v. 2,

Of whom God says in v. 6 "I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill."

By saying Jesus is the Christ Matthew is saying from the beginning this is the book about a King, about God's chosen King

Son of David [2 Sam. 7, [12-13, 16], Jer. 23:5-6, Is. 9:1-7, 11:1-10, 55:3; Ezk. 34:23, 37:24-25; Amos 9:11-12; Micah 5:2-5a]

And not just any King, but the promised King of God's people

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of David.

In Jewish history David had been the greatest King, the one who had really established the kingdom of Israel.

God had made a very special promise to David

2 Samuel 7: ¹² 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. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."

God promised David that he would always have one of His offspring to sit on His throne, and that His would be an eternal rule, that David's throne will be 'established forever'.

Those promises had been built on, elaborated on by the prophets of Israel over the centuries.

Heard an expression of what that promise meant in Psalm 2

Psalm 2:⁷ I will tell of the decree:

The LORD said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.

⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

The Christ would rule over the nations – all the earth would be His possession

Here is another

*Isaiah 9: and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

The Lord promised that the Christ, David's descendant, would have an eternal rule of peace, characterised by justice and righteousness

And again in Isaiah 11

*Isaiah 11:³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;*

*and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

⁵ *Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.*

This descendant would be a just and righteous King. And what a time He would bring – real peace, no fear; harmony with the created world and with each other

⁶ *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.*

⁷ *The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

⁸ *The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.*

⁹ *They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

The rule of the promised Christ involves all time – eternity, all people – all the nations, and it will involve – Is. 11 – the transformation of the whole creation, a rule of justice and righteousness for the poor and oppressed, a time we desire.

Matthew is saying to his readers – This is who I am saying Jesus is. Are you going to read on and find out if Jesus is this one?

Or maybe they have already heard a little about Jesus, including his shameful death – asking them are you going to read on and find out why one you know to have been crucified could be this one?

Son of Abraham [Genesis 12:2-3, 15:4-6, 17:4-8, 18:18, 22:16-18]

But Matthew doesn't just say Jesus is the Son of David. He says He is the son of Abraham as well

He is claiming that Jesus is the Heir of the promises God made to Abraham

Genesis 12:² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

That promise is repeated in various forms throughout Abraham's life, and to his descendants Isaac and Jacob.

And it is a promise that in Abraham, in his descendant, all the families, all the nations of the earth, will be blessed. The curses and judgments of Genesis 3, being driven from the presence of God, the disordering of relationships, death – will be reversed in Abraham's offspring.

Jesus being that heir will be blessing for all.

But Matthew is making more than a claim that Jesus is the physical descendant of Abraham.

We will see in chapter 3 that being a true child of Abraham is not just a matter of physical descent.

Speaking to the Pharisees John the Baptist will say

Matthew 3:⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

A true child of Abraham is one who shares the character of Abraham as someone who believes God's word, shared the faith of Abraham.

And that is what we will see in the gospel. Jesus is someone who will trust God – we will see that in the temptation in the wilderness, and in the garden before Jesus' death.

Jesus, and Jesus alone, will be the son of Abraham, who alone can include any in the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham

The first sentence, if you understand it, gets you in with the extraordinary greatness of its claim for Jesus.

Jesus is the king who will rule over all, rule for ever with justice and righteousness – different from all human kings and rulers

Jesus is the one who through trusting God like Abraham will bring blessing to all peoples

You read it and you think – could it be possible?

And if you have heard a little about Jesus and his death you think – how could it be possible?

Read on says Matthew

And he starts to prove his claim in the genealogy that follows – all those father of verses which we find so intimidating, or interest squashing

Why not just get on with the story?

Well, in brief, This genealogy is important for the validation of Matthew's claim in his opening line – For Jesus to be **the** son of David, he must be **a** son of David, along with everyone else in the genealogy after David

And perhaps some of his readers had heard that there were some questions about Jesus' parentage, and Matthew wants to start them thinking about that before he gives details of Jesus' birth.

But genealogies weren't the turn off for first century people they are for 21st century westerners.

The genealogy

Genealogies

Genealogies mattered to first hearers – some roles and privileges were hereditary

Jewish priests could trace their ancestry back before the fall of Jerusalem – over 500 years, and it established their right to serve in the temple. And it wasn't just priests that kept records. Eusebius the church historian tells us the emperor Domitian used genealogical records to track down other descendants of David at the end of the first century [Eusebius]

And it wasn't just Jews who were interested in their ancestral line. The Roman nobility would look down on marrying anyone who could not trace their Roman lineage for more than five generations

In fact genealogies matter in many cultures and families today

[Taiwan news Nov 5 2015: The **Confucius genealogical line** has been recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest **family tree** in history, containing the names of more than 2 million descendants, according to the latest edition of the **Confucius genealogy** book published in 2009.]

Can look up on Google the family tree of Confucius in the main line – and it extends to 80 generations.

Genealogies are not just about working out whether one of your ancestors was a convict or an eccentric

Genealogies can establish a vital connection to a group and a right to a position or inheritance, in this case Jesus' right to be heir of the promises to Abraham and David.

Deliberately structured and different

And Matthew has taken a lot of care over this genealogy. It is highly structured and different from Luke's genealogy, a structure and difference that focus on two things - Jesus' royal claims, and the tragedy of the exile in Babylon and its aftermath.

Apart from the repetition of David's name Matthew highlights Jesus' royal claims by his genealogies difference from Luke

Matthew's genealogy contains a different list of names from David v. 6b on to the list found in the genealogy in Luke 3. Luke's is much longer – 42 generations after David compared to 27 in Matthew. Though different both would be reckoned legitimate genealogies in the first century, for abbreviation – citing someone as the son of someone when they may be their grandson or greatgrandson – was acceptable; and they would be reckoned as having different purposes.

Matthew is giving a royal genealogy, a list of throne succession, of those descendants of David who succeeded to his throne or were in line for the throne, and so all the names from David to the exile are of kings who reigned in Jerusalem.

This emphasis on royal succession is also emphasized by the structure of Matthew's genealogy

¹⁷ *So 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.*

That structure of fourteen generations is very deliberate.

To make 14 generations from David to Jeconiah the names of three kings – Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah – have been left out, and Jewish readers would have known that.

And Matthew claims 14 generations between Jeconiah and Jesus – only by counting Jeconiah a second time.

All that tells you the number 14, highlighted in v. 17, mattered to Matthew.

Structuring the genealogy around 14 does two things – firstly, it is a recollection of David, a highlighting of David whose name is both the most frequent in these verses and whose name has the number 14 in Hebrew. [Dalet 4, Waw 6]

Secondly, three sets of 14 is six sets of seven – and many Jews following Genesis 1 structured world history in sets of sevens. Jesus becomes the beginning of the seventh seven which, like the seventh day of creation, is both the climax and fulfillment of the previous 6 and is left open ended, a beginning without ending

This is a royal genealogy – not left in any doubt, a royal genealogy building to a climax in a King whose reign has no end.

But it is also a royal genealogy that has suffered dispossession, the deportation to Babylon, justly because of the sin of the people and the kings that came before.

None of those named from the deportation onwards ruled on David's throne

Reminder things not right, that this is a King whose authority and right is not recognized by the world, is subject to the hostility of human power.

A king who cannot come to reign unless judgment is dealt with, the nations' hostility overcome.

Rather than bore Matthew's first readers, this genealogy would excite them and heighten their expectation.

And there is a note at the end of it that would have puzzled until they read on

Joseph

Matthew 3:¹⁵ 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.

In every generation someone had been said to be the father of someone else.

But not Joseph

He is said to be the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.

That verse firstly Affirms legal status, that Jesus is legitimately the heir of David and Abraham because he is accepted by Joseph

But it also indicates that there is something irregular about Jesus' birth, something irregular that leaves room for Jesus to be more than Joseph's son, for the reality of His being the Son of God

A son to be the son – legal, not biological

From the English aristocracy we have inherited the importance of a bloodline – a concern for biological sonship that has been reinforced by our pre-occupation with genetics.

That someone is only a true son if they share the biology.

But for the ancient world it was not genetics but legal entitlement that mattered when it came to inheritance.

You see that in Levirate marriage – the son of the union of the brother with the deceased's wife, while not the inheritor of the deceased brother's genes, would inherit the property of the deceased brother because he was legally entitled to it.

In fact Adoption could qualify for royalty – the emperor Tiberius was the adopted son of Augustus, and he was fully entitled to reign.

Jesus, by Joseph's acceptance of God's command to take Mary as His wife later in chapter 1 and Joseph's recognition of Jesus as his son by his naming of Him [1:25], is legally Joseph's son and so the legal son of David

In fact Jesus' adoption by Joseph is in accord with the other message of the genealogy

That Hope is not in genes, but in God – which will become clear as we think about this introduction telling us that this gospel is not just the story of the man the LORD has chosen, but of the LORD Himself.

The story of the LORD

The introduction in v. 1 and this genealogy focuses Matthew's readers on God. It is the LORD who took the initiative to make those promises to Abraham and to David that are so special, and it is those promises that make them people who matter to us all.

And in the Bible story those promises are the LORD's response to sin, to the rebellion of Adam against God, to Adam plunging all his descendants into death and distance from God by choosing to disbelieve and disobey the LORD's command.

It is in the promise to Abraham that blessing will come in place of the curse, in the promises to David that the rejected rule of the LORD will be restored, and with its restoration come peace and life.

The LORD's purposes for His whole creation

The LORD's reputation before the whole creation

Hang on the fulfillment of those promises.

But what we see in the genealogy is that human sin constantly threatened that fulfilment.

Look again at the genealogy. It is a record of failure – of individuals and of the people as a whole. Many of the Kings in it were worse than duds. Rehoboam lost the kingdom through pride. Solomon unfaithful with many wives. Ahaz put his trust in Assyria not in the Lord. Manasseh sacrificed his children. Even the heroes are deeply flawed. Abraham told lies about Sarah to protect his own life. Jacob was a deceiver. Judah sold his brother Joseph into slavery. David we are reminded committed adultery with Uriah's wife. This is not a list of righteous people who deserve a kingdom, who have done anything that would merit the LORD's great kindness to them.

And the genealogy is punctuated by the exile, a sign of the people's failure – while a tragedy it was a deserved judgement as we saw in Ezekiel, and the people had not really changed.

And of themselves they were not able to recover their kingdom

This is a list of failures – failures in righteousness and faithfulness.

And from Jehoiachin on it is a list of the obscure – the first couple are known, and seem to have failed in whatever promise they had. The rest are complete unknowns – not famous high achievers.

There is no hope in the human recipients, the human bearers of the promise for the fulfilment of the promise. They have done nothing deserving of God doing good to them.

In fact they constantly threaten that fulfilment by provoking the LORD's just judgment, by turning away from the LORD, making them deserving of the exact opposite of what is promised.

And at the same time it is a list of surprising continuity over 1800 years and more. Abraham and David do not run out of descendants. The exile is not the end. And that is because of the LORD's faithfulness, His gracious faithfulness. This genealogy is a record of God's grace and faithfulness, of His steadfast love to Abraham and His descendants. The promises are initiated by grace, and they continue to guide God's dealings with them by His grace and mercy, His commitment to steadfast love.

That grace is emphasized by the four women mentioned in this genealogy – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and 'the wife of Uriah', Bathsheba. Where the genealogy could have included the great mothers of the faith – Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, their presence stands out. Each is a surprise – three are known to be gentiles, non-Jews – Tamar and Rahab are Caananites, Ruth a Moabitess, a member of a people God had said could never enter the congregation of his people [Deut. 23:3]; the fourth identified by her relation to Uriah, a Hittite, a non Jew.

And each represents a gracious intervention of God through what could be called an irregular conception and birth – Tamar posing as a prostitute to have children through her father in law, Rahab being named a prostitute, Bathsheba caught up in David's adultery. In Judah and David's case that intervention was in the context of their sin, sin which threatened the continuity of the line of

kings. Judah neglected the duty he owed his daughter in law Tamar to give her a husband and offspring. David committed murder and adultery, murder and adultery that deserved death.

The genealogy says the hope of Israel is not in genes, not in racial purity, not in the righteousness of the recipients of the promise, but in God – His faithfulness and steadfast love and might, that can work good from human ill. His mercy.[Hosea 6:6, Matt. 9:13].

The LORD didn't abandon his promise to David and to Abraham in the face of sin. What is seen is that He can even use sin – Judah and Tamar, David and Bathsheba – to keep his promises, and use surprising and irregular births to bring His promised purpose to fulfillment.

More, the genealogy says that when it looks like nothing is happening, when the human heirs of the promise are doing nothing to bring about its fulfillment – God has never lost His focus. Take that last group of names, those after the exile. During that time there were wars, changing rulers of Palestine, famines, earthquakes, threats to Israel's existence, fluctuating faithfulness amongst the people. But no great intervention of God. From Malachi on no great prophet. No son of David rising to prominence, just sinking further into obscurity until we come to Joseph who is – a carpenter.

And then it says Joseph is the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.

God never lost sight of the promises, never wavered in His commitment to what He has said, and to do it at the time of His choosing – the structure of the genealogy into 14's brings that home.

He had a plan, and He had a timetable, and now it had come to the climax

The LORD is determined to fulfill His promise through the person and at the time of His choosing [the 14's] – and that is Israel's only hope.

We have this story because the LORD is the LORD – the righteous and faithful God, the almighty and holy God, the God of steadfast love and mercy, and He is determined to fulfill His promise, be the God He has revealed Himself to be in His dealings with His sinful people

That promise included non Jews – Gentiles, for the LORD is the God of all the earth

That promise will be fulfilled in surprising ways, for the LORD is faithful and almighty, not frustrated in achieving His purpose by the sin of His people

The Story for you

Not yet a believer, if you have just heard of Jesus, or heard claims made for him but are as yet unconvinced – Matthew is saying this story is for you

Read on for what you see in the genealogy foreshadows what you will find in the rest of the story

Jesus will be the Son of David – rule for the poor, come and say blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom, the reign, of heaven. The king who won't despise the needy, but serve them

Son of Abraham – who like Abraham will trust God and bring the blessing of God for all – for this is a story that includes non-Jews from beginning – from the wise men coming at Jesus birth, to the end, when Jesus sends to make disciples of all nations

But more

This will be a story of God fulfilling His promise by a surprising birth

Keeping His word where His people, all people, fail

Of Showing mercy to a sinful people who deserve death

OF the almighty God working good from human sin, the sin of crucifying His Son

A story of the bringing of the beginning of a new creation and new humanity by dealing with deserved judgment in that death and bringing new life in the resurrection from the dead

As the genealogy shows this story may come from another culture and time, but a story for all cultures and time, a story for you

For it holds promise of forgiveness and life, of blessing where we live under the curse, of peace where we have drifted far from God and fear his anger at our sin – holds promise for you

Jesus is someone to find out more about

And if you are a believer, convinced already that Jesus is the Christ, the beginning of Matthew's gospel is saying to you

Don't lose sight of Jesus' greatness – summed up by the opening line – the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham

He is the one, the only one in whom all humanity can find blessing

He will rule the nations

Don't reduce Jesus by privatising your faith, as if there are parts of creation that Jesus does not rule, sections of humanity whom Jesus cannot bless – whole creation, hope of the nations

Put your hope in God for the fulfilment of His promises to you and I,

Not in yourself, not in your own goodness

But in His demonstrated, proven, grace and faithfulness

And when nothing seems to be happening, when history just seems to be rolling on as usual, people busy with their own plans ignoring God,

Remember – He does not fail of His purpose, He hasn't forgotten His promise, ceased to be faithful

He is moving in His own time to His appointed goal, and it will happen at the right time