

Lessons from Matthew 1

By Clinton Wahlen

The Gospel of Matthew heads the New Testament canon. This prominent placement, rather than being merely a historical accident, witnesses to its foundational significance for Christians. Just as the book of Genesis introduces us to our God and the Creator of all, so this first Gospel introduces us to Jesus Christ, “God with us,” our Savior and the Lord of all. In fact, the first two words of Matthew (*biblos geneeseōs*) could be translated “the book of Genesis” and may be intended to draw readers’ attention to Jesus as a new beginning and to the many connections that exist between these two biblical books.

Unlike epistles, which—in accordance with ancient letter-writing conventions—clearly identify the author, none of the canonical Gospels clearly identify their author; instead, they only hint at who wrote them. It is not hard to understand the possible reasons for this virtual anonymity. After all, the Gospels relate important events in the life of *Jesus* and *His* teachings—not those of their respective authors. Furthermore, this treasure, given through “earthen vessels,” belongs to all Christians because it is God’s revelation to them. As such, it is not any one person’s intellectual property, but is a witness that has been committed to each believer in order that he or she may share it with others.

The Gospel of Matthew gets its name from the tax collector identified only in this Gospel as having been the same as the disciple selected by Jesus to be among the twelve apostles (Matt 9:9; 10:3; cf. Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15). Other Gospels call him “Levi” (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). Thus, he is sometimes referred to as “Levi Matthew.”

Structure of the Chapter

The first part of Matthew 1 introduces readers to Jesus as the focus of the book. It does this through a Hebrew construction known as a chiasm, in which the second half of the material mirrors the first but in reverse order¹:

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|--------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1:1 | A | Christ |
| | B | son of David |
| | C | son of Abraham |
| 1:2–17 | C ^ˆ | Abraham begot . . . (v. 2) |
| | B ^ˆ | David the king begot . . . (v. 6) |
| | A ^ˆ | Christ (vv. 16–17) |

The remainder of Matthew 1 describes in detail the birth of Jesus as the promised messiah in fulfillment of Bible prophecy (vv. 18–25).

Interpretation of the Chapter

I. Verse 1. As the above structure of the chapter shows, “Christ” should be understood as more

than merely a second name to further identify Jesus. In connection with its use again in verse 16, it refers here to Jesus as “*the* Christ,” which means “anointed one” or Messiah. At His baptism, Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit for His messianic work (Matt 3:16; Acts 10:38).

- A. The Son of David.** Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament that say the promised “seed” would be a king in the line of David (e.g., Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–2; Jer 23:5–6)—at His first advent through His suffering and death with a crown of thorns (Matt 27:27–29), and at His second advent as King of Kings with a crown of glory (Heb 2:9; Rev 14:14; 19:11–13).
- B. The Son of Abraham.** Being descended from Abraham, Jesus was a Hebrew (cf. Gen 14:13) and able to fulfill the promise that in Abraham’s “seed” all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 22:18; Acts 3:24–26).

II. Verses 2–17

- A. Importance of biblical genealogies.** Modern readers might be tempted to skip over the genealogy that makes up the bulk of chapter one. But, as many Bible students have discovered, valuable gems of truth lie just beneath the surface of such seemingly “desert-like” passages of Scripture. Ever since God’s promise that the “seed” or descendant of Eve would crush the serpent’s head, thereby redeeming the human race from the Fall (Gen 3:15), God’s people have eagerly awaited the promise’s fulfillment. That is why the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 and elsewhere in Scripture are so important—they preserve the historical record by which the promise’s fulfillment can be traced.
- B. Interruptions in the genealogical pattern “A begot B.”** These draw our attention to important elements in Jesus’ ancestry.
- Verse 2, “Judah and his brothers.”** This phrase refers to the nation of Israel descended from Jacob’s twelve sons and, more specifically, to Judah, through whose descendants the “scepter” or kingdom of Israel would be established (Gen 49:10).
 - Jesus’ human lineage.** Matthew also seems to emphasize, by several references to women (who normally go unmentioned in genealogies), that, on His human side, Jesus’ ancestry was in no way better or

purer than those He came to save.

- a) **Verse 3, “by Tamar.”** When Judah refused to give his surviving son to Tamar in levirate marriage (a practice later codified in Deut 25:5–10), she tricked her father-in-law into having sexual relations (Gen 38). The twins who were born to her preserved Judah’s royal line.
- b) **Verse 5**
- (1) **“... by Rahab.”** Although not an Israelite, and in fact a prostitute, Rahab played a vital role in saving the spies sent by Joshua to Jericho, expressing her faith in the God of Israel and acting on it (Josh 2).
- (2) **“... by Ruth.”** Like Rahab, Ruth was also a foreigner who expressed her faith in the God of Israel (Ruth 1:16; 2:12). Like Tamar, her actions preserved the royal seed, becoming the grandmother of David (Ruth 4:21–22).
- c) **Verse 6, “by her who had been the wife of Uriah.”** It appears that, due to her affair with David, Bathsheba is not named (unlike the previous three women). The law required that the guilty partners be put to death (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). But, in light of David’s repentance, God forgave this sin and it was through Bathsheba that Solomon was born.
3. **Verse 11, “Jeconiah and his brothers about the time they were carried away to Babylon.”** This verse records the end of Davidic rule because of Israel’s persistent disobedience to God and rebellion against His word (see 2 Chr 36:1–21; Jer 22:30). Royal succession would be continued through a different line—that of Shealtiel down to Jesus.
- C. **Verses 16–17.** Jesus’ birth was unusual as He was not biologically the son of Joseph but only of Mary (cf. Luke 1:35; 3:23). Rather than being “born of fornication” as the Jews in John 8:41 insinuate, Jesus was miraculously conceived through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The fourteen generations from Abraham to David (identically recorded in Luke 3:31–34) are taken as the pattern in summarizing (without being compre-

hensive) the royal line from David to the Babylonian captivity and from the captivity to the birth of Christ.

- III. **Verses 18–21.** While the birth narrative in Luke seems to reflect Mary’s perspective, Matthew’s narrative focuses on Joseph. Betrothal was as binding as marriage in Jewish circles, so Mary’s pregnancy poses a real problem for Joseph that is only resolved through divine revelation in a dream. He is instructed to make Mary his wife, accepting the child as his legitimate son, and to name Him Jesus, which means “Yahweh is salvation,” because “He will save His people from their sins.”
- IV. **Verses 22–25.** Joseph obeys the angel’s command. Jesus’ birth is identified by Matthew as fulfilling Isaiah 7:14, the first of twelve quotations from the Old Testament to show their fulfillment in Jesus (the others are Matt 2:6, 15, 18, 23; 4:15, 16; 8:17; 12:18–21; 13:14, 15; 13:35; 21:5; 27:9, 10). The mysterious Immanuel figure in Isaiah (Isa 7:14; 8:8) is here concretized in Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke emphasize that Jesus was born of a virgin (Matt 1:23h; Luke 1:34). Thus, the birth of Jesus quite literally fulfills the expectation of “God with us” in that He has both a human side (through Mary) and a divine side (through His conception by the Holy Spirit).

Application of the Chapter

Many lessons can be drawn from this chapter. Some of the most important ones are: 1) God is in control of history and will bring His purposes to pass at the right time, as He did with the birth of Jesus “in the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4; cf. Rom 5:6). 2) Every part of the Bible is useful for our study—even passages that seem, on the surface, to have little relevance for us today. 3) Jesus understands us and can help us—because He is God, who knows all things and can do all things, and because He shares our human ancestry and experienced temptation from the cradle to the cross and was victorious over sin and death. This divine-human lineage uniquely qualifies Him as the one who can save us from our sins. 4) Finally, even clear commands of God that may seem, from a human perspective, to be difficult or even embarrassing to fulfill—such as Joseph taking Mary as his wife despite her not being pregnant by him—may be obeyed with the assurance that God will take care of the results.

¹ Unless specified otherwise, all Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.

“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”
(The apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15, NASB95)
