

## JESUS' FAMILY TREE

—MATTHEW 1-2—

**F**or most readers of the Bible, reading a genealogy is about as exciting as reading a telephone book. Yet this is exactly how the entire New Testament begins in chapter one of Saint Matthew's Gospel:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah . . . (Mt. 1:1-3).

I would bet that many readers today do what I did when I first looked at chapter 1 of this Gospel: skip the genealogy and pick up again in chapter 2. Even the few brave readers who survive the list of forty-two generations are nevertheless probably left wondering, "Couldn't Matthew have chosen a better way to begin his Gospel?" Admittedly, being hit with a family tree of people who lived thousands of years ago doesn't seem to be the most attractive way to lure people into the story of Jesus Christ. As one New Testament scholar put it, "Let's face it: Other people's family trees are about as interesting as other people's holiday videos."<sup>1</sup>

For a Jew in Jesus' day, however, this genealogy would have had more attention-grabbing power than

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 23.

the cover of *Time* magazine or the front page of *U.S.A. Today*. It would have summed up all their hopes and expectations about what God had been promising to do in their lives ever since the time of Abraham. And it would have triumphantly announced that God's plan had come to completion in their own lifetime! In fact, if there were CNN in first-century Palestine, this little genealogy would have made the top story on "Headline News."

Let's look at Matthew's genealogy with new eyes—with the eyes of first-century Jews who would have seen their history and future and very reason for existing summed up in these few verses. In the process, we will begin to see how this story of Jesus, which sums up the story of Israel, has become our story—the story of the Church.

### **The Promised "Son of David"**

While many people are mentioned in this genealogy, the figure that stands out most is David. It is significant that the first title Matthew bestows on Jesus is the "son of David" (1:1). Another link between David and Jesus is that they are the only individuals who are given titles.<sup>2</sup> David is described as "the king" (1:6) and Jesus is called the "Christ"—meaning "anointed one" (1:16)—a title given to a Davidic king when he was anointed at his coronation. Scholars have also found Davidic imagery in verse 17, in which Matthew draws attention to the number of generations in the geneal-

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<sup>2</sup> On these points, I am indebted to my friend and colleague Curtis Mitch, researcher and writer for the forthcoming Ignatius Study Bible.

ogy from Abraham to Jesus:

[T]he 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 (Mt. 1:17).

Matthew divides the generations into three sets of fourteen. He is drawing our attention to the number fourteen, which is significant because David's name adds up to fourteen in Hebrew. Let me explain. In the Hebrew alphabet, consonants are also given numeric value. They represent not only letters, but also numbers. The three Hebrew consonants in David's name are *dwd* (*d*=4, *w*=6), adding up to fourteen. Thus, the very structure of Matthew's genealogy centered around three sets of fourteen generations subtly proclaims Jesus to be the "thrice-Davidic Son of David."<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, David himself appears as the 14th generation in the family tree of Saint Matthew's Gospel.

Why all this focus on David? Allusions to David would bring to mind the glory days of Israel's history, when the kingdom reached its peak in terms of its political and religious power and influence in the world. God promised David and his descendants an everlasting dynasty: "[Y]our house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam. 7:16).

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<sup>3</sup> Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies, with Special References to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (Society for New Testament Studies, Monograph Series, 8; London: Cambridge University, 1969), 192.

This dynasty would have worldwide influence. The Davidic king would rule over all the earth, nations would bow down before him, and in him all peoples would find blessing (cf. Ps. 2:8; 72:8-11, 17; 110:6).

One can imagine the excitement a Jew would have felt in reading about the great King David in this genealogy. In the preamble to the genealogy, Jesus is identified as a “son of David.” Then the genealogy traces the descendants of Abraham down to “David the king” (Mt. 1:6) and goes on to list the kings of Judah flowing from David’s line (Mt. 1:7-10).

### **The Fallen Kingdom**

But then in verse 11 comes a major turning point in the genealogy which issues a somber note for Jewish readers—a sudden, sharp minor chord in the genealogy’s triumphant march through David’s royal descendants: “and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, *at the time of the deportation to Babylon.*” Here, Matthew highlights the Babylonian deportation not so much as a chronological marker, but as a signpost signaling a tragic shift in the story of Israel: the end of the Davidic monarchy. These words would recall how all of Israel’s hopes surrounding the dynasty were dashed in 587 B.C. when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and carried off the people and even their king into a most humiliating and painful exile.

Even more, this exile was not simply a painful memory from the distant past, but an abiding reality for the Jews in Jesus’ day, who continued to feel the effects of this devastating loss. For practically six centuries following the Babylonian exile, the Jewish

people suffered oppression under the hands of various foreign nations up to the time of Jesus, when the Romans ruled the land. For hundreds of years, the Jews were a nation without control over their own land and a people without a true Davidic king.

The end of the kingdom was not simply a political disaster or military defeat. For a long time, God's prophets had been reminding the people that Israel's strength depended not on military might, economic wealth, or political maneuvering, but on covenant faithfulness to the one true God. Israel's law taught them that if they broke their covenant relationship with Yahweh, they would suffer the curse of exile, in which even their king would be carried away by a foreign nation and God would no longer be with them (cf. Deut. 28:32-36; 31:16-18). This is exactly what happened at the time of the deportation to Babylon (cf. 2 Kings 24).

With Matthew's mention of the Babylonian exile, all the sadness, frustration, and despair which surrounded the first-century Jews' experience of suffering and oppression would ring loudly in their ears. The genealogy continues these somber notes and minor chords by listing the next two generations of oppressed Davidic descendants up to Zerubbabel in verse 12.

### **Christ and the Kingdom's Restoration**

Yet God offered the Jews some hope during this period of suffering and exile. He sent His prophets to tell how a new Davidic king would be raised up—a Messiah ("Anointed One") who would restore the kingdom and bring about the New Covenant era in

which there would be forgiveness of sins and blessing for the whole world.<sup>4</sup> Many first-century Jews reading Matthew's genealogy would be longing for these promises to be fulfilled.

Matthew plays upon those hopes in verse 13, where the genealogy slowly begins to change keys again. While verse 12 mentions Zerubbabel, who was the last of the Davidic descendants in Matthew's genealogy to be mentioned in the Old Testament, verse 13 offers a sign of new hope, showing how the Davidic royal line continued even after Zerubbabel. This, no doubt, would stir excitement and anticipation: The Davidic line continues! Perhaps we will find the Messiah at the end of this line!

The genealogy builds a hopeful momentum as it introduces each descendent after Zerubbabel—men who were previously unrecorded in Scripture: Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Achim. . . . Finally, it reaches the peak of its crescendo when Matthew presents “Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (1:16). Here, the chorus resounds at the climax of the whole genealogy: Jesus is the “Christ”—the Messiah whom God had foretold would restore the kingdom and bring to completion His plan of bringing blessing to the entire world!

### **Emmanuel: God with Us**

The chorus continues into verses 18-23, in which Matthew highlights two more titles for this great royal Son. First, Matthew shows us how this Child's very

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Jer. 33:15 *et seq.*; Jer. 23:1-6; Ezek. 34; Amos 9:11-12; Dan. 9:25-26; cf. Is. 45:1-5, 21-25.

name has great importance. He shall be called "Jesus," which literally means "God saves." Why is He given this name? Matthew tells us through the angel's explanation to Joseph: "[A]nd you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (1:21).

Here we see that Jesus' name in verse 21 is the answer to the problem of the Babylonian exile in verse 11.<sup>5</sup> Remember, the Jews viewed their exilic condition not simply as a political or military problem, but as a sin problem. According to their prophets and their law, it was covenant unfaithfulness that brought about their exile and oppression. Thus, Jesus ("God saves") comes to "save his people from their sins," thereby saving the Jews from the real exile—which is not being chained down by the Babylonians or Romans, but being enslaved to the real oppressor, the devil, who has a hold over all humanity through the chains of sin and death.

Of all the titles for Jesus that Matthew highlights, perhaps the most profound one comes right at the end of his first chapter. Jesus is called "Emmanuel," which means "God with us" (Mt. 1:23). We cannot understate how much this must have meant to ancient Jews. Ever since the first sin, when Adam and Eve "hid themselves from the presence of the LORD" (Gen. 3:8), God has been working to restore communion with sinful humanity. And God planned to use Israel as His chosen people and the Davidic king as their leader and representative in order to reach the nations and gather all people back into communion

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<sup>5</sup> See John Mark Jones, "Subverting the Textuality of Davidic Messianism: Matthew's Presentation of the Genealogy of the Davidic Title," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994), 263-64.

with the one true God. But without their kingdom, without a Davidic king, and still suffering under foreign domination, some first-century Jews might have wondered what happened to God's great promises for their nation and felt somewhat abandoned. Was God still with His people?

But Matthew triumphantly proclaims that the royal Child at the end of the genealogy is the answer to their hearts' deepest longings. Not only is He the Christ—the anointed Davidic king who will restore the kingdom. And not only is He Jesus, the one who will save His people from their sins. He is Emmanuel—God with us. God is with His people again!

Indeed, as we shall see in subsequent reflections on Matthew's Gospel, the New Covenant which Jesus inaugurates restores communion with Our Heavenly Father and gives us God's presence in a way like never before: God is with us in the Church, in His Word, in the sacraments, and most intimately in the Holy Eucharist. If you want to see just how important this theme of "Emmanuel" is for Saint Matthew, turn to the very end of his Gospel. Just as "God with us" appears as the climactic name for Jesus at the end of Matthew 1, so it appears at the culmination of Matthew's entire Gospel in Jesus' last words to the apostles, promising them that He will be with them always, even to the end of time:

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 (Mt. 28:19-20).

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### Questions for Discussion

**1.** Note how the genealogy in Matthew 1 draws immediate attention to Jesus' being a royal descendant of King David. Let's consider why this would be an important part of Jesus' heritage that Matthew would want to emphasize.

**(a)** According to the following verses, what promises did God make to David and his descendants?

2 Samuel 7:8-17 \_\_\_\_\_  
Psalm 89:20-37 \_\_\_\_\_  
Psalm 132:11-12 \_\_\_\_\_

**(b)** Read Isaiah 11:1-2, 6-12. This prophecy described how the Davidic dynasty was like a strong tree that has been cut off and reduced to a stump when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and carried the people into exile in 587 B.C. In this time of exile, it appeared as if all of the royal descendants of David had been wiped out and the Davidic dynasty had ceased forever. But the prophet Isaiah offered a message a hope: the Davidic line continued! A branch in David's family tree quietly continued to grow out of the stump, and at the end of this branch there will eventually blossom a great king who will restore the kingdom to Israel.

What else did the prophets say about this future son of David who would restore the kingdom? What do the following passages add?

Isaiah 7:14-17 \_\_\_\_\_

Isaiah 9:2-7 \_\_\_\_\_

Micah 5:1-4 \_\_\_\_\_

Ezekiel 34:23-31 \_\_\_\_\_

Jeremiah 23:1-6 \_\_\_\_\_

**(c)** What are the various ways the genealogy in Matthew 1 draws attention to Jesus' being this long-awaited Davidic king? Consider the following verses:

Matthew 1:1 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 1:16 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 1:17 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 1:13-16 \_\_\_\_\_

Other verses and themes in Matthew 1 \_\_\_\_\_

**(d)** In light of this background, why would this genealogy in Matthew 1 grab the first-century Jewish readers' attention? What would it mean to them?

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**2.** Read 2 Kings 24:10-15. Why might Matthew's mention of the Babylonian exile be considered a somber note or downward shift in the genealogy?

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**3.** Who was Zerubbabel (Mt. 1:12)? Why would the names listed after him be so important (Mt. 1:13-16)?

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**4.** What is the meaning of Jesus being called the "Christ" ("Messiah") at the end of the genealogy in Matthew 1:16?

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**5.** Read Matthew 1:22-23.

**(a)** At the end of the first chapter, Jesus is called "Emmanuel." What does this word mean?

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**(b)** Why would this name for Jesus be important to the Jewish people who had been oppressed for over five hundred years?

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**(c)** In what ways does Jesus continue to be with us today? Consider Matthew 18:20 and Matthew 28:16-20.

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