
§1 *The Birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–25)*

Genealogical records were important to the Jewish people of Jesus' day. They were maintained by the Sanhedrin and used to ensure purity of descent. Josephus, the famous Jewish historian who served in the court of Rome, began his autobiography by listing his ancestral pedigree. Similarly, Matthew opens his Gospel by tracing the lineage of Jesus. It has often been noted that, from David forward, the Lucan genealogy has forty-one generations traced through Nathan rather than twenty-six generations traced through Solomon. Possibly Luke records the actual descent of Joseph whereas Matthew follows the royal lineage.

1:1 / At the very beginning Matthew establishes the two most significant points about Jesus' family history: he was **the son of David** (therefore of royal lineage) and also a descendant **of Abraham** (he belonged to the people of God who had their origin with the great patriarch who moved out of ancient Ur and by faith followed the leading of God to a new land.) The title **son of David** occurs frequently in Matthew and stems from God's promise to King David in 2 Samuel 7:12: "I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, . . . and I will establish his kingdom." In Jewish usage the title was messianic; that is, it pointed ahead to the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

1:2–17 / The family record of Jesus (listed in vv. 2–16) is arranged in three divisions, which mark out three stages in Jewish history. Furthermore, according to verse 17, there are **fourteen generations** in each division. Several irregularities call for explanation. First, there appear to be only thirteen generations in the third division (vv. 12–16). A number of answers have been suggested: a name has been lost; Mary should be included; Jesus is the thirteenth, and Messiah (Jesus at his second coming) is the fourteenth. Schweizer is probably correct in his observation that, since ancient reckoning always included the first and last elements of a series, the sequence should be (1) Abraham to David,

(2) David to Josiah (the last free king), (3) Jeconiah (the first king of the captivity) to Jesus (p. 23). This would place fourteen generations in each division.

Another irregularity is the omission of three kings before Jotham (Joash, Amaziah, Azariah) and one after Josiah (Jehoahaz). The most reasonable answer is that Matthew is less concerned with supplying us with an exact family record than with arranging the names in groups of fourteen to coincide with the three important stages of Jewish history: the account of God's people leading up to Israel's greatest king; the decline of the nation, ending in Babylonian exile; the restoration of God's people with the advent of the Messiah. Some have noted that fourteen is the numerical value of the Hebrew letters in the name David (the three consonants have the numerical values D = 4, W = 6, D = 4, for a total of 14). In any case, the somewhat rough genealogical table serves Matthew's purpose of setting forth the royal and messianic ancestry of Jesus of Nazareth.

A third irregularity sets this family record apart from all others: it makes reference to five women. Since women had no legal rights in Jesus' day, this is indeed extraordinary. And note who the four (apart from Mary) were: **Tamar** was a Canaanite who seduced her father-in-law, Judah (Gen. 38). **Rahab** was a prostitute in Jericho (Josh. 2:1-21). **Ruth** was a Moabitess (Ruth 1:4; and Deut. 23:3 rules that "no . . . Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord"). Bathsheba (**Uriah's wife**) was the wife of a Hittite, and as a result of his lust for her, David committed both adultery and murder. If one searched the Old Testament for a more unlikely group of candidates for a messianic lineage, it is doubtful one could come up with a more questionable group.

Why did Matthew include women in his genealogical listing? They are not in the lineage in the same sense that all the men are. Since their names did not have to be included (he could have mentioned the mothers of all the other kings as well), Matthew must have had some specific reason for doing so. Of the many solutions offered, the most persuasive is that by including the women Matthew is calling attention to the strange ways in which God has brought about his purpose in times past and is thereby preparing the way for a truly unique event, the virgin birth of Jesus. Whether or not he is getting ready to argue that

God's activity embraces both Jew and Gentile (all four women were foreigners) is not quite clear. In any case, the family record reminds us of the fallen state of human nature and the redeeming activity of God in bringing back to himself the sinner as well as the saint.

1:18-21 / Matthew now turns to the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. It will be noticed at once that the account differs from what we find in Luke. In fact, neither Gospel writer includes anything dealt with by the other except the role of the Holy Spirit in Mary's pregnancy and the fact that Joseph and Mary were the parents of Jesus. This has led some scholars to conclude that the two accounts are historically irreconcilable.

There is no inherent necessity, however, for such a radical conclusion. For example, the angelic appearance to Mary (in Luke) and to Joseph (in Matthew) are not the same event. To Mary, the angel announces that, having found favor with God, she is to bear a son. In response to Mary's query as to how that could be, since she has no husband, the angel explains that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her, and the child will be the Son of God (Luke 1:30-35). To Joseph, the angel counseled that he **not be afraid to take Mary home as his wife**, since the child she will conceive is **from the Holy Spirit** (Matt. 1:20-23). There is no reason to question a twofold appearance of the angel. In fact, the situation calls for it. Other variations between the accounts are no more than what one would expect given the slightly differing purposes and perspectives of the writers.

Jewish weddings involved three separate steps. First, there was the engagement. This was often arranged by the parents or by a professional matchmaker while the couple were still children. At a later stage came the betrothal, a legally binding relationship lasting for one year. During this period the couple lived apart and had no sexual relations. Should either party not wish to go ahead with the marriage, a divorce was required. The penalty for sleeping with a virgin betrothed to another man was stoning for both (in Deut. 22:24, she is called "another man's wife"). The third step was the marriage itself.

It was during the second stage (the betrothal) that Mary was found to be pregnant. What bewilderment and dismay this must have brought to the virgin Mary. And what thoughts must have

passed through the mind of Joseph. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a **righteous man** (v. 19), yet he did not want to expose Mary openly. Mosaic law called upon a man to divorce his wife if he “finds something indecent about her” (Deut. 24:1). Such was Joseph’s duty, and he realized it. Yet compassion for his bride led him to make plans to break off the engagement privately, that is, before the minimum number of witnesses (two) and without pressing charges (cf. m. *Sotah* 1.5).

While he was considering this, an angel appeared to Joseph telling him to follow through with the marriage plans. The child Mary would bear would be by the Holy Spirit. He was to call him **Jesus**, for his mission would be to **save his people from their sins** (v. 21). With his Davidic bloodline, Joseph was to become the legal father of Jesus the Messiah. It has been noted that in certain respects Joseph is a reflection of his Old Testament namesake, who also was a righteous man, influenced by dreams, and forced to journey into Egypt.

1:22–25 / Five times in the first two chapters (and six more scattered through the Gospel) Matthew uses what are called “formula quotations” to point out that in the details of Jesus’ life are being fulfilled many of the promises of the Old Testament. On this first occasion Matthew says that **all this** (the supernatural conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary) **took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet**. He then quotes Isaiah 7:14 from the LXX, which translates the Hebrew *‘almâ* (“a young woman of marriageable age”) with the Greek *parthenos* (“virgin”; note, however, that though *parthenos* normally assumes virginity, it is used in Gen. 34:3 for a girl who has been raped.) He sees beyond the promise made to King Ahaz (that by the time a child soon to be born reaches early childhood the international situation will change in favor of Israel) to a greater fulfillment in the birth of Christ. The child will be called **Immanuel**, explained by Matthew as meaning **God with us** (v. 23). In the Old Testament setting, God is with his people in the noble son of Ahaz (Hezekiah), who gave his undivided loyalty and allegiance to the God of Israel. Green notes that **God with us** in the Old Testament is “a semi-technical expression of God’s helping presence with individuals” (p. 56). In the New Testament, Jesus is the very presence of God the Father who comes to live among his people (cf. John 1:14). It is fitting that the Gospel ends with

an “Immanuel” promise—“I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

When Joseph awoke from his dream he carried out the instructions he had received from the angel. Mary and Joseph were married but had **no union** (“sexual relations,” GNB) until after the child was born. One branch of the church, desiring to protect the “perpetual virginity” of Mary, holds that the couple never did have sexual relations. The mention of Jesus’ brothers and sisters in Matthew 13:55-56 points to a different conclusion.

Additional Notes §1

1:16 / Of the three principal variant readings, the UBS follows the one that translates, “Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.” Other readings avoid the expression “husband of Mary” as inappropriate in view of vv. 18ff.

1:19 / **Public:** Gk. *deigmatizō* means “to expose or humiliate in public.” A *deigma* is a “specimen” or an “example.”

1:20 / **In a dream:** In biblical times dreams were often used as vehicles of revelation. They seem to appear in clusters: in the patriarchal period, during the ministry of Daniel, and in the nativity narratives in Matthew.

1:21 / **Jesus:** The name is the Greek form of the Hebrew “*ye-(hō)šū‘ā*” (English “Joshua”) which means “Yahweh is salvation.” Jesus’ mission is revealed in the name he is given. His mission is redemptive and spiritual rather than nationalistic. He is to save his people from their sins.