

# 1

## Jesus the Christ

*Please read Matthew 1*

Jewish sixties' pop-star Helen Shapiro was searching for something. Stirred by the story of how Stan Telchin's daughter became a Christian,<sup>1</sup> she found herself a Bible. In her own words, 'I took a deep breath, decided, "In for a penny, in for a pound" and opened up at the New Testament. I didn't know what to expect, other than an anti-Semitic diatribe. The thing that shook me to the core on that first reading was ... the genealogy of Jesus, which went through Zerubbabel via King David, to the tribe of Judah and back to the patriarch Abraham ... I could relate the events to me and my culture.'<sup>2</sup>

This should warn the reader, Jew or Gentile, not to skip the first seventeen verses of the Gospel, saying, 'Who these days is interested in genealogies?' Matthew begins

his Gospel with a prologue in which he introduces the main themes of his book or, more precisely, the Lord himself, who is the subject of the book. The genealogy is an essential part of this. Since the theme of the Gospel as a whole is the kingship of Christ, the prologue deals specifically with his descent from King David. This is not done in a merely technical way. Jesus came to the throne of his father David in order to bring in the kingdom of God and achieve a great salvation, and in these two chapters Matthew is already challenging his readers to submit to and benefit from this kingship, as Helen Shapiro did.

### **The genealogy of Jesus**

Matthew begins his Gospel by demonstrating beyond any doubt at all that the Jesus about whom he is going to write is the long-expected Messiah, or 'Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham' (1:1). To do this he sets down his genealogy. Genealogies, or family trees, are not the most exciting parts of the Bible. They are, however, very necessary and most effective in showing that the biblical record is factual, not a mere fairy tale, as is so often claimed. The Bible deals with real people and real events, so Matthew begins with our Lord's line of descent.

Luke's version of this is very different: it goes in the reverse direction, traces Christ's descent right back to Adam, 'the son of God', and has many variants in the more recent part. It has often been claimed that this is because one is the line through Joseph and the other through Mary, but this does not really fit the text. It is more likely that Luke traces the physical descent of Joseph and Matthew his

legal, and royal, descent, thus establishing Jesus' claim to David's throne as his heir, the Messiah.

According to verse 17, the genealogy is arranged artificially in three fourteens of generations (possibly to help memory as 'was customary among Jewish authors'<sup>3</sup>), which clearly necessitated some omissions. It may be that Jeconiah has to be counted twice to make the names fit. It seems likely that the significance of the number fourteen comes from the numerical value of the consonants in the Hebrew form of David;  $d = 4, v = 6$  so  $4 + 6 + 4 = 14$ .<sup>4</sup> The important thing to notice is that the turning-points after the initial call of Abraham are the reign of David (explicitly called 'King', 1:6) and the exile: the high and low points of the history of the monarchy and of the people of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Genealogies can be dull, but this one is full of surprising details.

### **From Abraham to David (1:1-6a)**

Beginning the genealogy with Abraham rather than David takes us back even beyond the founding of the nation. Matthew's concern is not merely with Israel, but with the world. His vision of the kingdom is as universal as was God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. This does not, of course, exclude the Jews, but it does prepare for the inclusion of the Gentiles. In Genesis 12 Abraham was promised not only that he would become a great nation and receive a blessing; he was also told, 'All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.' In Genesis 22:18 this was enlarged as he was told, 'Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.' Right from the beginning

the hope of the coming Messiah, the offspring of Abraham, was associated with the blessing of all nations, not just the descendants of 'Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers' (1:2). Later references to the kingdom being given to another people should come as no shock.

It is not, therefore, surprising, though it is remarkable, that in the first section of the genealogy we have not just certain women mentioned, but Gentile women! True, these are the exceptions, but that is enough to foreshadow the later extension of the kingdom. 'Tamar', mentioned in verse 3 as the mother of the twins, 'Perez and Zerah', was in fact the wife of Judah's son Er and, probably, a Canaanite girl. The twins were born as the result of her seduction of Judah in revenge for his wrong treatment of her (Genesis 38). 'Rahab', whose story is recounted in Joshua 2:1-21 and 6:25, became a believer, according to Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25, but was a Canaanite by birth all the same, an exception to the general slaughter of the inhabitants of Jericho. 'Ruth', of course, was a very different character, but nevertheless a Moabite, one of the nation which had been banned from the congregation of Israel for ten generations! (Deuteronomy 23:3). And these women, not Sarah or Rebekah or Leah, are the ones included in Messiah's genealogy!

Even without mentioning Bathsheba, the wife of a Hittite, from the next section, it is clear that Matthew is making a point. It was always God's intention to include the Gentiles. Even David could say:

All the nations you have made  
will come and worship before you, O Lord;  
they will bring glory to your name (Psalm 86:9).

Now, with the coming of the King in whose line they are to be found, the time has come for them to be called more generally. Throughout the Gospel we find the suggestions that, although Jesus himself is sent only to the Jews, the gospel will soon be sent to all nations. It is not only that Jewish outsiders, like Matthew himself, are to be welcomed, but also those who hitherto had been excluded, the unclean heathen. This should stimulate us even more to proclaim the gospel worldwide. How sad that some today use the concept of the kingdom to exclude the Gentiles from the blessings promised to Messiah's people and look for a return to the old days of exclusion in a future millennium! That is a direct contradiction of Matthew's teaching here and elsewhere.

### **From David to the exile to Babylon (1:6b-11)**

This section of the genealogy demonstrates the triumph of God's grace. The Messiah has come and God has kept his promises, not because of Israel's righteousness, but in spite of Israel's sin. It is not just a matter of amazement at the people God can use, but a more general principle that salvation at every stage is all of grace. This point had been made in devastating fashion centuries before: 'The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you ...' (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). The chosen people had no

right to be proud of themselves; their election was all of grace.

Of course, all the individuals, both men and women, mentioned in the list were sinners, even Abraham and Isaac and Boaz, however godly they became. Some, however, were outstanding or notorious sinners. In the first section 'Tamar' stands out for this reason and is specifically mentioned, not glossed over as one might have expected. (In fact, Judah was the more sinful one in that case, as we have seen already.) In this second period between King David and 'the exile to Babylon' we find some righteous kings, like 'Asa' and 'Jehoshaphat', but there are others who are clearly wicked. Even David's sin with Bathsheba, 'Uriah's wife', is referred to (1:6), and 'Ahaz', 'Manasseh' and 'Amon' are included in the list of Christ's ancestors. It is not just their individual wickedness that is significant. Their collective and cumulative sin led inevitably to the exile. Is this, perhaps, the meaning of the reference to 'Jeconiah and his brothers' (1:11), i.e. not his physical brothers, but his fellow-Israelites, the whole nation going into exile?

With that event all seemed to be lost. The line of David, although it did not die out altogether, ceased to occupy the throne of Israel. Indeed, for many years there was not even a throne to occupy! Thus we see that Christ came to deliver Israel from the consequences of their sin. Matthew is teaching by implication that Christ is the Saviour of sinners, just as he will say explicitly later in the chapter.

**From the exile to the Christ (1:12–17)**

Matthew now traces the royal line through the period when Israel had no king, but during which God was keeping his purpose in operation and hope alive in the hearts of believing Israelites. 'Jeconiah' appears to have been chosen to mark the new beginning, rather than Jehoiakim or Zedekiah, because it was he whom the Babylonian king, Evil-Merodach, treated well, thus giving an assurance that Israel would survive and return (2 Kings 25:27–30). The chastisement was over; God's promise had not been lost. The names from 'Abiud' to 'Jacob the father of Joseph' are not known from other sources. God's purpose continues its course, irrespective of human fame or influence, until the time comes for the Christ to be born. Salvation, it is made clear, is the result of God's secret, hidden purpose, not man's working. Did any of these men know that he was in the Messiah's line?

The last link in the chain is not a physical one: 'Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ' (1:16). Christ is not, of course, a modern-type surname, but a title, as verse 17 makes clear: 'from the exile to the Christ'. The Hebrew 'Messiah' and the Greek 'Christ' both mean 'anointed', and although in the Old Testament we have references to priests and prophets being anointed with oil, it is chiefly the king who is in mind when this term is used. David was the Lord's Anointed, pointing forward to the one who would come and who would be anointed, not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 61:1; Acts 10:38). In fact Jesus, as the Christ, fulfilled the offices of all three Old Testament mediators—prophet, priest and

king—but in Matthew’s Gospel it is mainly the kingship that is in view.

Just as the first table showed God’s universal purpose and the second his sovereign grace, so this third one demonstrates his power. In spite of Israel’s folly and sin, in spite of the strength of their enemies and the hopelessness of the exile, God has brought his purpose to pass. The fact that this happened by means of a miraculous birth only stresses what is already clear. This foreshadows the rest of the Gospel. All three themes constantly recur: for example, God’s power (‘With God all things are possible’, 19:26); his grace (‘Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’, 20:15); and his universal purpose (‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations’, 28:19).

This genealogy, then, far from being a mere list of names, is, implicitly at least, a challenge to examine our doctrine of salvation. Do we too believe in salvation by God’s power alone, by grace alone, but for all nations?

### **The birth of Jesus Christ (1:18–20)**

From the genealogy’s preparatory details, Matthew passes to a narrative of the event itself. Immediately he makes clear that this is a supernatural, virginal conception (the birth itself was normal). Mary was, indeed, ‘pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit’ (1:18). There is no possibility in the biblical record that Joseph was the father of Christ in the physical sense. It is only after Joseph



has discovered the fact of Mary's pregnancy that he is informed by an angel that what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Betrothal was a much more serious matter than a modern engagement is, so Joseph is described as considering divorce. It is clear from this that the strict application of the law concerning adultery has passed away. In fact, the Old Testament itself makes this clear, as the Lord speaks of divorcing Israel because of her sin, thus tacitly endorsing the commuting of the death penalty for adultery to divorce (Jeremiah 3:8; Isaiah 50:1). Thus Joseph can be described as 'a righteous man', as well as being shown to be compassionate in not wanting 'to expose her to public disgrace'. The assurance by 'an angel of the Lord' that Mary's pregnancy was 'from the Holy Spirit' gives Joseph the necessary confidence to proceed with the marriage, although verse 25 tells us that there was no sexual intercourse until after the birth of our Lord. He also tells him the name by which the baby is to be known.

### **Jesus (1:21)**

Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means 'Jehovah [or, better, Yahweh] saves' or 'is salvation'. The reason for this is also given: 'because he will save his people from their sins'. This probably refers back to Psalm 130:8: 'He himself [the LORD] will redeem Israel from all their sins.' It seems likely, therefore, that the name 'Jesus' is intended to show that Jesus is himself Yahweh who saves, not just the one through whom Yahweh saves.