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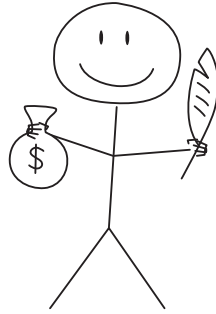
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## Part I

# The Kingdom of God Has Come!

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Matthew



Two

# The Gospel of Matthew

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Most Americans don't care much about genealogies. We move around too much and don't place enough emphasis on family ties. In fact, many of us would have a hard time clearly remembering the names of any ancestors before our own grandparents.

In many parts of the world, the attitude is different. I went on a pilgrimage to Israel some years ago. Our guide turned out to be an Arab Catholic. Not knowing anything about Arab Christians, I thought he must be a recent convert from Islam. "How long have you been Catholic?" I asked. "Oh," he said, "about *eight hundred years*." His family clan had become Catholic in the time of the Crusades (1200s) and had been living in the land of Israel near Nazareth since that time. Genealogies are often very important to families in the Middle East, where history and culture are deep.

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy. This may not be the way to grab the attention of Americans, but it *certainly* caught the attention of ancient Jews who were waiting for a king with the right genealogy. After two failed dynasties (the Maccabees and the Herodians) of kings with wrong family lines, Jews would have been very interested in someone who could prove his descent from the right man: King David.

We'll pick up with Matthew 1, the genealogy of Jesus, in just a minute. First, let's get an overview of this gospel.

## Bird's-Eye View of Matthew

Anytime you are going to tell a long story, you have to organize it somehow. St. Matthew likes to organize Jesus' teachings by topic. Five long sermons by Jesus, each on a separate topic, make up the backbone of his gospel:

1. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7)
2. The Mission Sermon (Mt 10)
3. The Parables of the Kingdom Sermon (Mt 13)
4. The Mercy Sermon (Mt 18)
5. The End Times Sermon (Mt 24-25)

Matthew "glues" these five long sermons together with narration about Jesus' travels, miracles, and other deeds. Finally, he puts the Christmas story at the beginning of his gospel and the Easter story (really the Triduum) at the end. That gives us a biography of Jesus that begins with Christmas, ends with Easter, and has five main blocks:

The Christmas story ("infancy narratives"): Mt 1-2

Book 1: Jesus announces the kingdom: Mt 3-7

Book 2: Jesus sends out the royal officers: Mt 8-10

Book 3: Jesus teaches on the hidden kingdom: Mt 11-13

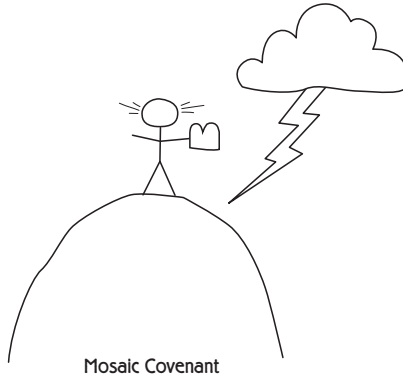
Book 4: Jesus teaches on the forgiving kingdom: Mt 14-18

Book 5: Jesus teaches on the end of the kingdom: Mt 19-25

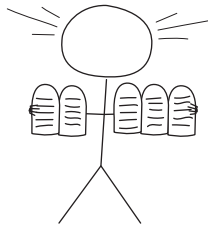
The Easter story (Triduum): Mt 26-28

Of course, a long time ago there was another famous teacher of Israel, a man who had a miraculous childhood, had a difficult career, and faced much opposition but finally led Israel

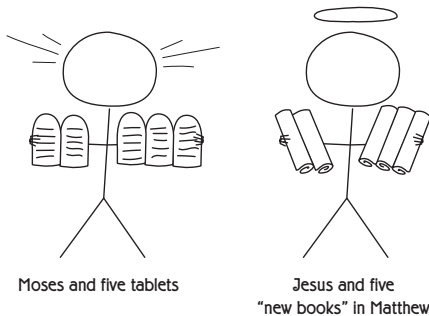
in a sacred meal of salvation, made a covenant between them and God, and taught them God’s laws. That was Moses:



According to tradition, Moses wrote five books, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.



Was Matthew trying to paint Jesus as a new Moses with five new books? It’s possible. He certainly does portray Jesus as a new Moses in many important places in the gospel. So, for the sake of memory and learning, it can be helpful to compare Moses with Matthew’s portrait of Jesus:



That's our overview of Matthew. Now let's start reading!

## Matthew's Christmas Story: The Genesis of Jesus

Matthew begins, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). Stifle that yawn! There is a lot going on here! In one sentence, Matthew has connected Jesus to three of the most important men in the Bible: Adam, David, and Abraham.

First, by beginning with "the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ," Matthew makes a connection to the only other place in the Bible where this phrase occurs: Genesis 5:1: "This is the book of the generations of Adam." Matthew is saying Jesus is a New Adam. We've opened a new chapter, a whole new book, in human history. Imagine that!

Second, by calling Jesus "*the* Son of David" Matthew identifies Jesus as the one who would restore the covenant and kingdom of David. There were many descendants of David running around in Israel in those days. Some scholars think certain towns (such as Nazareth) were almost entirely made up of folks with Davidic blood.<sup>1</sup> But Jesus is not just "*a* son of David," he is "*the* Son of David," about whom the prophet Nathan had prophesied, "When your days are fulfilled . . . I will raise up your *seed* after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Sm 7:12-14).

Third, by calling Jesus "*the* Son of Abraham," Matthew identifies Jesus as the one who would fulfill all the promises of the covenant to Abraham. Every Jew was "*a* son of Abraham." But Jesus was "*the* Son of Abraham," about whom God spoke to Abraham: "I will establish my covenant with you and with your *seed* after you" and "by your *seed* shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gn 17:7, 22:18). As we recall from the

Old Testament, God's covenant with Abraham included three major promises: great nationhood, great name (royalty), and universal blessing to the nations. Jesus would establish the great nation of Abraham (the Church), receive the great name (King of kings and Lord of lords), and spread blessing to all the nations (the outpouring of the Holy Spirit).

So in one sentence, Matthew connects Jesus with three of the greatest key figures in Bible history and suggests what Jesus' life and ministry will mean for the world. Not bad!

Proceeding through Jesus' genealogy, we run into a lot of names that are hard to pronounce. Pity the young deacon who has to proclaim this at the Christmas Vigil! At the end, we note that Matthew has arranged the genealogy into three sets of fourteen (Mt 1:17). Why? Fourteen is the number of David. Hebrew has no vowels, and the consonants double as numerals. David's name spelled in Hebrew is DVD. *D* is the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and *V* is the sixth. Add the values up, and it comes to fourteen. Jesus' genealogy is fourteen three times: a "triple David" or "David cubed." Matthew arranges it this way to make it easy to memorize and drive home the Davidic connection.

Now let's look at the genealogy again. Matthew starts with Abraham because Abraham was "father of the Jews," and Matthew writes his gospel for Jews in particular. He traces Jesus' line through David and Solomon, of course, because it is important to show Jesus is the crown prince, the heir to the throne of Israel. But then,

Four of these names are not like the others,  
 Four of these names just don't belong,  
 Can you tell which ones are not like the others  
 By the time I finish my song?

Can you spot them? Of course! Four *women* are mentioned in this genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—and



*such* women! If women were included at all in ancient genealogies, it was for some special reason: perhaps they were queens or national heroines. But Matthew's women are not the "usual suspects," not the great holy matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah.

Instead, they are . . . well, let's just retell their stories.

Do you remember Tamar? She was Judah's daughter-in-law, probably a Canaanite. She was married to two of Judah's sons, both of whom were rascals that God struck down. But when she was widowed, through no fault of her own, Judah refused to provide for her. What did Tamar do? She put on a cocktail dress and some spike heels (or the ancient equivalent) and hung out along the side of the road to catch Judah's eye (see Gn 38). She ended up having two boys by her father-in-law: Perez and Zerah. The vast majority of the tribe of Judah, that is, the Jews, descended from these two boys, both the product of this very, um . . . *unusual* relationship!

How about Rahab? She was the Canaanite "proprietor" of her own "establishment" in the red-light district of Jericho. The Israelite spies ran into her place of business to hide when they were scouting out the city (Jo 2). She survived the capture of the city and ended up doing well for herself, marrying Salmon, a nobleman from the tribe of Judah.

And Ruth? She was not Jewish either; she was a woman of the country of Moab, widowed after marrying a man of Judah. She was a woman of faith and loyalty, who accompanied her old mother-in-law back to Judah to care for her. However, there was that one sketchy scene in Ruth 3 where she hatched a plot to "reel in" her boyfriend, Boaz, after a party at night, using a lot of perfume and "attractive" clothing. That scene is the sole reason the Book of Ruth has a PG-13 rating. But nothing happens, and it all turns out good. Boaz marries Ruth, and they live happily ever after.

If only Bathsheba's story were so happy! Hers is one of the most painful in the Bible. Matthew doesn't even mention Bathsheba's name; he just says, "David was the father of Solomon by *the wife of Uri'ah*" (Mt 1:6, emphasis added). Ouch! Matthew, did you have to bring that up? David and Solomon were the two greatest kings of Israel, but the link between them involves a sordid tale of adultery and murder. Uriah was a Gentile, a Hittite (from modern-day Turkey) and a devout convert to the faith of Israel. His wife Bathsheba (we don't know her nationality) was one of the prettiest women in David's kingdom, and Uriah himself was one of David's "top brass," a high-ranking war hero. David took a fancy to Bathsheba one day when Uriah was out of town, and when Bathsheba found out she was pregnant by David, the king decided to cover his tracks by having Uriah killed in battle. Then, he married Uriah's widow himself. The whole episode was the moral low point of David's entire career (2 Sm 11), a personal disaster that spun his family out of control and led to further abuse, murder, betrayal, and war.

So Matthew, why bring that up? In fact, why mention *any* of these four women, all of whom were *Gentiles* (or at least married to one) and had, shall we say, *checkered* personal histories? For many good reasons!

1. Jesus would later be despised as one who hung out with "tax collectors and prostitutes," that is, men associated with Gentiles and women of ill repute. Matthew points out that the great Jewish kings David and Solomon descended from such people.
2. Jesus and his apostles would be criticized for inviting sinners, marginal women, and Gentiles into the New Covenant. Matthew shows that God had already brought such people into the Old Covenant.

3. Slander was spread about the Blessed Mother. Some Judeans claimed she was not a virgin before the birth of Jesus. Matthew contrasts the purity of Jesus' birth with some of the impure unions in the ancestry of David and Solomon. Matthew is saying, *If you Judeans want to accuse people of impurity, let's talk about the ancestors of Solomon, your greatest king!*

God is merciful. He works his salvation despite our sins and failings. Even in the Old Covenant, God brought fallen, imperfect people into the center of his covenant family. He still does this, even more so in the New Covenant, where people of any ethnic background, regardless of their sins, mistakes, or baggage, are welcome to come to God.

### The Birth and Childhood of Jesus (*Matthew 1:18–2:23*)

In contrast to the questionable relationships that formed the bloodline of Israel's great kings, Jesus is born to a father and mother in a completely pure relationship. He is conceived in the womb of his mother Mary, a virgin engaged to a righteous man, Joseph, heir to the throne of David. God explains to Joseph in a dream that the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit, a fulfillment of a famous prophecy: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (Is 7:14). It is often said that Matthew misquotes Isaiah 7:14 here, since the original Hebrew of Isaiah does not use the word for "virgin" (Hebrew, *betheulah*) but for "maiden" (Hebrew, *almah*). The truth is that there is such overlap between the meaning of these Hebrew words that Jewish translators themselves, hundreds of years before Matthew wrote, chose the Greek word "virgin" (*parthenos*) to render Isaiah 7:14. Matthew, writing in Greek, cites this verse in the well-known Jewish-Greek translation (the Septuagint) familiar to most of his readers.

The prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 was uttered seven hundred years before Matthew wrote, and it probably predicted the birth of good King Hezekiah of Judah in exaggerated, poetic language. But prophecies often have more than one fulfillment. Matthew knows that Jesus is more truly “born of a virgin” than Hezekiah was and that Hezekiah was merely a sign of God “being with” Israel but that Jesus *truly* is “God with us,” *Emmanu-el* in Hebrew. Jesus fulfills the prophecy better than Hezekiah himself did. That’s why Matthew quotes it.

As we move on into the infancy and childhood of Jesus, Matthew continually shows us two things: Jesus is Israel’s King and Jesus is the “True Israel,” or Israel-in-one-person.

While he is still a child in Bethlehem, “wise men” come from the East searching for him, and when they find him they worship him with “gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” The last time wise men from the East came to Israel looking for a king was in the reign of Solomon. If you doubt me, go back and read 1 Kings 4:29–34, where Solomon’s wisdom “surpassed . . . all the people of the East,” and men came from every land to hear his wisdom. Solomon attracted all these international wise men when he was at the height of his career, but Jesus is already attracting them as a toddler! The gifts also remind us of Solomon. No one had more gold than Solomon (1 Kgs 10:14–22), and “frankincense and myrrh” together are only mentioned elsewhere in the Bible in the Song of Solomon, where they are romantic perfumes worn by Solomon and his bride. The visit of the magi marks Jesus as a bridegroom-king, like Solomon, from his very childhood.

King Herod hears from the wise men about the birth of this new king. He sends soldiers to kill any male children in the region born near when the wise men first saw the prophetic star that announced his birth. King Herod, as we mentioned earlier, was not of the line of David and wasn’t even fully Jewish. He was an impostor. He and everyone

else knew it. Herod also knew that most Jews would have been very happy if he, Herod, suddenly died under mysterious circumstances and got replaced by a Jew with David's blood.

So, Herod was terribly paranoid and was in the habit of killing people who might pose a threat to his throne, including his wives and sons. The "slaughter of the holy innocents," which probably amounted to the killing of a dozen to twenty baby boys in the vicinity of Bethlehem, was such a small event in comparison to Herod's other massacres and murders that other contemporary historians didn't even bother to record it.

St. Joseph, much like his namesake Joseph, "Prince of Egypt," is gifted with supernatural dreams. The dreams drive him to flee with the Holy Family to Egypt, whose capital city Alexandria was the "New York" of its day, a center of Jewish culture, with the largest Jewish population outside the land of Israel. For Jews fleeing political trouble in Israel, Alexandria was the logical place to flee. Not only was it close but also one could easily melt in and "get lost" in one of the city's two huge Jewish quarters. But years later, when Joseph hears that Herod is dead, he takes the family back to Nazareth.

Nazareth was a little village in the north (Galilee), probably settled by Davidic kinsmen, who may have named their town "Little Branch" (*Nezereth*) after the famous prophecy that a "branch" (Hebrew, *nezer*) would come forth from David's line (Is 11:1). Matthew refers to this prophecy, "He shall be called a *Nazarene*" (Mt 2:23), that is, he shall be the branch the prophets announced.

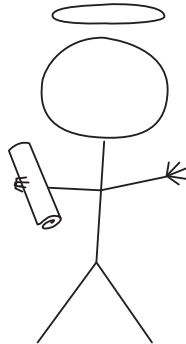
Matthew gives us no more information about Jesus' childhood. The next we know, Jesus is an adult, beginning his public ministry in response to the preaching of John the Baptist. What was Jesus doing for about thirty years in Nazareth?

Christians call these the “silent years” of Jesus life, during which he probably worked at home, learning his father’s craftsmanship and taking care of his mother after the death of Joseph, who passed away when Jesus was a young man.

Although we know so little of these years, they are very important to us. Don’t most of us work for years on end, out of the public eye, with our days made up of simple things such as getting up to go to work, buying groceries, cleaning the house, and taking care of other family members? The silent years of Jesus remind us that he too—God himself!—worked for many years unnoticed by the world, taking part in “the daily grind.” As we go about the toil of our quiet lives, we know Jesus understands and is close to us.

## Book 1 of Matthew: Jesus Announces the Kingdom

*(Matthew 3–7)*



John the Baptist bursts onto the stage of history with his shout, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” John was the original “hellfire and brimstone” preacher. He made quite the scary figure in his hair garment, with a leather belt, honey dripping from his beard, and bee stings on his arms! John looked like a survivor of God’s coming judgment day. People may have been baptized just to avoid ending up looking like him!



John the Baptist

The heart of John's message was, "I baptize with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I." This one to come sounded very intimidating—who would this be, who would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire"?

Jesus, too, came to John to be baptized. Why should Jesus be baptized? He has no sin. Even John protests: "I should be baptized by you!" But Jesus says, "It is fitting to fulfill all righteousness." What does that mean? In part, it means that Jesus' baptism fulfills many themes and prophecies in scripture.

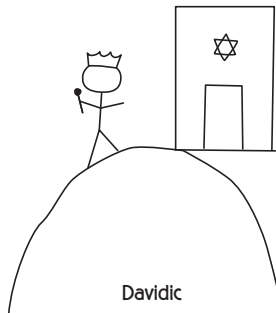
As Jesus comes up from the water, the Holy Spirit hovers as a dove and the voice of God the Father speaks. We recognize images of the creation story: God spoke the word, and the Spirit came down to hover over the waves (Gen 1:1–2). The creation comes up from the water. So the baptism is like a new creation event, and, in fact, Jesus is the new creation. This reminds us of how Matthew began: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus," comparing Jesus to Adam.



The voice of God the Father speaks at the baptism: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased!” Here, the voice of God echoes a line from the ancient coronation hymn of the Davidic kingdom, the song sang when each new king mounted the throne. We know this hymn as Psalm 2, and the key line goes:

I will tell the decree of the Lord:  
 he said to me:  
 “You are my Son!  
 Today I have begotten you!” (v. 7)

It’s as if Jesus, the Son of David, is beginning his reign and his heavenly father sings a bit of the hymn for the occasion!



But there’s more. The Father says, “my *beloved* son,” which harks back to a famous incident, the near sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, that famous chapter where Isaac is called (in the