

Who Do You Think You Are? - Jesus

Matthew 1:1-17

Introduction - Who do you think you are?

There's a TV show I like to watch on SBS called *Who Do You Think You Are?* You might have come across it.

It's been hugely popular, and this year ran its seventh season. Each episode turns the spotlight on a well-known Australian, and traces their family tree.

So far, the program has mapped the ancestry of people like celebrity chef Maggie Beer, musician John Butler, actor Geoffrey Rush and football star Adam Goodes.

There are many surprising discoveries. I remember watching the episode with John Butler, and he discovered that one of his ancestors had played key role in an event known as the *April Uprising*, a revolution by ethnic Bulgarians against the ruling Ottoman Empire in the 1870's, which resulted in the re-establishment of the country of Bulgaria in Eastern Europe that we know today. This discovery affected him profoundly, and he named an album after the event.

I'm a history nut, so this kind of stuff fascinates me. I've started doing a bit of work on my own family tree, as a result. Perhaps you've done the same.

However, I like what the author Mark Twain had to say about family trees.

"Why waste your money looking up your family tree? Just go into politics and your opponents will do it for you."

Who Do You Think You Are? has shown us, that you can learn a lot about someone by looking at their family tree. And in fact, you can learn a lot about the Jesus behind the Christmas story by looking at his family tree.

Fortunately, Jesus' family tree is recorded for us in the Bible, in the first chapter of the book of Matthew, that was read for us a moment ago.

Let's imagine that Jesus himself is the subject of a new episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, and let's see what we can discover about who he is.

Introduction to Matthew

If you have a Bible with you, please turn over to the first page of the New Testament, Matthew chapter 1. If you don't have your own Bible, you're welcome to head to the back and grab one.

As you find your place, remember that each of the four New Testament biographies of the life of Jesus, that we call gospels, were written by different people, to different people, and each with a different end goal.

Luke is writing a detailed record of Jesus' life and teaching for someone important who had become a Christian. Mark is writing a fast-paced record to challenge his readers to ask the question, "Who is Jesus?"

Matthew was one of Jesus' disciples, a former tax collector. He knew Jesus personally. He is writing about the life and teachings of Jesus, but to Jewish readers, people who were familiar with the Old Testament. This is why he says, over and over, *"This took place to fulfil the Scriptures."*

The Book of the Genealogy

So, Matthew 1:1, Matthew's introductory summary of the entire book.

"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

(Matthew 1:1 ESV)

Matthew is giving us a heads-up that these are the main characters in what's to follow. Certainly for the Jewish reader, Abraham, the father of the nation, and David, the greatest king of the nation, would have been major figures in their national heritage. Quite a thing to have these guys in your family tree.

Both of these men also received promises directly from God that would shape the course of God's relationship not just with Israel, but with all humanity. We'll get to those promises a little later.

It's easy for us to gloss over the first words of Matthew's introduction, *"The book of the genealogy..."*. We might read that and think nothing of it, or at the very least it's a warning that something very boring is about to follow.

It's not very clear in our English Bibles, but that phrase "the book of the genealogy" is actually used in a very specific way, back in the book of Genesis. It's sometimes translated as, *"These are the generations of"*.

If we go back to **Genesis 2:4**, we read

"These are the generations of the heavens and the earth ..."

(Genesis 2:4 ESV)

And later in **Genesis 5:1**,

"This is the book of the generations of Adam."

(Genesis 5:1 ESV)

And further on in **Genesis 6:9**,

"These are the generations of Noah..."

(Genesis 6:9 ESV)

There are more examples through the book of Genesis. That phrase, though, is a marker for the reader that a historical turning point begins 'here'. Creation. The beginning of the human race in Adam. The new beginning through Noah after the flood.

So, by choosing those specific words, that specific phrase to begin his gospel, what is Matthew saying about Jesus?

He's saying that the arrival of Jesus Christ begins a turning point the history of the universe.

Jesus is going to establish a new creation. Jesus himself is going to be a new common 'ancestor' for the people of God.

This is what Paul is getting at in Romans 5:14:

"Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come."

(Romans 5:14 ESV)

Matthew is also saying that like Noah, he will carry God's promise and God's people through judgement to establish a new people for God on the other side. It's a reference to the cross.

That tiny phrase in v1, that short sentence is so pregnant with meaning. We might easily gloss over it. But it would have hit Matthew's Jewish readers like a bolt from the blue, because they were far more familiar with the Old Testament than we are.

Matthew opens his book in a the most audacious way possible, by saying that the whole Old Testament was heading towards Jesus, and that in Jesus, God is starting something new, a new creation and the establishment of a new people, even though the Old Testament had been foreshadowing it for centuries.

Let's try and get a little further than just verse 1!

The whole family tree of Jesus recorded here is broken up into three neat sections. Right at the end, in v17, mirroring v1, we read:

"So all the 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."

(Matthew 1:17 ESV)

Abraham to David (v2-6)

Let's look at the first section, from Abraham to David, in v2-6.

One of the things Matthew is trying to show us here is not just who's who in Jesus' family tree, but also how God has been faithful to his promises all the way through to Jesus, and how God's *fulfilled promises* make up Jesus' family tree.

Without these promises, Abraham and David and all the rest are just ordinary people.

But if we start with Abraham, we start really with one of God's most important promises in the whole Bible. Remember, Abraham was not an 'Israelite' when God called him. He was living in what would later be part of Babylon, and today is southern Iraq.

We pick up the story in Genesis 12:

“Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

(Genesis 12:1 ESV)

The land that God showed him was the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, which the Israelites would travel to after their liberation from slavery in Egypt, and where the Kingdom of Israel would be established.

But then God gives him a further promise. He says to Abraham:

“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

(Genesis 12:2–3 ESV)

Let’s unpack this.

God promises to Abraham, who at this stage has no kids, that he would be the **father of a great nation**. That nation would be **blessed by God**, and would have a **special relationship with God**. They would be God’s people. God would love them, so that an insult against them would be an insult against himself. They would be **established in a place that God would give them**.

And God would **bleed the world through his people**.

It’s important to notice that this promise takes the form of a **covenant**. It’s no ordinary promise. Australian Bible teacher Graham Goldsworthy puts it like this:

“This is no human covenant involving mutual consent of equals, but a lordly covenant dispensed by the gracious act of a God greatly offended and sinned against. The covenant is an agreement in the sense that the recipient must agree to any terms that may be proposed. But before all else we must see this covenant as one of grace - undeserved favour.”¹

- Graham Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*

¹ p.52-53, *Gospel and Kingdom*, by Graham Goldsworthy, © 1981
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And what terms are proposed? Simply that Abraham must exercise faith, and follow God to this mystery land. This becomes the pattern for all God's most important promises throughout the Old Testament.

By including Abraham in Jesus' family tree, Matthew is saying that Jesus is the rightful heir of these covenant promises. Yes, Israel might have become a great nation. Yes, they may have had a special relationship with God. Yes, they may have been a blessing to the surrounding nations.

But this was nothing compared to how Jesus would fulfil these promises. He would make a way, through his death on the cross, for people to come into relationship with God, where they would be blessed, and where they would have the promise of being with him in a heaven forever.

Paul says in the book of Galatians, ch3:

“And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”

(Galatians 3:29 ESV)

So then Jesus fulfils both roles as a physical heir and a spiritual heir of Abraham, and God's promises made way back in Genesis 12 are made fully true in Jesus, not just for Jews, but for all humanity - you and I sitting here this morning.

David to Exile (Matthew 1:6-11)

The next major stopping point on this journey is David, the greatest king of Israel.

Like all Israelites, David himself was a direct descendant of Abraham. He was also a descendant of Jacob's son Judah, as we learn in v2-3.

Back in Genesis 49, Jacob blessed each of his twelve sons before he died. He gets to his third oldest, Judah, and says this:

“Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. [...] The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.”

(Genesis 49:8–10 ESV)

Interesting.

Though Israel's first king, Saul, was from the tribe of Benjamin (and we know what a disaster that was), it was the line of Judah, beginning with David, that was to become the rightful royal family of Israel, in keeping with this promise.

God made another amazing covenant promise to King David in 2 Samuel 7:

“Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come 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 forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.”

(2 Samuel 7:11–14 ESV)

A promise that **God would establish the kingdom** of David's offspring. A promise that his kingdom will be **established forever**. And a promise that this king would be a **son to God, and God a father to him**.

This promise corresponds to the covenant promise to Abraham back in Genesis 12. In fact, this promise expands on that one, showing *how* God will bring about his promise to Abraham.

And by drawing a line from David to Jesus, by calling Jesus *the* Son of David in v1, Matthew is making a statement that Jesus is the one whose throne God will establish forever. He is the one who will have not only David, but God himself as Father.

Yes, this carpenter-turned-teacher from a small northern Judean backwater was a direct descendant of the great King David. He was even born in the 'town of David', in Bethlehem. Matthew highlights in ch2 how this fulfils another Old Testament promise.

But it took a couple of blind beggar son the road outside Jericho to *see* who Jesus truly was, not a king in the conventional sense, but the heir of God's covenant promises to David. We read of them crying out as Jesus walks by:

Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”

(Matthew 20:30 ESV)

And so, it didn't matter that Jesus' family wasn't actually ruling over Israel at the time, because God's promises encompass a much bigger kingdom, with a much more enduring king. Jesus' eternal reign, as the rightful Son of David would make the empires of earth pale in comparison.

Why wasn't David's family ruling Israel?

Well, for that we need to look at the third section.

Exile to Jesus (Matthew 1:12-16)

After David, his son Solomon took the throne. After Solomon, came his son Rehoboam. But during Rehoboam's reign, a civil war erupted in Israel which split the kingdom in two.

The tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to David's family line, on the throne in Jerusalem, but the remaining ten tribes transferred their loyalty to a new upstart called Jeroboam.

The southern kingdom under David's family became known as the Kingdom of Judah, and the northern kingdom, under a succession of rival families, became known, rather pretentiously, as the kingdom of Israel.

The northern kingdom fell into wickedness and idol worship, despite warnings from prophets like Elijah and Hosea, and they were judged by God around \pm 722BC, when the Assyrian Empire swept through and annihilated them.

The southern Kingdom of Judah continued until \pm 597BC, when they were taken into exile, (or deportation) in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar, as a judgement from God for their faithlessness. This was the time of Ezekiel and Daniel.

But where Israel were abandoned to their own foolishness, God didn't give up on Judah. God stayed true to his promises.

We are told at the end of 2 Kings that after 37 years of exile, Nebuchadnezzar's son released King Jehoniah (Jesus' ancestor in v12) from prison, and favoured him. His life, and God's promises through David's family line, were preserved by God.

After 70 years, the exiles were allowed to return. But things were never quite the same. Even though they rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and repaired the city, they were still just a province of the Persian empire.

They had no real autonomy, and Zerubbabel, who we read about in v12-13, even though he was the rightful heir to the throne, was no more than a kind of low-level tribal governor.

The same was true of his sons.

But God had bigger plans for Israel than merely a physical and political restoration of the kingdom of Judah.

Daniel was one of the prophets in Babylon during the Exile, and he received this vision in Daniel 7:13:

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days [i.e., to God] and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

(Daniel 7:13–14 ESV)

There’s a clear connection with God’s promises to David here, but it’s also clearly much, much bigger in scope. This isn’t just a king for Israel - it’s a king for the world.

Matthew’s gospel connects Jesus with this promise by highlighting where Jesus calls himself “The Son of Man”. And Jesus himself says, as begins his ministry in 4:17:

“Repent, for the kingdom [not of Israel, but] of heaven [i.e. God’s Kingdom] is at hand.”

(Matthew 4:17 ESV)

So, to revisit v1, Jesus is...

- ...the **son of Abraham**, and heir to the promises of Genesis 12:1-3
- ...the **son of David**, and heir to the promises of 2 Samuel 7:11-14
- ...the **true restoration of Israel**, fulfilling promises like Daniel 7:13-14

How does he do this? Well, he does this through his death and resurrection. In his death and resurrection, he pays the penalty for sin, he establishes his eternal kingdom, and he makes it possible for those whom God calls to be made part of God’s family, God’s people, and to live forever with him in heaven.

This is what makes Jesus the Christ, as Matthew is showing us - God's promised, Forever King.

Perhaps this is put most bluntly by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:20:

"For all the promises of God find their Yes in him."

(2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV)

There's one final point I want to make about Jesus' family tree before we wrap things up for this morning.

Saints, Sinners and Strangers (Matthew 1:2-16)

One thing about looking through your own, or anyone's family tree, is looking at the people who have shaped and influenced our identity.

Like it or not, we are all a product of our ancestors, genetically, culturally, geographically, perhaps even economically.

Sometimes we can be quite proud of our ancestry, especially if we are descended from someone famous. But we can also be quite embarrassed if we are descended from some dodgy characters, or if we find a scandal in our family tree.

As you look at Jesus' family tree, there are many there who you might expect to find in the ancestry of God's King. There are the 'Fathers of Israel': Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, King David, King Solomon. Good kings like Hezekiah and Josiah. Faithful leaders like Zerubbabel, after the Exile.

But there are also some... colourful... characters. In fact, Abraham (v2) was no stranger to lying his way out of trouble, or to trying to engineer the fulfilment of God's promises his own way.

Through an elaborate deception, Jacob (v2) cheated his brother out of his blind dad's inheritance and blessing.

Rahab (v5) was a prostitute.

David (v6) lied, committed adultery, and committed murder because he couldn't keep his eyes off someone else's wife. That's Bathsheba, called quite baldly in v6, "the wife of Uriah". Not trying to hide the family secrets there!

Solomon (v6-7) also had ‘women troubles’, and compromised on his responsibility as God’s king because of the varying religious traditions of his 700 wives.

His son, Rehoboam (v7), was a disaster as a king. It’s amazing that even two tribes stuck it out with him. He led the whole nation into idol worship. His son Abijah did the same.

In fact, there were only four kings of Judah who we could really say were good kings. Out of a grand total of twenty rulers over Judah prior to the Exile, another four weren’t good, but were kind of mediocre.

But the remaining twelve were utter ratbags. Perhaps the worst of all was Manasseh (v10), of whom we read in 2 Kings 21:

“For he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah [an idol], as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. And he built altars in the house of the LORD [the temple!], of which the LORD had said, “In Jerusalem will I put my name.”

And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD”

(2 Kings 21:3–6 ESV)

And these guys were Jesus’ ancestors?

Not even all of Jesus’ ancestors were Israelites!

Abraham was from what would later be Babylon. Tamar (v3) was from Canaan, as was Rahab (v5). Ruth (v5) was from Moab.

And Matthew is ok telling us that these are Jesus’ ancestors? If it were me, I would actually want to hide this family tree. In many ways, it’s downright embarrassing.

But what about Jesus? Well, this is where Jesus is different. Where we are shaped by our ancestors, Jesus kind of goes the other way.

His ancestors were colourful, weak, sinful, faithless characters to make the point that none of them were ever going to be the ones to fulfil God's promises. Only Jesus could do that, because he was perfect, sinless, completely faithful.

And because he was perfect, he could be a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. So rather than Jesus being shaped by David's adultery, or by Manasseh's wickedness, Jesus died to save sinners just like them.

If people like that could be in Jesus family, what's to say that you or I couldn't either?

And Jesus' family line runs with strange blood. That's because, even though God's promises would be worked out through one particular nation, Israel, the end goal was a nation of nations and peoples and tribes and languages, gathered around the throne of Jesus forever.

Paul writes to the Galatians, and says:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

(Galatians 3:26–29 ESV)

Conclusion - Jesus Is The Most Significant Person Who Ever Lived

We've done quite a survey through these few verses. Amazing how something we might sometimes skip over as boring, or just full of names that are hard to say, can be so full of meaning. God never wastes his words.

I hope you can see, though, that Matthew's purpose in showing us Jesus' family tree, warts-'n'-all, is to show us just who Jesus is, and how significant he is. He is the most significant person who ever lived. He is the centre around which the entire history of the universe revolves.

So when we come to Christmas time, celebrating the arrival of Jesus in the world, remember that we're celebrating the arrival of the one in whom all of God's promises find their 'Yes'.

It's a great time of year to reassess Jesus for ourselves.

Have we perhaps become too familiar with him? Have we forgotten who he really is? What do we really believe about Jesus, and how does that affect the way we relate to God? How does that affect the way we live? Do we take his words seriously?

Perhaps you're here this morning and you've never really realised who Jesus is, that he is no-one's equal, not even the equal of other great religious figures in history.

If Jesus is the most significant person who has ever lived, then he is significant for you, and you need to make a decision about him. You can't ignore someone that important.

If you want to know more about what to do with Jesus, or if you want to ask more questions, talk to the person who brought you to church today. You're also welcome to chat to me after the service, or get in touch during the week.

But don't let this Christmas go by without taking a serious look at who Jesus actually is. Let's turn the title of that TV show around, and bearing in mind all that we've talked about today, who do you think Jesus is?

As I close, I want to leave you with some thought-provoking words from a Dutch Bible teacher from the last century:

*"Jesus was not the first Christian; he was, and is, the Christ."*²

Why don't we pray?

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² Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)