

History of Israel and Names of Jesus
Matthew 1

Turn to Matthew 1 please. Matthew's Gospel begins with genealogy of Mary's Joseph, giving his ancestry beginning with Abraham. But this genealogy is more than just a family line. Matthew's genealogy has a particular view of Israel's history.

Jesus was not just born at the end of a long genealogy. Jesus was born at a particular stage of Israel's history. Matthew tells us, already in chapter 1, that to properly understand the birth of Jesus, we need to understand where in Israel's history he was born.

So we'll talk about Israel's history, and then we'll talk about the names of Jesus. And we will find an encouraging story in the history and the names.

In the Old Testament, if you read it right through, the story of God's people is not a happy story. I had to read it through a few times before I realized that the Old Testament is a long hard story.

The closest Israel ever got to being what God wanted for his people was when David was king. If you read right through the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, the story of David in 2 Samuel is just past one quarter of the way through the OT. The best Israel got, and it was pretty good, was under David, just over one fourth of the way through the OT. After that it slides, and never recovers. Matthew summarizes this story in four markers, four key events.

Mt 1:1- This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

In the first line of Matthew, he gives us the three important people in this genealogy: Abraham, David, and Jesus the Messiah. Now let's look at the last line of the genealogy, where Matthew expands this to four:

Mt 1:17 - Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to Babylon to the Messiah.

This is deliberate on Matthew's part. He's not just telling us the genealogy of Mary's Joseph. He's giving us the four important markers in Israel's history: Abraham, David, the exile to Babylon, and Christ. So we'll take a look at each one of these, so we can understand how Jesus fits into this. And remember that Matthew is the one Gospel that was written for early Jewish churches. This history was very important to Matthew's churches, it was their history.

1 Abraham and the Time of Promise

The story of Israel begins with Abraham in Genesis 12. God called Abraham and told him to go to Canaan, and God made promises to Abraham. Here are three things that God promised Abraham in Genesis 12.

One, I will make you into a great nation.

Two, I will give your offspring the land of Canaan.

Three, through you I will bless all peoples on earth.

The fourteen generations from Abraham to David were a time of promise. God's people went forward in fits and starts, sometimes good and sometimes awful, good in Joshua for example and awful in the time of the Judges.

God did get Abraham's offspring onto the land, that's true, but they were not faithful to God and they were not a great nation.

2 David and the Time of Failure

In 2 Samuel, God chose David to be king of Israel, and David's lifetime was the best Israel ever got. They were on the land of Canaan, they had the king God gave them, their nation was blessed, no other nation gave them a hard time, they conquered all their enemies, and they worshipped the one true God. And David made plans to build the temple in Jerusalem, a place for God's Name to dwell. God promised that David's descendants would rule his people forever.

David was not perfect, and David's Israel was not perfect, but it was pretty good, and it was the best that they ever saw. Matthew has fourteen generations from David to the exile, and those are fourteen generations of failure. David's own son Solomon began well, but Solomon drifted a long way from God in his lifetime. Failure began with David's own son.

And when David's grandson became king, ten of the twelve tribes rebelled against David's grandson, and started their own nation with their own king and their own temples and priests, and they worshipped two golden calves at their two temples. Failure. There were a few good kings, like Hezekiah and Josiah, but overall it was one long slide.

3 The Exile to Babylon and the Time of Waiting

The only detail in Matthew's genealogy that's not a person is the exile to Babylon. "*Josiah was the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon ...*"

To the Jews living in Matthew's day, the exile to Babylon was the worst thing ever. God put his people into the hands of cruel enemies, and left them there. These enemies did terrible things to men and women and children, and humiliated the Jews immensely.

Through Babylon, God took away what he promised Abraham. They were no longer a great nation, and they no longer lived in the promised land. God let these pagans destroy his temple, the pagans humiliated the chosen David king, and the Israelites and their kings became slaves in a foreign country because they would not be faithful to God.

For the Jews it was the worst memory they had, and Matthew names "the exile to Babylon" four times in this genealogy. Before the exile to Babylon, after the exile to Babylon, which we read in the middle of the genealogy and again at the end.

Ezra and Nehemiah were written after the Babylonian exiles moved back to their own land. The exiles returned in the time of Ezra. Why does Matthew not mention that the exiles returned?

Matthew does not mention the return of the exiles because in the big picture, it changed little. There was still no Israelite king, they were still under foreign rulers who taxed them severely. After the Babylonians came the Medes and the Persians, and then came the Greeks, and then came the Romans, who ruled Judea when Christ was born.

Listen to this sad prayer at the end of Nehemiah 9, which he prayed about one hundred years after the exiles returned to their promised land. "We're on the land you gave us," Nehemiah tells God, "but our lives are no better than when we were slave in Egypt."

But see, Lord God, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress. (We might as well be back in Egypt.)

Because of our sins: all this happens to us, says Nehemiah, because of our sins. Ezra 9 has a similar prayer. They are back in Israel, but because of their sins, they are slaves and in bondage to foreign kings. This continued right to the time of Jesus, Jews living under Roman rulers.

Earlier in Israel's history, when Israel was unfaithful to God, God let their enemies defeat them, and then when Israel turned back to God, God helped them defeat their enemies. But after the exile, no matter what they did, God would not rescue them. No matter how much they tried to obey, they were slaves to foreign kings. God would not act.

So the Jews had a real sense of national guilt. God had not forgiven them, they were still in their sins, they were still sinning, because otherwise God would help them defeat their enemies. Their sins had cut them off from God's help. That's why Matthew ignores the return of the exiles.

From the exile to Babylon to the birth of Christ they were waiting, hoping, longing, suffering. The first two beatitudes say, “blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn.” That’s exactly where the Jews were at that time, because the exile never ended.

First we had Abraham and the years of promise. Then we had David and the years of failure after him. Third was the exile to Babylon, and the years and years of waiting. And then we have the Christ

Christ: Call him Jesus

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Matt 1:20-21

Can you imagine what wonderful news this would have been to a devout Jew living in those days? After David they had 14 generations of failure, and after that they’ve had 14 generations of exile. They have sinned so much, and have suffered for their sins, and cannot get out from under them. Name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

“Jesus” is Greek for “Joshua.” The angel told Joseph, “Call the baby ‘Joshua,’” which means “save” or “salvation.” At the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup and said, “this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” He will save his people from their sins.

“His people” at first meant Israel. As we go through Matthew, we realize that Gentiles also can be included in the people of Jesus. He wants all the nations baptized and taught. But Matthew is the one Gospel written for Jewish churches, and this was such good news for them.

This is the most important line on salvation from sins in the NT. We are saved by a person, my brothers and sisters. Jesus saves people. Which people? His people. Want to be saved from your sins? Be one of his people. That’s the plan of salvation, and it cuts through a lot of clutter. Jesus saves his people from their sins. Hang on to that line, it’s important.

[Detour on Joseph and the genealogy. The genealogy shows the direct line from Abraham to David to Joseph. Joseph is genuinely in David’s royal line. But at the crucial moment, the genealogy falls apart, because Joseph does not produce this baby, God produces the baby in Mary through the Holy Spirit. David’s line cannot produce what Israel needs, so God intervenes.

The only way Jesus can claim to be the Christ in David’s line is if Joseph will take Mary as his wife and adopt Jesus as his own child. Joseph adopted Jesus into David’s line. The angel said, “Joseph, you name him.” Parents name the child. Jesus was the Son of God without Joseph, but not the Christ. Joseph took Mary and he named Jesus, therefore Jesus is the Christ. Detour done.]

Christ: They will Call him Immanuel

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). Matt 1:22-23

Typically, when we preach from this, we talk about the deity of Christ. That baby was God with us, God in the flesh. That is entirely true. But there is something more basic here. Jews have been through 14 generations of failure, and then 14 generations of exile. Was God still with them? That was not obvious. Everything about their lives said to them, “God is not with us, not really.”

In Isaiah 7, the virgin’s child was a sign to evil king Ahaz that God was still with him. For Ahaz, this was more like a warning, “you think God is not with you, Ahaz, but he is, so be careful what you do.” Ahaz was not careful, and David’s line of kings were never independent after that.

In Matthew 1 the virgin’s child was still a sign to the Jews that God was with them, but now a happy sign, proof that God had not forgotten them or walked away, God had not put them aside or given up, God was still with them.

Once in a while something in my life makes me think, “Look, God is still with me, God is still with us.” That is always a delightful message to me. That’s what this name says.

Summary of Matthew 1: the story begins with Abraham and God’s big promises to Abraham and his offspring. Then we go to David, a brief time of fulfillment, and then 14 generations of failure, and then thirdly the exile to Babylon and 14 generations of exile.

And we hear the angel, “Name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” And we people hear Isaiah the prophet, “the virgin will bear a child and will call him Immanuel, God is with us.” So, let’s not give up, let’s not lose heart. He will save us from our sins, and he is always with us. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, we are waiting. We wait for you, more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. On the other hand, you sent us Jesus. To us also a child is born, to us also a son is given. He will save us from our sins, and he shows that you are with us. What could be better?

BENEDICTION: May the Lord of peace, the Prince of Peace himself, give you peace at all times, in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.