

# Gospel Genealogies and Jesus's Jewishness

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**JOSEPH SIEVERS**

sievers@biblico.it

Pontifical Biblical Institute, 00187 Rome, Italy

## Introduction

The well-known opening phrase of *Nostra Aetate*, 4 states, “As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock.” This sentence considers the spiritual bond between Christians and Jews as part of the mystery of the church and of its very identity. This intimate connectedness is presented in very concrete terms in the New Testament and in early Christianity, starting with the genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and culminating with the inscription on the cross that is found in various forms in all four canonical gospels but always containing the words ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων (“the king of the Jews/Judeans,” Matthew 27:37; Mark 15.26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19).

By now it is commonly recognized that Jesus was Jewish during his whole life, but it may be worth asking with Jacob Neusner: “How do we *know* what we assert?”<sup>1</sup> At least for Matthew, Jesus’s genealogy was the first basis for the assertion of his Jewishness.

Historians attribute particular—though by no means exclusive—value to sources that are as contemporaneous as possible with the events they describe, although closeness in time is no guarantee of historicity or insight. Paul’s letters are the earliest extant sources that emphasize Jesus’s Abrahamic descent (especially Gal 3:16.29). Yet, despite all their difficulties and limitations, the canonical gospels remain our foremost sources about Jesus’s life. We must look at them first as literary products, before trying to find history or theology in them or behind them. Clearly, the evangelists, writing in the same century that Jesus lived, understood Jesus’s origins and character as set within the sweep of Israel’s story as a people. That identity is the primary interest of the two gospel genealogies, especially that of Matthew, which this essay will study in detail.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions About the Pharisees Before 70: Part III, Conclusions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 320.

### The Opening Words of Matthew's Genealogy (and of the New Testament)

As is well-known, the Gospel of Matthew, and therefore the New Testament as a whole in its canonical form, starts with a genealogy that descends from Abraham.<sup>2</sup> It is preceded by the expression βιβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυιδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ (“An account<sup>3</sup> of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” Matthew 1:1 NRSVUE), recognizable as a title by the lack of a verb.<sup>4</sup> Whether this expression refers only to the genealogy (1:2–17), to the Infancy Narrative (all of chapters 1–2), to the Prelude (1:2–4:16 or 22), or to the entire Gospel, is debated.<sup>5</sup> The reference to the Book of Genesis is clear, repeating the LXX rendering of Gen 2:4 as αὕτη ἡ βιβλος γενέσεως οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς (“This is the book of the origin of heaven and earth” Gen 2:4 LXX/NETS) and αὕτη ἡ βιβλος γενέσεως ἀνθρώπων (“This is the book of the origin of human beings” Gen 5:1 LXX/NETS).<sup>6</sup> Yet, the relation between title and content is not consistent here as in many ancient (and modern!) works.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore Davies and Allison plausibly suggest “that Matthew might have opened his gospel as he did in order to draw a parallel between one beginning and another beginning, between the creation of the cosmos and Adam and Eve on the one hand and the new creation brought by the Messiah on the other.”<sup>8</sup> They further suggest that Matthew 1:1 may have been intended to serve more than one function, that is as a title for more than one part of his Gospel.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In almost all Greek New Testament manuscripts, in which the sequence of the gospels can be determined, the Gospel of Matthew comes first. See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 296–297. Matthew's was also the gospel most frequently cited in early patristic literature. See Metzger, *Canon*, 261–262.

<sup>3</sup> NRSVUE adds a note to “an account”: “or a book.”

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*; trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 69; Moisés Mayordomo-Marín, *Den Anfang hören: Leserorientierte Evangelienexegese am Beispiel von Matthäus 1-2* FRLANT 180 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 206–217. On the difficulty of translating this title, see Dale C. Allison, “Matthew's First Two Words (Matt. 1:1)” in *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 157–162.

<sup>5</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 69–0; Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, new updated edition (London: Chapman 1993), 583–585; Leroy A. Huizenga, “Matt 1:1. ‘Son of Abraham’ as Christological Category,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 30, 2 (2008), 103–13, (103–4).

<sup>6</sup> In many instances, γενεαίς translates the word *tōlēdōt* “generations”; cf. Marguerite Harl, Monique Alexandre et al., *La Genèse, La Bible d'Alexandrie LXX 1* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 32–33; Michael Pietsch, “γένεσις,” in Eberhard Bons, ed., *Historical and Theological Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 1.1777; Martin Rösel, *Übersetzung als Vollendung der Auslegung: Studien zur Genesis-Septuaginta* BZAW 223 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 57.

<sup>7</sup> The lack of correspondence between title and content of a work may be illustrated by Josephus's extensive introduction to his *Antiquities of the Jews*, which concentrates exclusively on biblical history contained in *A.J.* 1–11 (with a focus on the Pentateuch/Books of Moses in *A.J.* 1–4), without a hint at the later history to the beginning of the war against Rome, contained in *A.J.* 12–20.

<sup>8</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 of *International Critical Commentary* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 150.

<sup>9</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 154.

In any case, the title emphasizes Jesus's embeddedness in the history of Israel. This is explicated further in the genealogy that immediately follows.

### Difficulties with Biblical Genealogies

In his classic *The Birth of the Messiah*, Raymond E. Brown observed: "To the modern reader there are few things in the Bible less meaningful than the frequent lists of descendants or ancestors."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Martin Luther emphasized the difficulties with those unfamiliar names: "It looks like a useless, unnecessary writing in which he [Matthew] has reviewed the names of the dear fathers, since we know absolutely nothing about them, and it is of no help to us at all."<sup>11</sup>

An often-cited German poem by Friedrich von Sallet (ca. 1835) expresses a similar frustration:

He was a son, he was a son, he was a son –  
 This one begat that one, this one begat that one, this one begat that one –  
 It drags thus along with the same dull lyric  
 Until my head is spinning with dead names.

Family trees, crudely patched together  
 by the weak minds of simpletons, if not by a scornful hand,  
 for young squires to benefit simple women  
 so that they not believe beneath their station.

I tear you out. What is this barren leaf doing  
 in the holy book full of the splendor of fresh palms?  
 What difference does it make whether Harry begat Conrad  
 all the way down to him who made the world free?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, new updated edition (London: Chapman 1993), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, First Sermon on the Gospel of Matthew, December 18, 1533; WA 37.211 "Das sihet sichs an, *quasi sit* unnutz, vergeblich schrifft, *quod recensuit nomina* der lieben veter, *cum nos de illis nihil omnino sciamus* und uns nichts da mit geholffen."

<sup>12</sup> „Der war ein Sohn, der war ein Sohn, der war ein Sohn —  
 Der zeugte den, der zeugte den, der zeugte den —“  
 So schleppt sich's fort in trägem Leierton  
 Bis todt Namen wirr im Hirn sich drehn.  
 Stammbäume, von beschränktem Thorensinn  
 Plump eingeflickt, wenn nicht von schnöder Hand,  
 für Junker, eitle Weiber zum Gewinn,  
 Daß sie nicht glauben unter ihrem Stand —  
 Aus reiß' ich euch. Was soll das dürre Blatt  
 Im heil'gen Buch voll frischer Palmenpracht?  
 Was ist's, ob Hinz den Kunz gezeuget hat,  
 Herab zu dem, der frei die Welt gemacht?  
 Ist: „Gottes Sohn“ euch Titels nicht genug?  
 Braucht ihr durchaus des Potentaten Sohn,  
 Der einem Weibe Ehr' und Mann erschlug  
 Und fromme Lieder sang im schönsten Ton?

While these authors, and modern readers generally, find such genealogical lists rather uninteresting and frustrating, the attitude toward them was certainly different in antiquity, in Jewish circles as well as in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. One of many examples is the opening section of Josephus's autobiography (*Vita* 1-6), in which he proudly and very inaccurately lists his pedigree.<sup>13</sup>

In his updated and revised version of *The Birth of the Messiah* (1993), Brown added the following remarks:

One may see theological insights appropriate to Matthew's time in the genealogy: continuity with the heritage of Israel's patriarchs and kings, the Davidic descent of Jesus . . . . Nevertheless, as Matthew is read by or to audiences today, what utility does the genealogy have? . . . [A]esthetically the genealogy strikes people as monotonous and pointless; historically it bothers scholars by its mistakes and omissions; morally it troubles preachers by listing ancestors for Jesus who were dishonest, brutal, or immoral; and philosophically, as an opening page of the NT, it does not offer much by way of helpful or salvific message.<sup>14</sup>

Brown further observes that Matthew's genealogy presented:

a challenge to the idea that God works only through the saintly . . . . [F]rom the portrayal of God's dealing with those who lived before the coming of the Messiah one can learn much about God's dealing with those who have lived after that coming. Ulrich Zwingli maintained that if one understood the genealogy correctly, it contained the essential theology of the Reformation. I would be bolder: *It contains the essential theology of the Christian Old and New Testaments*.<sup>15</sup>

I would have liked to ask Zwingli or Brown to elaborate further on these points. Unfortunately, that is no longer possible. Research through the *Institut für Reformationsgeschichte* in Zürich thus far has not discovered such a reference in

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Wißt: aus des Königs Saal, des Adels Schloß  
 Kam selten die gesunde, keusche Kraft.  
 Was Davids Sohn! — Des Volkes ächter Sproß  
 War's, der das Volk zu Gott emporgerafft.

Friedrich von Sallet, "Die Geschlechtsregister," in *Laien-Evangelium* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1843), 11; in Gustav Pfannmüller, *Jesus im Urteil der Jahrhunderte: die bedeutendsten Auffassungen Jesu in Theologie, Philosophie, Literatur und Kunst bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1908), 478. Both the first three stanzas of this poem and Luther's sermon are cited by Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 87.

<sup>13</sup> See *The Life of Josephus*, trans. and comm. Steve Mason (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 3-10.

<sup>14</sup> See Heinzpeter Hempelmann, "'Das dürre Blatt Im Heiligen Buch': Mt 1,1-17 und der Kampf wider die Erniedrigung Gottes." *Theologische Beiträge* 21, no. 1 (1990): 6-23. Reprinted in *Die Wirklichkeit Gottes* vol. 1 *Theologische Wissenschaft im Diskurs mit Wissenschaftstheorie, Sprachphilosophie und Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 505-524.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 596. Emphasis added.

Zwingli's available writings.<sup>16</sup> In one of his last works, his *Introduction to the New Testament*, Brown stated of the theological import of the whole genealogy: "It brings into the story of Jesus a lengthy span of Israelite history, involving the patriarchs (the first fourteen names), the kings (second fourteen), and even the unknowns (third fourteen)."<sup>17</sup> In any event, Jesus's (and therefore Christianity's) connection with the history of Israel through its most important ancestors seems to be a central feature of this opening passage of Matthew and hence the entire New Testament. Herman Waetjen in an article with the pointed title "The Genealogy as the Key to the Gospel According to Matthew," concludes: "Jesus is the unique integration of both discontinuity and continuity. As the child of Mary, he is a new creation generated by the holy Spirit. As the adopted son of Joseph, he is a descendant of Abraham and David."<sup>18</sup>

### Characteristics of Matthew's Genealogy

According to Ulrich Luz, Matthew's genealogy "belongs to the type of the so-called linear genealogical lists (without branches!) that in antiquity often functioned to give legitimation. It may have served that function ... before Matthew: Jesus is descended from the progenitor Abraham through Israel's royal dynasty. He is not only an authentic Jew; he is a descendant of David."<sup>19</sup> That the genealogy serves as an introduction not only to the Gospel of Matthew but indeed to the entire New Testament has been noted but is rarely discussed.<sup>20</sup> A further peculiarity is the unusual length of this genealogy. Wilson notes that linear genealogies never exceed 19 generations and are often much shorter, whereas Matthew 1:2-16 includes over 40 generations.<sup>21</sup>

The genealogy's starting point is Abraham, who is a central figure not only in Genesis but also in the genealogies that open 1 Chronicles. Abraham is listed in 1 Chr 1:27-28 along with his sons Ishmael and Isaac, then again in 1:32 with his concubine (Gen 25:1 wife) Keturah and in 1:34 with Isaac.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, Matthew

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<sup>16</sup> I would like to thank Peter Dettwiler and Luca Baschera for this research. I have found a reference to the genealogies of Matthew and Luke in Zwingli's work "*In catabaptistarum strophas elenchus*" where he asks: "Why is the family of his [Jesus's] foster father Joseph so carefully listed?" (*Cur ergo familia nutricii eius Ioseph tanta diligentia conscribitur?*), *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6.1 (Corpus Reformatorum 93.1; Zürich: Berichthaus, 1961) 54. Unfortunately, Zwingli gives no direct answer to this question.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 175.

<sup>18</sup> Herman C. Waetjen, *JBL* 95 (1976), 205-230 (229); Caleb t. Friedeman, "Jesus' Davidic Lineage and the Case for Jewish Adoption," *NTS* 66,2 (2020), 249-67.

<sup>19</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 81. On the different functions of genealogies one may consult the different works cited in n. 23 on that page.

<sup>20</sup> Hedda Klip, *Biblical Genealogies: A Form-Critical Analysis, with a Special Focus on Women*, *Oudtestamentische Studiën*, Old Testament Studies 80 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 5. Annemarie Frank notes this deficiency in her review of Klip's book: "Die Funktion von Genealogien im Kontext – z. B. als Einleitung einer Erzählung – wird nur knapp gestreift" (*Theologische Revue* 119 [May 2023], 3).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Wilson, "The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research," *JBL* 94 (1975) 169-189 (179).

<sup>22</sup> On 1-2 Chronicles, see especially Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (SCM) (London: SCM, 1993), xxv + 1077 pp. It may not be entirely accidental that her son Gilad Japhet is the founder and CEO of MyHeritage, one of the largest genealogical search companies.

concentrates only on the one line through Isaac. He has two explicit references to Isaac outside the genealogy (8:11; 22:32), in both cases mentioning him in conjunction with Abraham and Jacob. References to Isaac's *Aqedah* ("The Binding of Isaac," Gen 22) are found in various New Testament writings, most explicitly in the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:13-14; 11:17-19). Roy Rosenberg has tried to link the *Aqedah* in the Book of Jubilees, which assigns it to the time just before the forty-second jubilee since creation (*Jub* 13:16; 17:15; 19:1) with the forty-two generations in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> This appealing parallelism should be used with caution, however, since the relationship between a jubilee of 49 or 50 years and a generation is not at all obvious. Huizinga has pointed out more direct and apparently intentional verbal parallels between the *Aqedah* and Matthew in the references to the beloved son (Gen 22:2LXX; Matt 3:17; 17:5; cf. 12:18) and in some details of Jesus's arrest in Matt 26:36-56.<sup>24</sup> These elements may partially explain why there is such emphasis on "son of Abraham" in Matthew's genealogy.

Karin Zetterholm proposes that the importance of the *Aqedah* in rabbinic literature and synagogue art may be due to Christian influence.<sup>25</sup> She offers no reference to Philo (*Abr.* 167-177, 202-204)<sup>26</sup> and only a brief and incomplete reference Josephus (*A.J.* 1.222-236), where the *Aqedah* is described at length and in glowing terms, certainly both independent of Christian influence. She argues that "while Isaac was initially the model for Jesus, Jesus was in a later period the model for Isaac."<sup>27</sup> These assertions need further exploration.

Luz de-emphasizes the function of Isaac in the genealogy:

The history of Israel passes before their [i.e. the readers'] eyes in concentrated form. Thus the genesis of Jesus Christ begins with the history of Israel: it continues that history and includes it as its beginning. Its point of departure is Abraham. The genealogy first of all elucidates what "son of Abraham" means. Jesus the Messiah is an Israelite, Abraham's descendant. He is a descendant of the patriarchs. That is not a banality; it is part of God's plan in history. The genealogy also elucidates Jesus's Davidic sonship. Jesus is David's descendant and thus a Messiah of royal descent. That is why v. 6 also emphasizes David as king and then lets the kings on David's throne with whom the readers

<sup>23</sup> Roy A. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84/4 (1965): 381-88 (387).

<sup>24</sup> Leroy Andrew Huizinga, "Matt 1:1. 'Son of Abraham' as Christological Category," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 30/ 2 (2008): 103-13 (111-12).

<sup>25</sup> Karin Hedner Zetterholm, "Isaac and Jesus: A Rabbinic Reappropriation of a 'Christian' Motif?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 67, no. 1 (2016): 102-20 (107).

<sup>26</sup> See Gudrun Holtz, "Abraham als Archetyp der Gottesliebe: Die Opferung Isaaks in Philos biographischem Enkomium 'Das Leben des Weisen' (De Abrahamo 167-208a)," in *Haggadah in Early Judaism and the New Testament* (WUNT 461), ed. R.D. Aus (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 67-94; and Holz, "The Early Jewish Abraham Tradition as a Primary Source of Theocentric Universalism in Romans: Paul's Argument in Rom 4:2-17a; 8:32, and 15:7-12," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 115/2 (2024): 197-228.

<sup>27</sup> Zetterholm, "Isaac and Jesus," 104.

were familiar pass before their eyes. Thus the genealogy puts Jesus at the center of Israel's history. He is Abraham's son and royal Messiah and thus the bearer of all of Israel's messianic hopes in accordance with God's plan. This is the fundamental affirmation of the genealogy.<sup>28</sup>

While legitimation of Jesus may be the main purpose of the genealogy, it is not the only one. Johnson has identified nine different purposes of Old Testament genealogies, several of which were certainly present in the composition of Matthew 1:1-17.<sup>29</sup> Luz points to narrative elements that are included in Johnson's list:

It is also unclear why in vv. 11-12 the Babylonian exile is so emphasized even though it does not properly fit the schema of the three-times-fourteen generations. It was necessary to mention it, because the purpose of the genealogy is not only to give information about Jesus' ancestors and to legitimate Jesus as the Messiah but at the same time to recall the entire history of the people of God, Israel.<sup>30</sup>

Moisés Mayordomo-Marín formulates this as follows: "The genealogy not only relates Jesus to the history of Israel, but also relates the history of Israel to Jesus."<sup>31</sup> Thomas Hieke (crediting Florian Kreuzer for this expression) calls it a "Table of Contents of the Old Testament."<sup>32</sup> This somewhat frivolous formulation in some way addresses the content of the first two parts of the genealogy, until the Babylonian Exile, or more precisely, until Zerubbabel (Matthew 1:12-13; cf. 1 Chron 3:19) and their relation to the history of Israel. In Chronicles, Abiud is not named among the sons of Zerubbabel, nor is any of the later descendants in Matthew's list connected to any genealogical data in the Hebrew Bible, although most bear biblical names.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus*, 2nd ed, Society for New Testament Studies. Monograph Series 008 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 77-82.

<sup>30</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 83.

<sup>31</sup> "Die Genealogie setzt nicht nur Jesus in Verhältnis zur Geschichte Israels, sondern auch die Geschichte Israels in Verhältnis zu Jesus," Moisés Mayordomo-Marín, *Den Anfang hören: Leserorientierte Evangelienexegese am Beispiel von Matthäus 1-2 / Moisés Mayordomo-Marín*, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 180 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 223.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Hieke, "Frauen und Männer in Jesu Ahnengalerie: Zur Genealogie Jesu bei Matthäus und Lukas," *Bibel und Kirche* (2011) 5.

<sup>33</sup> Abiud appears in the Hebrew Bible only as the name of a son of Aaron (אֲבִיּוּד / Αβιουδ (Exodus 6:23 and *passim*) and as a son of Bela (אֲבִיּוּד / Αβιουδ 1 Chronicles 8:3). In the New Testament the name appears only in Matthew 1:13 and is not part of Luke's genealogy. In Luke 3:27, Zerubbabel's son is named Rhesa instead of Abiud.

### The Role(s) of Women in Matthew's Genealogy

Among the studies of Matthew's genealogy, the one by Marshall Johnson remains influential. He consulted many parallels in rabbinic literature and concluded: "that aspect of the genealogy which most clearly reveals its relationship with Rabbinic speculation on the ancestry of the Messiah, ... [are] the four women."<sup>34</sup> He further asserts: "The genealogy is thus among the most thoroughly Rabbinic parts of the NT."<sup>35</sup> This seems to be overstated and I along with other scholars would be more cautious about rabbinic parallels.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, among the peculiar characteristics of Matthew's linear genealogy is certainly the presence of five women. While women are sometimes mentioned in the genealogies of the Pentateuch and more often in those of the books of Chronicles, still they stand out in Matthew, especially if compared with Luke's genealogy where they are entirely absent.<sup>37</sup> "The attention is on Jesus being born in the lineage of Abraham. How he is exactly connected, seems less important," except that four (and, with Mary, five) women are part of this genealogy.<sup>38</sup>

Scholars have agonized over the question why they were included and what might be their common characteristics, if any.<sup>39</sup> While the explanation that they were included because they were sinners is untenable and offensive, the suggestion that (except Mary) they were considered gentiles is widely held.<sup>40</sup> These considerations are valid for Rahab and Ruth, but there is no such biblical information for Tamar. Philo is the first author to assume that she was a Syro-Palestinian gentile (*Virt.* 220-222).<sup>41</sup> *Jub* 41:1 and later Jewish traditions are unclear or divided about her status.<sup>42</sup> As for "the [wife] of Uriah" (=Bathsheva 2 Samuel 11:3.6), while she may have been considered Hittite because of her first husband, at the time of Solomon's birth she is presented as David's wife (2 Sam 12:24) and neither her name nor anything else indicates a foreign status. In all these cases, the women and their

<sup>34</sup> Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus*, 2nd ed, Society for New Testament Studies. Monograph Series 008 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 152.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, 209.

<sup>36</sup> Jason B. Hood, *The Messiah, His Brothers, and the Nations, Matthew 1.1-17*, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 12; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Hedda Klip, *Biblical Genealogies: A Form-Critical Analysis, with a Special Focus on Women*, Old Testament Studies 80 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 341-61, especially 351-53.

<sup>38</sup> Klip, *Biblical Genealogies*, 327.

<sup>39</sup> Klip, *Biblical Genealogies*; E. Anne Clements, *Mothers on the Margin? The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014). Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 590-595.

<sup>40</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Philo of Alexandria, *On Virtues*, trans. Walter T. Wilson., Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series, v. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 410 - 412.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Tamar's Ancestry and Rahab's Marriage: Two Problems in the Matthean Genealogy," *Novum Testamentum* 37, no. 4 (1995): 313-29 (314-318, 320).

offspring were or became fully part of the people of Israel as opposed to other cases in which foreign women were considered a danger to Israelite identity.<sup>43</sup>

The case of Ruth is of particular significance. The Book of Ruth describes not only her extraordinary kindness but also concludes with a descending genealogy (Ruth 4:18-22) which may be a secondary addition or may be part of the original version.<sup>44</sup> In some way such a conclusion provides a pendant to the emphasis on origins in Matthew's opening verses. One may find specific echoes of the Book of Ruth also in Matthew's highlighting Tamar and her son Perez (Matthew 1:3; Ruth 4:12.18).

The presence of Rahab provides a special puzzle in Matthew's genealogy, for nowhere else is she identified as the mother of Boas.<sup>45</sup> In the Book of Joshua she and her family are treated quite favorably because she provided lodging and safety to the Israelite spies (Josh 6:17-25). In the Babylonian Talmud and in Midrashim she is sometimes associated with Tamar and Ruth.<sup>46</sup> Although these sources are much later than Matthew, they make her appearance in the Gospel less implausible.<sup>47</sup>

Matthew tells us nothing about Mary's ancestry but Luke calls Elizabeth a descendant of Aaron (1:5) and a relative of Mary (1:36). Doubts about her belonging to the Jewish people have no basis in known facts, only in antisemitic tendencies.<sup>48</sup> The insertion of foreign women into a genealogy that is otherwise clearly focused on the (male) Israelite ancestry of Jesus may surprise us but is certainly not an explanation applicable to all four or five women.<sup>49</sup> Raymond Brown emphasizes: "These five women do have in common that their union with their partners before or at conception was scandalous or irregular, something not true of most OT women."<sup>50</sup>

Anne Clements considers the five women as representing the message of the gospel of Matthew. They stand for the focus of Matthew on marginalized people.<sup>51</sup> Although she does speak of various forms of marginalization, it is not clear how this category applies to all of them.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the different situation in Num 25:1-8 when Israelites are led astray by Moabite women, or the Ammonite mother of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:21; cf. Matthew 1:7) or the foreign wives in Ezra 10:1-44.

<sup>44</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth: the traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS translation*, The JPS Bible commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), 93 with pp. 102-3 n. 239.

<sup>45</sup> See Yair Zakowitch, "Rahab als Mutter des Boas in der Jesus-Genalogie" (Matth. 1.5) *Novum Testamentum* 17,1 (1975), 1-5.

<sup>46</sup> Zakowitch, 4-5.

<sup>47</sup> See also Richard Bauckham, "Tamar's Ancestry and Rahab's Marriage: Two Problems in the Matthean Genealogy," *Novum Testamentum* 37, 4 (1995), 313-29 (328-29) for a possible connection between Rahab and Salmon as her husband through a peculiar interpretation of 1 Chronicles 2:54-55.

<sup>48</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 85 n. 54; Peter Head, "The Nazi Quest for an Aryan Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 2/1 (2004): 55-89 (esp. 85). Mary's Jewishness is affirmed in the second of the *Ten Points of Seelisberg* and in several church pronouncements.

<sup>49</sup> For detailed discussions, see Mayordomo-Marín, *Den Anfang hören*, 225-237, 243-250.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 593.

<sup>51</sup> Clements, *Mothers on the Margin?*, 271 - 277.

Hedda Klip suggests yet another common trait among these women: "All four women were connected to other men than the father of their child. ... In this aspect these four women foreshadow Mary, who is giving birth to the son of God, while she is betrothed to Joseph."<sup>52</sup> She expresses a similar idea to the one Brown had suggested in his observation above.

In any event, it seems that Matthew thought his readers would understand the references to these women without explanation or further comment. Therefore, he must have expected his audience to be fairly familiar with major and not so major characters of the Hebrew Bible. The intended audience is therefore to be located in a Jewish rather than a Gentile milieu.<sup>53</sup>

### Ancient Genealogies and those in Matthew and Luke

On ancient genealogies in general, one may still consult Robert R. Wilson's published Yale dissertation. The author concludes:

Our work on biblical, as well as extrabiblical genealogies, indicates that genealogies are not normally created for the purpose of conveying historical information. They are not intended to be historical records. Rather, in the Bible, as well as in the ancient Near Eastern literature and in the anthropological material, genealogies seem to have been created and preserved for domestic, politico-jural and religious purposes, and historical information is preserved in the genealogies only incidentally. In general, the makers of genealogies are not historians.<sup>54</sup>

Wilson further concludes that "it is not safe to assume that contradictory genealogies are from different literary sources or even from different oral traditions. We have seen that it is quite possible for apparently contradictory genealogies to coexist in the same society if they have different functions."<sup>55</sup>

These considerations may be applied to the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, but historical concerns do seem to have played a role as well. "Matthew uses his introductory book of genesis (*biblos geneseōs*, 'birth record') to stress Jesus' insertion into a history and a people."<sup>56</sup> His genealogy is openly "messianic" (*ho legomenos Christos*, 1:17), highlighting Jesus's relation to Israel and his famous

<sup>52</sup> Klip, *Biblical Genealogies*, 310.

<sup>53</sup> "Von dieser textuellen Kompetenzerwartung lässt sich m.E. die intendierte Leserschaft in einem jüdisch geprägten Umfeld lokalisieren. Gerade an einem solchen Ort erweist sich der genealogische Nachweis als ein wichtiger Baustein in der Verteidigung der Messianität Jesu." Mayordomo-Marín, *Den Anfang hören*, 224.

<sup>54</sup> Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1977) 199; reviewed by Raymond E. Brown in *CBQ* 40 (1978): 426-427; see also Gerard Mussies, "Parallels to Matthew's Version of the Pedigree of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 28/1 (1986): 32-47.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 203.

<sup>56</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 69; see also id., *Introduction to the New Testament*, 174.

forebears, David and Abraham. Luke's genealogy, instead, is that of Jesus, the Son of God, with David and Abraham mentioned only as ordinary ancestors in a line going back to the first human being, Adam, and to God.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Philo states about Adam "But his father was not mortal, but the everlasting God" (*Virt.* 204). Thus, the purpose and the addressees of the two genealogies seem to be very different. Attempts at harmonizing them or showing one or the other more historically reliable have proven futile.<sup>58</sup>

Such attempts are almost as ancient as the texts themselves, as Codex Bezae gives us Luke's genealogy in Matthew's order.<sup>59</sup> They often overlook the fact that Luke's genealogy has a different purpose and focus from Matthew's. It is preceded immediately by the account of the baptism of Jesus, which ends with a heavenly voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22 NRSV). This divine sonship is explicated by the genealogy (3:23-38) which works its way from Jesus and his reputed father Joseph to Adam (son) of God, through 77 or 78 generations, with 56 generations listed between Jesus and Abraham, whereas Matthew has only about three times fourteen (=42) generations from Abraham to Jesus.<sup>60</sup> Between the Babylonian Exile and Jesus Luke lists twenty-two generations as opposed to Matthew's thirteen.

Raymond Brown sums up the differences between Matthew and Luke by noting that while "the two NT genealogies tell us how to evaluate Jesus, they tell us nothing certain about his grandparents or his great-grandparents. The message about Jesus, son of Joseph, is not that factually he is also (grand)son of either Jacob (Matthew) or of Eli (Luke) but that theologically he is "son of David, son of Abraham" (Matthew) and "Son of God" (Luke).<sup>61</sup>

Matthew's genealogy, which is clearly too short, not only in leaving out several generations of kings and a queen (Athaliah), but also in assigning only fourteen generations to the post-exilic period, may be focused on the numerical value, in Hebrew, of the name David ( $d [4] + v/w [6] + d [4] = 14$ ).<sup>62</sup> Attribution of Davidic descent to Jesus is a complicated question. Rom 1:3 seems to be one of the earliest attestations. This may be a pre-existing early formulation adopted by Paul "the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh" (Rom 1:3 NRSV). Fitzmyer argues that "[t]he basic formula in verses 3-4 is regarded as pre-Pauline, because it contains the only reference in Paul's uncontested writings to Jesus as Son of David (cf. 2 Tim 2:8)" and other peculiarities.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, (AYB 28; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 495; J.R. Levison, *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism: From Sirach to 2 Baruch*. JSPSup 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 77-78.

<sup>58</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 587-588.

<sup>59</sup> Codex Bezae (Cambridge, University Library, MS Nn.2.41).

<sup>60</sup> See Tables I-IV in Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 76-79.

<sup>61</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 94. On the improbable case for a levirate marriage of Joseph's mother, see *ibid.*, 503-504.

<sup>62</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 74-80; Donald Hagner, *Matthew* (WBC) 1.7 "We are unable conclusively to discern Matthew's intent in the 3x14 structure."

<sup>63</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33 of *Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 230.

The question of Davidic descent is raised in John 7:42 as well as in Mark 12:35-37 and elsewhere. I cannot go into details here but refer to the extensive literature on the subject.<sup>64</sup>

### Jesus's Genealogy in Art: The Jesse Tree

One expression of Christian remembrance of Jesus's Davidic descent can be seen in the frequently pictured Jesse Tree: The most famous may be the one in the stained-glass window of the Cathedral of Chartres.<sup>65</sup> But there are examples in many art forms, from illuminated manuscripts to paintings and sculptures. The reference to Isaiah is usually clear ("A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" [Isaiah 11:1 NRSVUE]), but it seems less clear whether Matthew or Luke serves as a basis. In one 12<sup>th</sup> century example, however, the tree of Jesse is shown as an illumination in the initial letter of the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>66</sup> A later work, created by Hans Holbein the Elder (1460-1524), was part of the main altar in the church of the Dominican monastery in Frankfurt, now kept in the city's Staedelmuseum<sup>67</sup> (which I was able to visit on the occasion of a session in Frankfurt that was part of the project for this this publication). The presentation starts with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and moves from there directly to Jesse and David and their descendants, ending in the top panel with the Virgin Mary and her child Jesus. On the opposite side two similar panels show the saints of the Dominican order—the shoot of St. Dominic instead of the shoot of Jesse—with Mary as patroness of the order at top center.

The connection of the Jesse Tree with Jesus's Jewish roots may not be consciously present to all past or present viewers, but it remains a basic reality. Of course, in all Christian renderings the last links are Mary and Jesus, leaving amply room for supersessionist interpretations, but that would be the topic of another of another paper or book. Mary C. Boys, in her article in this collection, as well as other colleagues, take up aspects of that challenge.

### Conclusion

On the basis of this brief study of Matthew's genealogy, I agree with Barbara U. Meyer against Franz Rosenzweig: "The time before Jesus' birth is clearly not

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<sup>64</sup> Daniel Zacharias, *Matthew's Presentation of the Son of David*, T&T Clark Biblical Studies (London: Bloomsbury/ T&T Clark, 2017). Max Botner, *Jesus Christ as the Son of David in the Gospel of Mark*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, vol. 174 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree\\_of\\_Jesse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_Jesse).

<sup>66</sup> See the Capuchins' Bible, c. 1180: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/JesseTree.jpg>.

<sup>67</sup> <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/de/werk/werktagsseite-des-frankfurter-dominikaneraltars>.

denied time, but time witnessed in Scripture and partly well remembered by Christians.”<sup>68</sup> It seems obvious that the time before Jesus was crucial to the thinking of the evangelists who composed the two gospel genealogies.

That Jesus’s genealogy opens the entire New Testament and not only the Gospel of Matthew is an insufficiently appreciated fact. Matthew wants his readers to understand that Jesus’s lineage and identity is rooted in Abraham himself, the “founding Father” of the Israelite and Jewish people. Jesus’s lineage is important not only for its Davidic-messianic component. Its neat structure of three groups of fourteen generations embraces all of Israel’s history of divine election, tribal life, monarchy, exile, and restoration. This organization of the generations, traced through the various vicissitudes of the centuries, is not in an attempt at scientific genealogical research but is a defining theological statement about the connectedness of Jesus to a specific people and its entire history.

In the second century C.E., the nascent church rejected the idea of Marcion that Jesus revealed a different deity than the God of Israel. This notion would have separated Jesus from his own ancestry. In repudiating Marcion, the church affirmed the evangelists’ vision that the Jewishness of Jesus is constitutive of Christian faith. And to deny this identity is to eviscerate Christian identity itself.

This presentation of Jesus’s ancestry may not always be appreciated in today’s discussion of his Jewishness. Yet, there is no clearer indication of his rootedness in the Jewish people than the Matthean genealogy.

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<sup>68</sup> See the essay by Barbara U. Meyer in this collection.