# Christmas Vigil Mass



*Adoration of the Shepherds by Matthias Stom (c. 1650).*
*Palazzo Madama and Casaforte degli Acaj, Turin, Italy*

By tradition, Matthew is positioned as the first book of the New Testament scriptures. The first verse is not exactly a show stopper such as the first line of the Star Wars saga: "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." The very first verse of the New Testament is: "*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham*." (Mt 1:1). It almost dares you to read it rather than skipping to verse 18: "*Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.*"

The importance of the genealogy is revealed when you realize it is the gospel reading for the Christmas Eve Vigil Mass each year. Can you imagine the challenge that the celebrating priest faces? You have a church filled with families and their children, you have been preparing the parish for the coming of the Christ Child ... and you have to proclaim a list of mostly unfamiliar names! But the genealogy is important and so you have to find the way to engage the people with Matthew's message and reason for placing it at the start of his gospel.

Every page of Matthew's Gospel is steeped in themes of promise and fulfillment. The Gospel begins with the announcement that, "*This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham*," followed by a detailed genealogy of 41 generations! While Western cultures tend to have little interest in genealogies, viewing them as tedious curiosities, Matthew and his readers would have considered this announcement to be the most exciting news of all time. The genealogy introduces Jesus as the "son of Abraham" and the "son of David," meaning he is in the lineage of two of the most significant figures in biblical history.

*¹ The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. ² Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. ³ Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, ⁶ Jesse the father of David the king. David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. ⁷ Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph. ⁸ Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah. ⁹ Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. ¹⁰ Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah. ¹¹ Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile. ¹² After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah. ¹⁷ Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations.* (Mt 1:1-17)

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**Genealogy.** Genealogies in the Old Testament are always working to communicate multiple layers of information to readers. Genealogies obviously trace family trees, but they also help us follow priestly and royal lines through Israel's story. You can see each of these types of genealogies in the first nine chapters of Chronicles. In fact, there's little doubt that the author of Matthew had the book of Chronicles and its genealogies in mind when he wrote his own Gospel account and began it with a genealogy.

"*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*" From this opening statement, we expect this family tree to help us understand not only the ancestral past of Jesus but also his identity and mission. Jesus is called the son of both David and Abraham.

**Son of Abraham.** By calling Jesus the "son of Abraham," the author is connecting Jesus to the father of the people of Israel. Abraham represents the moment when God selected and separated his family from the rest of the nations all the way back in the book of Genesis. It was through these Israelite people that God promised to bring blessing to all of humanity (Gen 12:1-3). By linking Jesus to Abraham, Matthew is bringing the reader's attention back to the promise of God's rescue plan for the world. He wants us to see that Jesus is the long-awaited son of Abraham who will bring God's blessing to all humanity. But how, exactly? Let's consider the second key figure in the genealogy: David.

**A King From the Line of David.** Jesus' identity as a descendant of David is a major focus of Matthew's gospel. To understand Matthew's theology and his portrait of Jesus, we will want to examine how Matthew is bringing David into the story.

"Son of David," is a term that the author of Matthew is very fond of. Verse one is the first of ten appearances of the phrase in the book, and it draws our attention to the royal line of King David. Abraham's name pointed to a belonging amongst the people of Israel. David's name tells us that Jesus was royalty.

That this was the author's goal can be seen by the fact that Jesus' ancestry is traced through David's son King Solomon. In Luke's gospel, the family line is traced through David's son Nathan. Matthew's author is not primarily concerned with genetic lineage, however. He is also attempting to establish Jesus as a royal successor and rightful heir to the throne of David's kingdom. The author traces the family line from Solomon to Jeconiah, who was the surviving king of David's line and alive at the time of the exile.

**14 Generations.** The genealogy of Matthew is broken up into three parts that cover 14 generations each. But why 14? Within the written language of Hebrew, the letters are also used as their numbers, and so each letter is assigned a numerical value. The name of David in Hebrew is "דוד," and from here you just do the math. The numerical value of the first and third letter "ד" (called dalet) is 4. The middle letter "ו" (called waw) has a numerical value of 6. Put it into your mental calculator: 4+6+4=14, the numerical value of the name of "David."

Matthew has created the genealogy so that it links Jesus to David both explicitly and in the very literary design of the list. In fact, Matthew wants to highlight this "14=David" idea so much that he's intentionally left out multiple generations of the line of David (three, to be exact) to make the numbers work. Leaving out generations to create symbolic numbers in genealogies is a common Hebrew literary practice, going all the way back to the genealogies in Genesis (the 10 generations of Genesis 5). Ancient genealogies were ways of making theological claims, and Matthew's readers would have understood what he was doing and why.

Matthew didn't make numerical adjustments only. He also adjusted a few letters in some names for the same purpose. For example, he changed the names of Asa and Amon to Asaph (the poet featured in the book of Psalms) and Amos (the famous prophet). Matthew is perhaps "winking" at the readers knowing they would spot these out of place names. The point, of course, is that Jesus doesn't just fulfill Israel's royal hopes, but also the hope of the Psalms (Asaph) and the Prophets (Amos). Jesus is from a line of kingly succession that also culminates the rich tradition of worship and prophecy of Israel. This way, readers are thinking about all of Israel and her history as they meet Jesus for the first time. A bit of irony is that some modern translations have changed the names back to their "original" referents assuming Matthew made a mistake.

Matthew's genealogy is unique in that it contains the names of four women in the genealogy of Matthew: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. All four are either non-Israelites or connected to non-Israelite families. Not only is it unconventional for Matthew to list these female names in an all-male genealogy, but these particular women are all associated with some element of scandal. Matthew could have highlighted Jesus' connection to Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel, the matriarchs of Israel. But instead, he mentions Canaanites, prostitutes, and Moabite women, who would be associated with Israel's covenant failure.

Matthew wants his readers to see that God has been using all types of people to move his plan forward. This portrait of an inclusive and expanding God and kingdom will continue to appear beyond Matthew's genealogy into the rest of his gospel. He will continue to include the rejects and outsiders into his family (see the list in Matthew 4:18-25). And this non-Israelite strand in Jesus' family history will expand even wider in his final commission to his followers to go and "*make disciples of all the nations*" (Matt 28:19).

So we read the genealogy of Matthew and see the royal lineage of Jesus. He's the one who will bring the blessing of Abraham to the whole world. He's the royal son of David that all of Israel has been waiting for. He's the one that the prophets wrote about, and the psalmists sang about. He will be the king of Israel who blesses all of the nations of the world, especially the outsiders. We know all of this because Matthew tells us in a genealogy that carefully reveals the hope that has arrived in Jesus. All of this, and we are only 17 verses into the first book!

The final genealogy entry is: "t*he father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah*."

### "*Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about…*"

The story of Jesus' birth (Mt 1:18 and following) is really an extension of the genealogy. Its primary concern is Jesus' right to a place in the messianic genealogy through Joseph, and its climax comes in Joseph's resolve to make Jesus a Davidic child by assuming the legal obligations of paternity. The tension between continuity with the Jewish tradition (legal paternity through Joseph) and the sharp break with tradition (the miraculous conception of Jesus) develops the basic theme already raised in the genealogy.

The opening of the Gospel of Matthew reads: "*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."*  Matthew could have used other words for "genealogy" or "birth," but he used the Greek word *génesis*, which is also the Greek title of the first book of scriptures. Similar wording is in the Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX) at Gn 2:4 "*This is the book of the* [génesis] *of heaven and earth*" and in 5:1 "*This is the book of the* [génesis] *of human beings. In the day God made Adam, according to the image of God he made him*." It seems Matthew intended a connection between the opening of his gospel and with the first book of scriptures. This is a new beginning,  a new creation. The traditional Christmas Eve gospel thus opens "*Now this is how the* [génesis] *of Jesus Christ came about* (v. 18).

But then Matthew does something interesting. Throughout verses 1-16a, Matthew has used *egennesen* 39 times (aorist, active of *gennao*, which means: when used of the male role = "to beget," or "to become the father of"; of the female role: "to give birth"). In 16b the grammar changes. He does not write, "Joseph begat Jesus," which we might expect after 39 times; but rather he uses *egennethe* (aorist, passive of *gennao*) "Joseph the husband of Mary from whom **was born** Jesus the one being called Christ." We already have a hint that there is something different about this birth from all those that went before.

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### *Matthew 1:18-25*

[18] *Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit.* [19] *Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly.* [20] *Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.* [21] *She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* [22] *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:* [23] *"Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us."* [24] *When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.* [25] *He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.*

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**The Word of God Come to Joseph.** Joseph's plans are interrupted in vv.20–23 by the appearance of a messenger from God in a dream — a device familiar from the Old Testament account of the birth of Samson (Judges 13). The angel's message assumes the virginal conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit and concentrates on the names of the Messiah. As the legal son of Joseph, Jesus will be named the "Son of David" (v. 20). His given name is Jesus, which is related to the Hebrew verb for "save." This name is entirely appropriate because, in Matthew's perspective and in the faith of all the early Christians, Jesus saved the people of God from their sins. The third name applied to Jesus appears in the citation from Isa 7:14: "and they shall name him Emmanuel." As a sign to King Ahaz and his royal court, the prophet Isaiah had announced that a certain woman would bear a son. The early Christians took the Greek translation of "young woman" as "virgin" to confirm their belief in the virginal conception of Jesus. But Matthew may have been more interested in the child's name "Emmanuel." In Hebrew, "Emmanuel" means "God with us," and this expresses the significance of Jesus for Matthew and the early church. A similar note is struck in the final verse of the Gospel: "*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*" (28:20).

The dream allayed Joseph's fears. Not only had Mary not been raped or seduced, but this child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit and deserves the names Son of David, Jesus, and Emmanuel. Joseph acts in accordance with the divine communication and takes Mary to be his wife (v. 24).

The whole of Matt 1:1–25 serves both to situate Jesus firmly within God's people and to call attention to his extraordinary status. On the one hand, he is the descendant of Abraham and David and the fulfillment of the promises and hopes attached to those great Old Testament figures. On the other hand, the mode of his birth is unique, and the names given to him — Jesus and Emmanuel — suggest that his mission far surpasses any of his ancestors.

**The Naming and Names of Jesus.** In the text we are told the child is to be named Jesus (v.21); as well we are to connect Jesus with the name Emanuel (v.23) given in the Isaiah text. In addition, via Joseph, Jesus is to be a "son of David." Besides telling us "who" Jesus is with these titles, these texts also indicate "how" Jesus is "who" he is.

Jesus is "son of David" because of his genealogy – but Joseph didn't "begat" him! The Davidic descendancy is not transferred through natural paternity but through legal paternity. The great Johannine scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown, notes: "By naming the child, Joseph acknowledges him as his own. The Jewish position on this is lucidly clear and is dictated by the fact that sometimes it is difficult to determine who begot a child biologically. Since normally a man will not acknowledge and support a child unless it is his own, the law prefers to base paternity on the man's acknowledgment. The Mishna *Baba Bathra* 8:6 states the principle: 'If a man says, "This is my son," he is to be believed.' Joseph, by exercising the father's right to name the child (cf. Luke 1:60-63), acknowledges Jesus and thus becomes the legal father of the child." (*The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary of the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, p. 139)

The name "Jesus" (Greek) or "Joshua" (Hebrew) are names that mean "savior". Note that with this name, the importance of Jesus is not "who he is" – defined by the genealogy and the virgin conception as son of God; but what he will do – save people from their sin.

Similarly the name "Emmanuel," (which, as Matthew tells us, means "God with us"- v.23) says more about Jesus' vocation rather than his nature. Jesus' calling is to save his people from their sins and to manifest God's presence. Nowhere else is Jesus called "Emmanuel." In fact, Matthew modifies the quote slightly. Rather than saying, "**You** will call ...," as in Isaiah 7:14; he has, "**They** will call ...." "Emmanuel" is not the name Joseph will give the child. It is the name given to him by others. By what he does, namely saving people from their sins, the people experience God's presence among them. It is only in Matthew where Jesus says: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there

am I in the midst of them" (18:20); this saying is in the context of forgiving sins (see 18:15-18). This gospel ends with Jesus' promise: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (28:20). For Matthew, it is Jesus himself, Emmanuel, who is the abiding presence of God with us after the resurrection, not the Holy Spirit (as in Luke/Acts & John). Matthew's community described it as the continuing presence of Jesus. Luke's and John's communities described it as the presence of the Holy Spirit.

**What about the meaning for us?** Can we believe that in this infant, God is with us as our savior? It can be safer to argue about what might have happened at Jesus' birth way back in history; than to live our lives today confessing and believing that "God is with us/me right now". Perhaps some of the historical arguments are inadvertently ways of avoiding the living God now. Maybe all some people want is an inoculation of Christianity – just enough of it so that they don't catch the real thing. For some Christmas is no more than a "booster shot" – something that helps us not catch the real thing. The real thing is "God is with us". The "savior" has been born and is with us.

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## Notes

**1:18 *was betrothed***: Engagement or betrothal in Jewish society of Jesus' time involved a much stronger commitment than it does in modern Western society. Betrothed to Joseph: betrothal was the first part of the marriage, constituting a man and woman as husband and wife. Subsequent infidelity was considered adultery. The betrothal was followed some months later by the husband's taking his wife into his home, at which time normal married life began. The description of Joseph's embarrassment and his plans in verses 18–19 may presume his suspicion that Mary had been raped or seduced. As a devout observer of the Old Testament law, Joseph could not take Mary as his wife (see Deut 22:23–27). Not wishing to subject Mary to the shameful trial of the woman suspected of adultery (Num 5:11–31; with death by stoning as a penalty, Deut 22:21), he decided to forgo the public procedure and took upon himself the responsibility for the divorce. Divorce proceedings were carried out, not in a law court, but rather on the initiative of the male (see Deut 24:1).

***found with child through the holy Spirit***: The understanding of the "holy Spirit" here is more inline with OT ideas of the role of the Spirit in creation, rather than the later NT understanding, especially those doctrinally developed in the early church councils. This phrase is a revelation of the mystery of Mary's pregnancy even as the question of genealogy and paternity swirl in the foreground of the text.

**1:19 *a righteous man***: the Greek term *dikaios* is best understood in reference to Joseph's observance of the Law rather than the weaker translations of "pious" or "kindly.

***shame***: the shame here refers to choice between public disgrace in making public accusations (*cf* Dt 22:23-27) and the less public procedure of divorce. As noted above, the former can result in a death penalty, the latter in a life lived apart.

**1:20 *An angel of the Lord***: The angel of the Lord: in the Old Testament a common designation of God in communication with a human being. In a dream: see Matthew 2:13,19,22. These dreams may be meant to recall the dreams of Joseph, son of Jacob the patriarch (Genesis 37:5–11:19). A closer parallel is the dream of Amram, father of Moses, related by Josephus (Antiquities 2,9,3; 212, 215–16).

**1:21 *you are to name him Jesus***: test

**1:22 *to fulfill***: This is a Matthean formula especially in the first four chapters of Matthew, but also throughout the text. The formula highlights the continuity between the OT and Jesus

**1:23** *virgin*: In the Hebrew text of Isaiah 7:14 the oracle refers to the imminent birth of a Davidic prince from a young woman of the royal court; that would be a sign of hope to Judah in the days of King Ahaz (ca. 734-715 BCE). The Septuagint (LXX) use of the Greek word *parthenos* ("virgin") for '*almă* (Hebrew; "young woman) indicates that she was perceived to be a virgin at the time of the oracle. Matthew's use of the text bolsters the existing faith in the virginal conception, not a proof-texting from OT sources.

***Emmanuel***: The Hebrew name "Emmanuel" is actually a phrase in Hebrew (`*immanu el*). It doesn't contain a verb, and it is usually correct to provide a present tense form of "to be," e.g., "God **is** with us." Thus this name doesn't imply that God **was** with us only during Jesus' lifetime, but that through Jesus, God continues to be with us.

Some scholars noting the phrase in Isaiah 7:14 and 8:8, point out that the preposition `*im* = "with" comes from the verb `*MM* which means: (1) "to be hidden" and (2) "to be common or in common". The primary noun from this verb, `*am* means "people" or a "group of people" who have something in common. It is often used of Israelites in opposition to Gentiles. It is part of the phrase `*am ha'arez* = "people of the land". It is also used of a "swarm" or "flock" of animals.

Thus it is suggested that the translation "God is with us" doesn't completely capture the sense of the Hebrew. The words suggest that "God is **in common** with us people" or "God is one of us." In this vein, John captures the sense with "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14a).

**1:25** *until she bore a son*: the evangelist is concerned to emphasize that Joseph was not responsible for the conception of Jesus. The Greek word translated "until" does not imply normal marital conduct after Jesus' birth, nor does it exclude it.