

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.

Genealogies are important: even if they doze off in the middle everybody always listens to the start of what you're saying, and the New Testament starts right there at the beginning of St Matthew's gospel with a genealogy. You've just heard it. It's important. You might not have heard it otherwise if I hadn't just read it, and it's important that you do hear it. St Matthew for one thought so.

Genealogies are important. There's almost certainly someone in your extended family who's realised this and has spent many years and many pennies contacting distant second cousins, scouring census returns and pestering clergy about old registers, constructing your genealogy, digging up your ancestors, researching your family tree.

Genealogies are important: they tells us how we got to where we are today.

And if genealogies are important, none is more important than the genealogy of Jesus, the central person of human history.

So, what can we say about what we've just heard? Like all genealogies, the list of forbears in Matthew's gospel is designed less to be strictly historically accurate than to tell a story, to make a point, to say something about *now* by talking about the past. When we research our family trees, what we're really interested in is *our* ancestor, how those branches of dividing DNA ended up with *us*, how we can explain today by looking at our forbears. What we want to know is our story.

So, we know Matthew is not trying to scientifically map DNA: his genealogy is all a bit too tidy- there are equal numbers of ancestors from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, from the exile to Joseph. Real life is never so neat. That should alert us straight away that a story is being told.

But there's an even bigger clue. When we first listen to this ancestor list we might be impressed by all the great men there are in Jesus' genealogy. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David, Solomon: on and on, there's a lot of testosterone swagger in that litany. But as the maxim goes, behind every great man is a surprised woman (and about 5% of the time a surprised man), and if you approach the genealogy of Jesus with eagle eyes or rabbit ears, you will have noticed that it's not just men in there. All that relentless begetting is periodically broken with a woman's name. You might not have noticed. You might have noticed but not thought that this was anything remarkable. After all, almost certainly if you set about tracing your family tree you'll put both men and women in it. In 1st century Palestine, having women named in your family tree would be unheard of. If you've ever got some spare time and have had enough of watching the paint dry and the grass grow, try reading some of the genealogies that appear in Genesis, Numbers or Chronicles. And then when you wake up again, keep going. And if you persist, perhaps with a crate of Red Bull and a supply of matchsticks, you'll realise that it's all fellas. You don't need to bother now because I've told you. Trust me, I'm a priest. Point is, back then when the gospels were being written, you didn't put women in genealogies because men did all the interesting stuff and women were only ever second-class humans, and who wants a second class family tree?

So when those early Christians first heard the start of Matthew's gospel they'd have been shocked. Wow. There are *women* in there. But that's only the start, just a little shake to soften you up.

There are five women named in Jesus' ancestor list. If that's not startling enough, these are not 'great' women like Boadicea or Cleopatra, Florence Nightingale or

Judith, Amazons and Heroines, Queens and Princesses, : people you could just about be proud of if they weren't inconveniently the wrong sex. When we're talking Jesus' forbears it's less a case of behind every great man is a great woman and more alongside the blokes are some really dodgy women. We might not think so in the 21st century, I'd hope we wouldn't, but you can bet your bottom dollar that the first century hearer of our list would have mostly been utterly scandalised and maybe just a few, as ever, would have been thrilled at the brazen parade of broken taboos.

So let's name these women and discover why two thousand years ago you'd be embarrassed to have them on your Christmas card list. These women are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary.

Tamar's tale doesn't tend to make it into the Sunday morning readings. Tamar was the wife of Onan. Her husband's doesn't either. For reasons that might be implicit in her husband's name, Tamar's marriage wasn't blessed with the pitter patter of tiny feet. So frustrated was she by this that she disguised herself as a prostitute, seduced her father-in-law Judah and became pregnant. When Judah heard that his daughter in law was expecting and had, in that charming scriptural phrase 'played the whore', he had her dragged out to be burned, the punishment for all adulterers. Until Tamar revealed the paternity of her bairn and, acutely embarrassing as well, Judah's amazing hypocrisy. A bit like the Jeremy Kyle show, but with tents and camels. Good old Bible values eh? That's Tamar. I've lingered a little on her tale because it's the one you're least likely to have heard before.

Our next female ancestor is Rahab. Rahab didn't pretend to be a sex worker: she was one. And not only that she was a traitor to her people, betraying them to Joshua's genocidal armies.

Ruth was a foreigner (never a good thing to be in ancient cultures) with an unhealthy suspect devotion to her mother-in-law and a readiness to do what it takes with Boaz on the threshing floor. Once you know Hebrew euphemisms, some Bible passages are never the same again.

Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon, was an adulteress and an accessory to murder.

And finally, Mary. A pregnant teenager with a child conceived out of wedlock and not with her betrothed.

So. Five women. Each one a scandal. Not one of them would any self-respecting ancient boy want to take home to meet his family. And they're the only ones Matthew bothered to mention.

So there on the very first page of the first gospel is a hint as to what the rest of the book will be about, a clue that the remaining twenty-seven chapters of St Matthew after the first will be dedicated to showing that the whole system of thinking of which family heritage and ancestral lineage are but one integral part, that whole way of thinking is over.

As well as being the hint that from now on everything will change- who's in and who's out, who matters and who doesn't, who's at the top of the heap and who's at the bottom, the way relate to each other and the way we relate to God: as well as saying that everything from this point forward is going to be very different, the start of this gospel is also pointing out that the big picture is made up of lots of smaller pictures and *they* are all going to change too: the status quo will be undermined from the inside. Starting right from the very beginning.

Noticing the women in Jesus genealogy, the scandal their presence would have provoked, the challenge to the status quo their inclusion in the list represents, we've missed the even more important point: it's not the genealogy of Jesus at all. It's the genealogy of Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father. It's that favourite Bible trick of letting you think you know what's going on before the rug's whipped out from under your feet, lulling you into a false sense of security before saying 'Actually, it's not about that at all'. So with the generations of Jesus, the whole point of genealogies is subverted. Genealogies are important. And this one is important for showing us that they don't matter at all. What that long list of begetters and begotten says is: where you came from, biologically, doesn't matter. Your family might be the people who share your genes, and it might not. The reality is you make your own family. And in the Kingdom of God what matters is your relationship to God. Not heredity. Not family background. Not your sex. Not your sexual orientation. Not your social respectability. Not the dodgy things in your past. But the way you respond to God's son when he calls your name.