

# main course

## who do you think you are?



### INTRODUCTION

In our culture, lots of people want to research their family history, and the television series 'Who do you think you are?' does this for celebrities.

We don't often think about the way the Bible describes the family background of Jesus, though.

At the start of Matthew's gospel there is a version of the family tree of Jesus, with a list of his ancestors, which we often leave out when we read the Bible.

### AIM

The aim of this session is to look at this passage:

- to consider why the gospel of Matthew has a family tree for Jesus
- to ask why it comes where it does in the Bible
- to uncover the contribution of the people named
- to explore how this relates to us today.

### YOU WILL NEED

You will need:

- a copy of Matthew 1: 1-17 for everyone - don't worry if people bring a variety of Bible versions
- some large sheets of paper, marker pens, and a way to display the sheets
- enough Bible concordances and Bible dictionaries, or copies of background information on characters named in the family tree, for people to share in twos and threes

There is more material here than you may cover in one session. You may leave some out or arrange another session.

### GETTING STARTED (10 minutes)

The Bible contains both the Old and New Testaments.

This raises questions as to why, and to what the relationship is between the two Testaments.

Some might ask if we still need them both and wonder what each contributes to our faith today.

Begin by inviting people to form twos or threes. Ask them to think for a short time individually and then to share their views on these questions:

- How do you see the Old Testament?
- What is its relationship to the New Testament?
- How do they inform our faith today?

Bring the group back together and invite people to share their responses. Allow people to hear the range of views being expressed.

### DISCOVERING THE FAMILY TREE (20 minutes)

Ask the group to read Matthew 1:1-17. It will be good if someone does this aloud, while others follow in their own texts. The reader will need to prepare because of the names.

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Now pose the question why this passage has been placed at the beginning of the New Testament.

Reassure the group there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. Encourage discussion on the following questions, and record the answers on large sheets of paper, which you then display

- Who is this about?
- What is it about?
- Who are the key characters?
- What are the key events?
- Is a pattern emerging

Now you may:

- look more closely at the main characters
- compare this text with another
- look at some of the women named
- think about the meanings of 'Messiah' and 'Babylon'.

You do not have to cover all these questions or do them in a set order. Resources for each topic are given in full after the concluding section.

### IN CONCLUSION: WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE? (15 minutes)

It is best to end by revisiting the opening questions on the Old and New Testaments, and our faith now, and asking:

- Have your views changed as a result of this discussion?
- If so why?
- What has this process added to your understanding of who we are?

### EVALUATION

To close, ask the group:

- What was helpful in what we've done?
- What was unhelpful?
- What do we want to do next?

### ADDITIONAL MATERIAL FOR THIS BIBLE STUDY

#### Looking more closely at the main characters

Ask the group to form twos or threes and to identify any characters, familiar or unfamiliar, which interest them from the family tree in Matthew 1: 1-17.

Invite them to consider where some of the stories of these characters can be found. Assist them by providing several Bible concordances, Bible dictionaries or copies of background material on the various characters for them. The internet may be helpful in gathering this information.

Having looked at the stories of the characters they've chosen, ask the groups to discuss the significance of each character briefly.

Draw the group together at the end of the process and invite each two and three to share what they've discovered about one character they explored.

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Ask them to consider whether anyone has been left out of the family tree. If so, why?

Here is a full list of references for where the characters named in Matthew's family tree of Jesus appear in other parts of the Bible. Those marked \* might be especially interesting to look at.

Abraham	Genesis 12:1 - 25:11
Isaac	Genesis 21:3 - 35:29
Jacob	Genesis 25:26 - 49:33
Judah*	Genesis 29:35; 35:23; 37:26 - 38:26; 44:14-34; 49:8-13
Boaz	Ruth 2:1 - 4:22; 1 Chronicles 2:11-12
Jesse	Ruth 4:17-22; 1 Samuel 16:1 - 17:20; Isaiah 11:1
David	1 Samuel 16:11 - 1 Kings 2:11; 1 Chronicles 10:14 29:30; Psalm 72:20; 89:3-4; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24-28
Solomon	2 Samuel 12:24; 1 Kings 1:11 - 11:43; 1 Chronicles 28:4 - 2 Chronicles 9:31; Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; Song of Solomon 1:1
Rehoboam*	1 Kings 11:43 - 12:24; 14:21-31; 2 Chronicles 9:31 - 12:16
Jehoshaphat*	1 Kings 22:1-50; 2 Chronicles 17:1 - 21:3
Uzziah* (Azariah)	2 Kings 14:21-22; 15:1-34; 2 Chronicles 26:1-23; Isaiah 1:1; 6:1; Hosea 1:1; Amos 1:1
Ahaz*	2 Kings 15:38 - 16:20; 2 Chronicles 27:9 - 28:27; Isaiah 1:1; 7:1-17; Hosea 1:1; Micah 1:1
Hezekiah*	2 Kings 18:1 - 20:21; 2 Chronicles 28:27 - 32:33; Isaiah 36:1 - 39:8
Manasseh*	2 Kings 21:1-18; 2 Chronicles 33:1-20
Josiah*	2 Kings 22:1 - 23:30; 2 Chronicles 34:1 - 35:27
Jechoniah* (Jehoiachin) (Coniah)	2 Kings 24:6-17; 25:27-30; 2 Chronicles 36:8-10; 25:27-30; 2 Chronicles 36:8-10; Jeremiah 22:24-30; 52:31-34
Zerubbabel	Ezra 2:2; 3:2 - 4:3; 5:1-2; Haggai 1:1 - 2:23; Zechariah 4:6-10

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### Comparing this text with another

Ask people to form smaller groups of up to four or five members. Invite them to look up Luke 3:23-38 and to compare it with the passage in Matthew. Ask them to note any differences.

Allow some time for discussion as they share what they have discovered.

Now bring the group back together and give people space to share what they have found. You may note down their ideas on a large sheet of paper, so everyone can see. Some of the following information may be helpful in dealing with questions about different spellings of names, the discrepancies between the two versions, and issues of truth.

### *Background notes for those leading the group*

Biblical names often occur in different versions. Sometimes characters are renamed (as when Abram becomes Abraham in Genesis 17:5). More often the variation relates to whether it is the Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek form of the name that has been recorded and is being given in an Anglicised form.

Some scholars think that the family tree of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew refers to the royal line. They say Matthew emphasises Jesus' descent from David and from Abraham, to focus on his kingship.

These scholars see the family tree in the gospel of Luke as being Joseph's natural line of descent. Luke works in reverse order, tracing the line back to Adam and God, and focussing on the sonship, the shared humanity, of Jesus.

Other scholars think that Matthew gives Joseph's ancestors, while Luke gives Mary's.

Matthew follows a numerical pattern with 14 names from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the exile in Babylon, and the same number between the return from exile and the birth of Jesus. This gospel also places the genealogy before stories about the birth of Jesus. Luke has a fuller, unbroken list of names and uses it to introduce the adult ministry of Jesus.

There is general agreement that both Gospel writers are using the family tree (genealogy) of Jesus to reveal theological ideas about him as the Messiah. Both are selecting material from a wide range available to them.

Both Gospel writers are presenting theological ideas and neither is claiming their genealogy is historically accurate.

### Looking at some of the women

Ask the group to consider this question:

Why do you think Matthew includes women in the family tree of Jesus?

Invite people to name the four women listed in Matthew 1:1-17.

Ask people to consider these questions:

- Who were they?
- What were their stories?
- What do they have in common?
- What do they add to the message of this passage?

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*Background notes for those leading the group*

The four women characters named in Matthew's family tree of Jesus are also referred to elsewhere in the Bible:

- Tamar            Genesis 38:6-30; Ruth 4:12
- Rahab           Joshua 2:1-24; 6:17, 22-25
- Ruth            The Book of Ruth
- Uriah's wife    2 Samuel 11:2 - 12:25;  
(Bathsheba)    1 Kings 1:11-31; 2:13-25

All of these women are non-Israelites. They all take the initiative where they are to enable God's purposes to be fulfilled. They all behave in ways that are outside the normal expectations of their society. The 'irregular' nature of their relationships is an important aspect of their stories.

In this sense, they prepare readers for the 'irregular' story of Mary, as the unmarried mother of Jesus.

### Thinking more about meanings

It is important to remind people that there are no 'right' and 'wrong' answers.

### Messiah

Ask the group:

- What do you think is the significance of the term 'Messiah'?
- Why do you think Matthew mentions it here three times? (Matthew 1:1; 1:16; 1:17.)

*Background notes for those leading the group*

Messiah is a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed'. Christ is the Greek form of the same word.

It was used for King David and his royal descendants. They were anointed by prophets as a sign that God had chosen them to be king. The anointing symbolised the giving of God's spirit to equip the king for his role.

The monarchy ended with the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. When the exiles returned and temple worship was restored the High Priests were similarly anointed.

Gradually the idea developed of a future Messiah being raised up by God to redeem Israel from her oppressors.

In the time of Jesus many saw this hope of a Messiah in political terms, but royal, priestly and prophetic ideas were also linked to it.

### Babylon

Ask the group:

- Why is Babylon mentioned?
- What does it represent?
- Why is the deportation into exile mentioned?
- Why does 'fourteen' recur?

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*Background notes for those leading the group*

The Babylonian exile (597-537 BCE) was the critical event in Jewish understanding of their history. It was when some of them were removed from the Promised Land by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king. This came to be understood as a punishment from God because God's people had failed to keep the covenant begun at Sinai. It was a time for repentance and significant theological development.

After the exile, the name 'Babylon' came to represent everything negative and opposed to God. It stood for the most oppressive power imaginable. The nation of Babylon lost its independent existence after 537 BCE when it was overrun by the Persians. It then became part of the Greek and then the Roman empires. Throughout this time its power as a symbol grew stronger, hence its use in Revelation 17:5; 18:2, 10.

The way this passage uses three groups of 14 names is another powerful symbol. It takes two sevens to make 14, and seven is a highly significant number. Jesus is born at the end of three sequences of 14 names. This baby, the gospel writer is saying, is the Messiah we've waited for all this time.

Let the conversation stray into Babylon as symbolic, rather than literal, or into Babylon (Iraq) today if this arises naturally in the group.