

**“WHAT’S IN A NAME?”**  
**A STUDY ON THE MATTHEAN GENEALOGY**  
**(MT 1,1-17)**  
Part Two\*

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*Abstract:* Inspired by the rhetorical study of William Subash on the dreams in Matthew 1–2 and Ansgar Wucherpfennig’s article on the Matthean genealogy, the author launches a new approach to the Matthean genealogy by studying the names therein. The study investigates the reason why Matthew selected these names and seeks to determine their function in the infancy narrative and in the Gospel. It is divided into two parts: I Part: 1) Matthew’s sources, 2) etymology of names, 3) the structure of the three parts of the genealogy, 4) additions in the genealogy. II Part: 5) the women in the genealogy, 6) changed and inserted names, 7) symbolic reading.

*Keywords:* Genealogy. Covenant. Patriarchs. Kings of Judah. Women in the Bible. Etymology of Names in the Bible. Messiah. Matthew.

¿Qué significado tiene un nombre? Un estudio sobre la genealogía mateana (Mt 1,1-17) (Segunda parte).

*Resumen:* Inspirada en el estudio de William Subash acerca de los sueños en Mt 1–2 y en el artículo de Ansgar Wucherpfennig sobre la genealogía en el evangelio de Mateo, la autora aborda un nuevo enfoque de la genealogía mateana por medio del estudio de los nombres contenidos en dicho evangelio. El estudio investiga la razón de por qué Mateo seleccionó esos nom-

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bres y busca determinar su función en los relatos de la infancia y en el evangelio. Dicho estudio está dividido en dos partes: primera parte, 1) las fuentes de Mateo, 2) la etimología de los nombres, 3) estructura de las tres partes de la genealogía, 4) adiciones en la genealogía. Segunda parte: 5) las mujeres en la genealogía, 6) nombres cambiados e insertados, 7) lectura simbólica.

*Palabras clave:* Genealogía. Pacto. Patriarcas. Reyes de Judá. Mujeres en la Biblia. Etimología de los nombres en la Biblia. Mesías. Mateo.

## 5. The Women in the Genealogy

Women are mentioned in the genealogy in their function as mothers. The first three women in the first part of the genealogy, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, parallel the three matriarchs Sara, Rebecca, Rachel<sup>1</sup>, and they are remembered with great honor in Jewish popular piety in Matthew’s time<sup>2</sup>. The fourth woman is not mentioned by name but linked to her murdered husband. The last woman is Mary, the one who mothered the Messiah.

### 5.1. Tamar

Tamar is the first female name mentioned in the genealogy. Her name means “palm tree”; its verbal form, *tmr*, means “be erect, stiff”<sup>3</sup>. The palm tree is the symbol of the righteous (cf. Ps 92,13), and of the beauty of the bride (cf. Song 7,9). It holds “an important place in the lives of the Hebrew people, for they literally put the entire tree to use”<sup>4</sup>, and “sacred associations with the palm are found throughout the ancient Near East, especially in glyptic art. It often appears as the Tree of Life on cylinder seals and in other forms of art”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. WUCHERPFENNIG, “Jesus mehr als Salomo”, 716. Rachel’s name is the triad and not Leah’s, for Rachel could have been the only wife of Jacob had Laban not switched his two daughters on the first night after the marriage of Jacob with one of them, and had Leah and Rachel not given him their respective maidservants.

<sup>2</sup> A brief discussion on the rabbinic literature’s treatment of these women at the time of Matthew is offered by PAUL, *Il vangelo*, 30-35.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. BDB, 1071. For the occurrences of the name and the verb, see EVEN-SHOSHAN, *Concordance*, 1234.

<sup>4</sup> “Palm Tree,” in MYERS (ed.), *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, 791.

<sup>5</sup> TREVER, “Palm Tree”, 646.

Tamar, whose story is recounted in Genesis 38, is linked to Judah, who married a daughter of a Canaanite named Shua. She was presumably a daughter of the land and not an Aramaean like the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel. Abraham had his servant Eleazar swear that he should not procure a wife for Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites with whom he was living, but from among his kindred (cf. Gn 24,4).

Tamar was given as wife to Judah's son, Er, and after his death she was given to his brother Onan in levirate marriage. When Onan also died, Judah sent her back to her father's house to wait until his last son, Shelah, grew up and could take her in marriage. But Judah had no intention to give him to Tamar for he feared to lose also his third son, and when this became obvious to Tamar, she took the initiative to raise a descendant for his dead husband by their father, Judah. She willfully "erected" the line of her husband – and therefore the line of Judah – by resorting to a ruse, playing the harlot, in order to attract her father-in-law, shortly bereaved of his wife. Twins, in place of Jacob's two sons who died, are born to Judah and Tamar. The line of kings is traced back to one of Tamar's sons, Perez, not to Shelah.

Jews at the time of Matthew regarded her as a saint and a model for the proselytes<sup>6</sup>.

## 5.2. Rahab

The second of the three female names in the first part of the genealogy is Rahab. Her name –from the verb *rhb*, "be wide, large"<sup>7</sup>– means "extending; pride"<sup>8</sup>. The only woman bearing this name in the Old Testament is the harlot of Jericho, who safeguarded Joshua's scouts. The scarlet thread (*šānī*), which Joshua's spies gave to her (Josh 2,18), reminds us of the scarlet thread (*šānī*) the midwife tied around the wrist of the first born of Tamar, Zerach (Gn 38,28-29). In both occasions the scarlet thread marked the one possessing it: to proclaim the presence of Rahab and her family in the house, and to tag Zerach as the firstborn. Like Tamar, Rahab is not Aramaean. According to rabbinic traditions Joshua married her and that she was a proselyte<sup>9</sup>.

Outside the Matthean genealogy, Rahab is mentioned only two times in the New Testament, in Heb 11,31 and Jas 2,25<sup>10</sup>, both in the passa-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. PAUL, *Il vangelo*, 30-32.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. BDB, 931; *EncBib* IV, 4007.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. POTTS, *Dictionary*, 200.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. PAUL, *Il vangelo*, 32-33.

<sup>10</sup> Where her name is spelled Raab. Cf. MGM, 880.

ges dealing with faith, where she is praised for her faith. In the Letter to the Hebrews she is remembered together with the patriarchs and Moses, she did not perish with the inhabitants of Jericho on account of her faith; in James she is presented on a par with Abraham! For these two Jewish Christian authors Rahab is exemplary because of her faith in something that she knew would be fulfilled in God's appointed time (cf. Josh 2,9-14). This evidence of Rahab's faith shows the Jews' high regard of her in the first century. However, outside Matthew, nowhere in the Old Testament and New Testament do we learn that Rahab was taken as wife by an Israelite. Matthew must have inserted the name on purpose just as he did in the phrase "Jechoniah *and his brothers*".

### 5.3. Ruth

The third woman in the genealogy is a Moabitess. Her story is recorded in the book bearing her name. She was a widow who followed her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem. She became the wife of her dead husband's relative, not so close as to have in line before him another who remained without a name.

The Moabites and the Ammonites are descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew (cf. Gn 19,30-38). They are the enemies of Israel during the wandering (cf. Nm 22-24) and after the settlement (cf. Judg 3,12-14). According to the Persian sage, Aphrahat, whom the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner defined as "a truly 'docile pupil' of no one, but a powerful and independent mind"<sup>11</sup>, in Ruth's marriage with Boaz, the sons of Lot are grafted on to the line of the Messiah<sup>12</sup>. Thus he wrote, "Boaz married Ruth the Moabitess, so that Lot might be a partner in the blessing of the righteous"<sup>13</sup>. He received this portion of blessing because "God did not reject the hospitality of Lot, the son of Abraham's brother, who went forth with him from Harran, and because he hospitably received strangers like

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<sup>11</sup> NEUSNER, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, xi. At the beginning of his comparative study on Aphrahat's thought on Judaism and the ante-Nicene Fathers' he stated succinctly, "Aphrahat was a pupil of Christ, not of rabbis" (196), and he concluded, "we can hardly imagine Aphrahat depended for his repertoire of Scriptural testimonies on earlier Church Fathers. Clearly, he followed the New Testament testimonies, and proceeded along the lines of exegesis set forth there" (233).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. APHRAHAT, *Demonstratio XXIII*, in PARISOT, *Patrologia Syriaca*, II, 48, 9-23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ib.*, 11-12.

Abraham his uncle”<sup>14</sup>. And “God remembered Lot again by the hand of Naamah the Ammonite, whom Solomon married, and who gave birth to King Rehoboam”<sup>15</sup>. For Aphrahat, Ruth is not only a means through which the enemies become united to Israel, but also a means through which the blessing of Abraham would pass on to the descendants of Lot. Ruth, then, is a sign of unity and reconciliation.

#### 5.4. Wife of Uriah

Unlike the rabbinic literature’s attempt to ease the sin away from David and place it upon Bethshabea<sup>16</sup>, Matthew seems to deliberately link her to her righteous husband, although Solomon was born after his death, hence allowing her to become David’s legal wife. Like Nathan who never mentioned her by name but as “the wife of Uriah,” Matthew draws our attention to David’s adultery with the wife of Uriah. The mention of Uriah reminds us of his tragic end – killed by David “with the sword of the Ammonites” (2 Sam 12,9). Nathan’s parable shows that the initiative was not hers. Acted upon, she appears in the parable and in Matthew’s genealogy without a name. “Bathsheba who survives as a queen never emerges as a person”<sup>17</sup>.

Her name, *bat-šeba*’, Bathsheba, means “daughter of seven”, *šeba*’, “seven”<sup>18</sup>, or “daughter of oath”, the verb *šb*’ means “swear, take an oath”<sup>19</sup>. The first element of her name, *bat*’ “daughter,” may be implied in Nathan’s parable of the sheep which was like a daughter to the poor man. The second element, *šeba*’, may be alluded to at the death on the seventh (*šby*’<sup>19</sup>) day of the first child of David and Bathsheba (cf. 2 Sam 12,18)<sup>20</sup>. As we have seen above, in Matthew’s view David’s adultery and the murder of Uriah led to the downfall of his house.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ib.*, 15-18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ib.*, 20-23.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. PAUL, *Il vangelo*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> SCHABERG, *Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 41.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. BDB, 987-988.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. BDB, 989.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. GARSIEL, *Biblical Names*, 195.

## 5.5. Mary

Matthew does not inform us concerning the tribe whence Mary comes. Yet if the Child had to be David’s descendant at all, then Mary must have been a Judahite. The other four women before her are all foreigners and with questionable reputation. She is a virgin and presented as Joseph’s spouse in the period before cohabitation. What does she have in common with the other women? She is not a widow like Tamar, Ruth and the wife of Uriah, let alone a harlot like Rahab.

According to Paul André it is Mary’s vocation which is prepared and prefigured through the vocation of the four women. However, one must draw a distinctive line between them and Mary; for while the first four represent the feminine contribution to the continuity of the promise, on the other hand, Mary, plays a peculiar role which Matthew puts to the fore by giving her a place in the male successions of the generations (cf. the verb *gennáō* in v. 16b)<sup>21</sup>.

It is by examining the two occurrences of the formula “*x* and his brothers” and the two pairs of father-son segment that we can find out what Mary has in common with the women mentioned before her in the genealogy. The first and the last elements of the phrases and pairs are parallel and they offer an interpretation by comparison. Hence we need to put Mary, the last of the five women, in comparison to the first woman, Tamar. The parallelism is suggested after the parallelism between Judah and Joseph, which we have analyzed in 4.3.

The four women before Mary are regarded also as preparation of the coming of the One who searched not the just but the sinners<sup>22</sup>, but although this can be true, Matthew seems to be giving an important message with Mary at the end of the list. When put alongside the first woman of the list, we find that Mary and Tamar have one thing in common: both were found to be with child and ran the risk of being executed.

Mary may also be compared with the unnamed “wife of Uriah”, for, Matthew, unlike Luke, remarkably depicted her without initiative of her own. She is taken –like Bathsheba– as wife by Joseph as commanded him by the angel, after knowing about her mysterious pregnancy, and it is he who will name her Child (cf. Mt 1,24-25). Yet, whereso the mother of Solomon is unmentioned by name, and her passivity in David’s sin and her

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. PAUL, *Il vangelo*, 35-37.

<sup>22</sup> See discussion on the four women in SCHABERG, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 32-43.

husband's murder is manifest, Mary is mentioned by name and clearly presented as the legal spouse of a son of David. It is through her that the awaited Messiah, "who will save his people from their sins" (1,21), will be born.

A closer examination of the five women yields a point of convergence in Tamar.

*Tamar and Rahab:* Tamar was accused of harlotry, Rahab was a harlot. What they have in common aside from being non-Aramaeans is the mention of the "scarlet thread," which was a sign that saved Rahab's family when Joshua and his men attacked Jericho, and marked the firstborn of Judah and Tamar. In both occasions the scarlet thread announces life.

*Tamar and Ruth* are both widows and taken in levirate marriage. Both had contact with their male partners in the context of joyous seasonal gatherings: Judah took the disguised Tamar at the time of shearing; Boaz remained for a night with Ruth at the threshing floor, and even if she did not disguise herself, nonetheless she had to dress up in order not to be recognized by Boaz. The ruse of both women was met with success and they gave descendants to their respective partners.

In the first part of the genealogy the three women have taken the initiative of bringing life in the context of death.

*Tamar and the wife of Uriah:* Bathsheba became a widow and was pregnant of her lover. Tamar was also a widow found with child of harlotry. Adultery and harlotry are punished by the Law, but in the case of the wife of Uriah nowhere do we learn that she was accused, while Tamar barely escaped death. In the first part of the genealogy, justice is pursued; in the second part there is no sign that David's transgressions are going to be punished until God sent to him the prophet Nathan.

*Tamar and Mary* were both found with child out of wedlock and could have been punished with death, had Tamar not taken the initiative and had Joseph not decided to divorce Mary silently in order to live legally with the one who impregnated her. The glaring difference between their male partners—one wanted to exact justice, the other showed loving compassion—demonstrates how women's destiny in the ancient world depended heavily on their male partners. However, Tamar is an example of how women can change this custom, especially when justice is compromised. Tamar, therefore, is a perfect bearer of her name—the palm tree: so majestic in her erect stature—for it is she who personifies the complex figure of a woman in the genealogical line of the Messiah.

## 6. Changed and Inserted Names

In this section we shall try to understand why in the first part of the genealogy, Matthew changed the name of Ram to *Aram* and he inserted the name *Rahab* whose marriage to an Israelite has no narrative support. In the second part two names are changed: *Asaph* for Asa and *Amos* for Amon.

### 6.1. Aram for Ram (“exalted”)

Aram appears thrice in the Pentateuch<sup>23</sup>: in the primeval period, it is the name of one of the sons of Shem and grandson of Noah (Gn 10,22-23), in the period of the patriarchs, it is the name of the son of Kemuel and grandson of Nahor, Abraham’s brother (Gn 22,21; LXX *Syriōn*). Before the entrance to the Promised Land, the Israelites must remember that their father was “Aramaeans” (the creed of Israel; cf. Dt 26,5 *’ārammî*; LXX *Syrian*). At the time of the wandering in the desert, Balak summoned Balaam without knowing that the one he had hired to curse the tents of Israel (cf. Nm 22–24) came from the same regions whence the ancestor of Israel also came (Nm 23,7 *’ārām*; LXX *Mesopotamia*). It comes as no surprise that Balaam could not but bless the descendants of the one who journeyed long way from Ur.

Aram is a personal name meaning “exalted”<sup>24</sup>, and name of a place whose inhabitants are called Aramaeans. They “were seen as kinsmen of Israel-Judah”<sup>25</sup>. Abaraham wanted that the wife for Isaac be taken from among his kindred in Aram-naharaim (cf. Gn 24), a custom his descendants ought to comply. Changing Ram to Aram may be a reminder before the entrance to the Promised Land of the origins of the patriarchs, but also a call to remain faithful to the ancestor’s wish to take for wife only from among their kinsmen. In Matthew’s genealogy the four women are all non-Aramaeans and this may be a clue that in the Matthean community intermarriage was an important issue. If this is true, then, the first part of the genealogy must also reflect the founding members of the Matthean community. These founding members, presumably of Jewish origins, must have taken non-Jewish wives, some of whom must have had questionable reputation.

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<sup>23</sup> EVEN-SHOSHAN, *Concordance*, 111.

<sup>24</sup> POTTS, *Dictionary*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> AXSKJÖLD, *Aram as the Enemy Friend*, 9.



But another aspect emerges at the change of the name from Ram to Aram. Ram which also means “exalted” is exclusively a personal name, while Aram is both a personal name and a name of place. Matthew preferred the latter identification. In the Gospel we read Jesus saying that we must not call “father” any man in this world, for we have only one Father, who is in heaven (cf. Mt 23,9), and that we must not “exalt” ourselves before anyone, lest we be humiliated (cf. Mt 23,12). This may be the reason why Matthew changed the name from Ram to Aram. If this is true, then we may assume that here we are also given a clue as to why Matthew chose the changed name of the first ancestor, Abraham, “father of multitude of nations,” and not his unchanged name, Abram, which means “exalted father.” Matthew will speak later of giving glory to God through our actions. He alone is the “exalted”. He alone is the “Father” who cares for all his creatures.

## **6.2. Rahab vs. Rehoboam (“expansion of people”)**

Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, is otherwise unknown ancestress of David. The insertion of her name, and the memory it evokes, leads us to put her alongside “her descendant” with a compound name, Rehoboam, “the people is enlarged” or “expansion of people.”

Matthew is alluding to the fact that just as the heart of Rahab was opened wide toward the enemies of her people, so Rehoboam’s heart was closed toward his own people, so numerous that his father gave him a name attesting this fact. Thanks to Rahab, the people of Israel was able to penetrate and settle in the land of Canaan; whereas Rehoboam caused secession among the people leading to the division of the kingdom. This division never really healed, the breach just grew wider until both kingdoms fall in the hands of their enemies. Even at the time of Matthew we can see that the enmity between Judah and Samaria was still an issue. In Matthew Jesus orders his disciples not to enter to preach the coming kingdom in any of the Samaritan towns and cities.

The purpose of the insertion of Rahab as ancestress of the Messiah, therefore, serves to put her—a foreigner welcoming the Israelites—over against the unaccommodating king who became enemy to some of his subjects.

## **6.3 Asaph for Asa (“gatherer” and “healer”)**

The name of Asaph in place of King Asa has raised questions. First, because the one bearing this name is one who served at the Tent during

David’s and Solomon’s time, and his descendants are among the returnees from the Babylonian exile. Second, the twelve psalms attributed to him have the earmarks of a witness of the fall of Samaria, and therefore a northerner<sup>26</sup>. If Asaph was not originally a resident of Judah but a survivor of the northern kingdom, then his family who returned with the others from Babylon had witnessed not one but two catastrophes.

Asaph comes from the verb *’sp* “gather”<sup>27</sup>, while Asa from the verb *’s* “heal”<sup>28</sup>. At the end of his life King Asa contracted an illness on the feet. Did Matthew judge that the name does not suit him? A reason for the change seems to be suggested by the situation in the period of King Asa’s reign, when three dynasties in the northern kingdom succeeded in a relatively short time and people were pouring back into the southern kingdom. Asa could have seized the opportunity to “gather” the people again and “heal” the breach, as David did after the death of Saul. Sadly, Asa did not follow the example of his ancestor. Rather, Chronicles report that he made matters worse by being the first one to open the way to the conquerors of the northern tribes. This move is criticized, because it made Aram gain some territories of the northern tribes. Once banished after the Assyrian invasion, with the exception of the priest who had to instruct the new population installed in Samaria to proper worship of the God of Israel, they never made their way back to their territories, unlike their brothers who were deported in Babylon but were allowed to go back to Judah.

The psalms attributed to Asaph, which speak of the fall of the Northern Kingdom, serve as a warning for the Southern Kingdom. These psalms make clear that the reason for their fall was their unfaithfulness to the covenant with YHWH. They are warning that the same fate will be allotted to them if they do not return to YHWH. The warning was unheeded, and the Asaphites witnessed the fall of the kingdom of Judah.

Changing the name from Asa to *Asaph*, therefore, has twofold purpose: first, Matthew is pointing to the inability of the Judahite king to grab

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<sup>26</sup> GOULDER’s study, *The Psalms of Asaph*, is a very important contribution to the understanding of the Asaphite Psalms, drawing our attention to their background, i.e. the northern kingdom before its fall. In these psalms the situation before and after the Assyrian invasion are described. The Asaphites somehow managed to reach the southern kingdom and there continued their cult service. The inclusion of the psalms attributed to Asaph in the final form of the psalter indicates that they were the among those liable for its compilation. Perhaps, as Goulder sustains, they also played an important role in the completion of the Pentateuch.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. BDB, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. BDB, 61.

the opportunity to “gather” the people and bring them back under the rule of the king of Judah, and added to this is the king’s offering grounds to the enemies of his brothers, the northerners. Asaph’s name reminds the readers of the time of David in contrast to the time of Asa, and the psalms of Asaph bear witness to the fall of Samaria and they serve at the same time as prophecy to the fall of Judah. Secondly, Matthew is already preparing the readers for the coming of “the son of David and the son of Abraham”, who will send his disciples to gather the lost sheep of Israel.

#### 6.4. Amos for Amon (“burden-bearer” and “firmness”)

The other name in the line of kings which has been changed by Matthew is the name of king Amon, from the verb *'mn*, “confirm, be firm, be faithful”<sup>29</sup>. Instead, Matthew writes *Amos*, from the verb *'ms* “carry a load”<sup>30</sup>. It is the name of the prophet taken “from following the flock” (Am 7,15) to prophesy to the northern kingdom before its fall.

After the long reign of Manasseh, the people in Judah remained in idolatrous practice which had been introduced during his reign. His son Amon succeeded him, but he was assassinated shortly by some of his subjects. By changing his name into Amos, Matthew seems to be suggesting that the son of Manasseh has taken on himself the burden of his father’s unfaithfulness to the covenant. However, not only Amon but also his descendants bore the consequences of Manasseh’s idolatry, for the merciful Lord does not let anything go unchecked, punishing the father’s fault in the sons and in the grandsons to the third and fourth generations (cf. Ex 34,7). During the reign of the third king after Manasseh, the Babylonian army marched against Jerusalem and deported King Jehoniah together with his dignitaries. The change of Amon’s name into Amos, then, served the purpose of pointing to the imminent punishment, and the name of the prophet reminds the readers that just as the Lord had sent prophets to the kingdom of Samaria to warn them, so also the southern kingdom have been warned and called to repent before the punishment fell upon them.

The two verbal roots of the substituting names in the list of kings, *'sp* and *'ms*, can be found together in an oracle in Zech 12,3: “On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone (*'eben ma'āmāsāh*) for all the peoples; all who lift her (*'ōm<sup>e</sup>sēhā*) will be severely scratched. And all the nations of

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. BDB, 52-53.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. BDB, 770.

the earth will gather (*ne’esphû*) against her”. Matthew, who made use of the book of the prophet Zechariah, must have had this oracle in mind.

In the narrative before the Passion, at the betrayal of Judas and on their way to the Mount of Olives, the allusion-citations are both taken from Zechariah, Zech 11,12 and 13,7 respectively. Both passages speak of shepherds, and the second passage also speaks of the sheep being dispersed. David was a shepherd, who became king; hence the figure of a king-shepherd. But Nathan’s parable declares injustice and abuse of power: the wealthy man takes away the beloved sheep of a poor man. This is the people’s experience with their kings. By changing the names of the kings, Matthew brings to fore the kind of king the people long for: one who would gather them in one and take upon himself their burden.

In the Gospel, before his Passion, the Lord will look at Jerusalem, the unrepentant people, and weep for her, for she did not acknowledge the visit of the Lord, who wanted to gather her “as a hen would gather her chicks under her wings” and now her house will become like a desert (cf. Mt 23,37-38). He is the King who takes the burden of the illness and the sins of his people. He is the One who will sit on David’s throne (cf. Ps 132,11) and will reign forever.

The changed names, *Asaph* and *Amos*, therefore, do not indicate only God’s judgment on the Judahite kings, but also God’s mercy on both Samaria and Judah, shown through his servants the prophets<sup>31</sup>. These names may even reflect the situation of the Matthean community living under the Roman rule. They know well enough about kings past and present. Kings ought to gather (*’sp*) the people, carry their burden (*’ms*), heal (*’s’*) divisions, faithful (*’mn*) to the covenant and example for the people, but they have led them astray. The purpose of the changes, therefore, is not only to point the two kings’ –Asa and Amon– failure, but all the other kings’ as well, to meet the people’s (and ultimately God’s) expectations of a good king.

To the Jewish members of the Matthean community the changed (*Aram*, *Asaph*, *Amos*) and inserted (*Rahab*) names in the genealogy infuse hope, but for the Jews who did not acknowledge in Jesus of Nazareth the awaited Messiah, they must have been pronounced reverse. These names are clues to understanding the setting and reason for its composition. They are meant to be polemical and aimed to answer questions concerning the person and origin of Jesus Christ. He is the Sent One of the Exalted. He is the only one who has pity on the weary people. He *gathers* them to himself. He *heals*

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<sup>31</sup> There are prophetic speeches in the Psalms of Asaph.

them from their illness. He *carries* upon himself the burden of their sins, for he is the One who is ever *faithful* to His covenant with His people.

## 7. Symbolic Reading

### 7.1. *Biblos geneoseōs Iēsou Jristou*

The heading of the Matthean genealogy is the same as the LXX's rendering of the heading of the genealogy before the flood in Gn 5, from Adam to Noah, *sepher tōlēdōt* (5,1). It begins with the day God created man down to the destruction of humankind by the flood. It is remarkable that in all three parts of the Matthean genealogy, God is never mentioned, yet from the very first name, where we find the changed name of the first ancestor of Israel –changed by God!– and the last name of the genealogy, Jesus *the Anointed* –again by God– God is the unmentioned Omnipresent. For the Child will be named *Emmanuel*, “God-with-us”, and the rising of his star will announce to the world that he is the expected One, the Messiah, King of the Jews.

How are we going to translate *genesis*? It appears here in v. 1 and in v. 18 at the beginning of the narrative account of Jesus' birth after the genealogy. Does the term have the same meaning in both instances and can we translate it with the very same word? As Benedict Viviano pointed out, “The range of lexical possibilities for the meaning of *genesis* is fairly broad. It could be translated generation, genealogy, table of descent, birth, creation, beginning, lineage nativity, existence, life, nature, or origin”<sup>32</sup>. The scholar Matthew Thomas for one in his study on the genealogy and covenant preferred not to translate the word *tōlēdōt*, but simply transliterated the word<sup>33</sup>.

Thomas reports that a genealogy precedes the giving of a covenant, like that found in Gn 5, the beginning of a section extending to Gn 10. This section begins with the genealogy of humanity and narrows in the line of Noah, and then it ends with the covenant which is accompanied by the sign of the rainbow –with seven colors. Matthew's Gospel also begins with a genealogy ordered in seven's, and its final section– on the Passion and Death of Our Lord – seals the establishment of the new covenant not with the blood of animals, the sacrifice of pleasing odor to the Lord God after the flood, but with the blood of Jesus Christ. The sign of this new covenant, which does not annul the first, is the “sign of Jonah”: three days after his death, he will rise

<sup>32</sup> VIVIANO, *Matthew and His World*, 42.

<sup>33</sup> See THOMAS, *These are the Generations*.

from the dead. And parallel to God’s command to Noah and his sons together with the animals in the arc to go forth and multiply, the Gospel recounts that Jesus sent his disciples to the whole world to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The Matthean genealogy, therefore, is not only a heading of the infancy narrative but of the entire Gospel as well. With it Matthew is “sending a signal to the biblically literate reader that he is writing of a new Genesis, a new epoch in the history of salvation.”<sup>34</sup>

## 7.2. Son of David

Why is Jesus presented “Son of David” first? The people acclaim him as Son of David, and never as “Son of Abraham”. The Messiah is expected to come from the royal family of David. But the genealogy clearly displayed the Davidic dynasty’s ending with the Babylonian exile, bringing to naught the promise of a kingdom without end. The fall of the house of David was announced by the prophet Nathan after David’s sin with the wife of Uriah. It is useful to remember, as David T. Lamb suggests, that David received from YHWH through Nathan an eternal promise and an eternal curse<sup>35</sup>. For indeed He “has the authority to punish a corrupt dynasty, even one with an ‘eternal’ promise”<sup>36</sup>.

David’s son in the genealogy is Solomon<sup>37</sup>. Matthew does not hint at Solomon’s apostasy at the end of his life on account of his many wives. Rather, Solomon is presented in his glory as king, donning magnificent garments (6,29), and renowned for his wisdom (12,42). Both passages are imbedded in Jesus’ teaching on faith. Speaking to the crowds and to his disciples, Jesus tells them not to worry about what to eat and wear, but rather to trust in their heavenly Father, who takes care even of the lilies in the fields, who are better dressed than Solomon with all his glory. The Son of Man is our example of complete trust in God, for he himself “has nowhere to lay his head” (8,20). Later, he answers to his contemporaries asking for a sign that they would be given no other sign than that of Jonah, who brought back his contemporaries to God. It is here that Jesus draws the at-

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<sup>34</sup> VIVIANO, *Matthew and His World*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> See LAMB, “The ‘Eternal’ Curse”, 315-325.

<sup>36</sup> *Ib.*, 324-325.

<sup>37</sup> Solomon is mentioned only five times in the Gospel: twice in the genealogy (1,6.7) and thrice elsewhere (6,29; 12,42 twice). Cf. MGM, 898.

attention to the Queen of Sheba who made her way to listen to Solomon's renowned wisdom, yet "Behold, here is somebody greater than Solomon" (12,42)<sup>38</sup>. Thus, Solomon's wisdom is set in parallel to the teaching of Jesus. Both are "sons of David", yet Matthew seems to indicate a point of divergence when he punctuates in the angel's words to Joseph –called "son of David" (1,20)– that the son to be born of his spouse Mary will be named Jesus, "because he will save his people from their sins" (1,21).

Wucherpfennig is right in saying:

Jesus ist kein leiblicher Sohn Davids. Die Genealogie ist streng genommen kein Stammbaum Jesu, weil sie mit Josef als letztem legitimen Erben Davids endet. Jesus wird einerseits in die Sündengeschichte der Genealogie hineingeboren, setzt aber andererseits die ideale Urzeit fort. Sohn Davids ist er nicht deshalb, weil Josef ihn gezeugt hätte, sondern weil er ihn als Kind seiner Verlobten Maria annimmt. Gott gibt Israel an Stelle von Salomo einen neuen König, den er mit heiligem Geist aus Maria zeugt. Er sucht sich Josef, den legitimen Erbe David, als den aus, der seinen Sohn als Vater annimmt<sup>39</sup>.

Matthew's putting Jesus as "son of David" first, and only secondly "son of Abraham" may convey a message that even though the Messiah is expected to come from the line of David, it is the blessing given by God to Abraham, who held fast to his faith in God, that reaches beyond Israel, to the whole world.

### 7.3. Son of Abraham

Abraham, the father of all believers, is the first who received the promise of blessing from God. Matthew chose his changed name in the genealogy on purpose: he wants the community of believers who received his Gospel to remember that they have only one Father, the exalted One who dwells in heaven. Jesus in the Gospel is never called "Son of Abraham." Matthew had John the Baptist declare to Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism that they need not boast saying they have Abraham as their father, for God can raise children for Abraham out of stones (cf. Mt 3,9)<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> See the study exploring the concept of Solomonic sapiential messianism in 1 Kings, Matthew 1–2 and related texts of VIVIANO, "A Woman's Quest for Wisdom and the Adorations of the Magi as Part of Matthew's Program of Solomonic Sapiential Messianism", 683-700.

<sup>39</sup> Wucherpfennig, 719-720.

<sup>40</sup> The alliteration of the phrase in Hebrew has long been noted: *bānîm min-ha'ăḇ ānîm*.

The blessing God gave to Abraham –to become the father of many nations, from whom kings are descending, to whom God will establish an everlasting covenant (Gn 17,7)– is passed on to Isaac. What is really amazing is God’s promise that Abraham himself would become a blessing. This promise is renewed after he passed the test of obedience: to offer as burnt offering to the Lord his beloved son Isaac. Because Abraham did not withhold his son Isaac from God, he received the promise of a blessing for himself and his seed: “I will bless you and I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand upon the sea shore; and your seed will possess the gate of his enemies and in your seed will all the nations be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gn 22,17-18).

In the Gospel, a voice speaks from heaven at the baptism of Jesus –when he is acclaimed as Son– and the same voice again acclaims his sonship at the Transfiguration, and we are commanded to “listen to his voice”. It is no longer the voice from heaven that we must listen to –like the one who spoke to Abraham– but the Son’s. Abraham in offering his beloved son Isaac prefigured God’s offering His Only Son for the sake of humanity. The difference is stark: while the life of Abraham’s son was spared, the offering of God’s Son has been consummated. There was no ram to take his stead, for he was the Ram to be offered in sacrifice.

The first and the last name of the genealogy are helpful indicators to understand the function of the genealogy.<sup>41</sup> Just as the obedient Abraham became a blessing and people will be blessed in him, so Jesus Christ became the blessing for all humankind by his birth, death and resurrection in obedience to the Father. This explains why the heading of the genealogy mentions first the title “Son of David” and only secondly “Son of Abraham”; for the promise made to David was followed shortly by an oracle of doom, while the promise given to Abraham was renewed after he showed his unconditioned obedience to the God who called him from the land of Ur.

#### 7.4. The Numbers: Genealogy and Covenant

Numbers are featured in the genealogy. Matthew shaped his genealogy in three parts, each containing fourteen generations. To preserve such numbering he had to select the names to be included in the genealogy<sup>42</sup>. One

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<sup>41</sup> WILSON, *Genealogy*, 163-164.

<sup>42</sup> Genealogies in the ancient near eastern world and in the bible are composed on purpose. As far as biblical genealogies are concerned, Andrew E. Steinmann ob-



thing we need to remember concerning biblical numbers and their symbolic import is that they need to be understood in their context, not a priori<sup>43</sup>. As we have seen above, *fourteen* is the sum of seven plus seven, two times seven. Number *seven* is the symbolic number of God's covenant. Number *two* indicates repetition and opposites. *Three* is the number of God's revelation.

Our study on the occurrences of the formula "x and his brothers" yielded the inner structure of the first two parts of the genealogy, comprising twenty-four names, which can be divided neatly into two sets of *twelve*. Twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel, indicating the entirety of God's people. Number twelve can be traced for the third time in the third part of the genealogy from the returnee Zerubbabel down to Christ. Twelve, then, is the hidden number in the genealogy, for it is the *history of God's people* which Matthew presents to his readers in the form of a genealogy. That this number can be traced thrice draws our attention to the fact that Matthew's historical account is unlike any other, because through the history of His people, God reveals himself to the world.

*Five* is half of ten, which is the number of perfection (cf. the parable of the ten virgins). The number of the five women yawns for a fulfillment in the Messianic times, presented in both Old and New Testaments as a wedding banquet. Then there will be no more room for the five women's pain and anxiety.

As said above in 7.1, biblical genealogies are followed by the narrative of the covenant, and we have seen that the heading of the Matthean genealogy parallels the heading of the genealogy in Gen 5 which is the beginning of the narrative of the Noahic covenant. It is in terms of covenant that we have to understand the numbers –both expressed and hinted at– in the Matthean genealogy.

## Conclusion

In the genealogy Matthew traces the history of his people. The first part of the genealogy bears the names of the founders of Israel, a wand-

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served: "Biblical genealogies can be selective and can contain gaps" (STEINMANN, "Gaps", 142).

<sup>43</sup> BÄHR, *Symbolik*, 204: "Die einzelnen Zahlen kommen bedeutsam nicht in einer bestimmten Ordnung nacheinander in der Schrift vor, sondern zerstreut und gelegentlich, ihre Bedeutung lässt sich daher nur aus dem verschiedenartigen Gebrauch, der von ihnen gemacht wird, und nicht a priori entwickeln".

ring people from Ur who finally settle in Canaan with their own king. In second part, the list of kings, Matthew features his interpretation of the fall of David's house and the Babylonian Exile. In the third part of the genealogy, the names of the exiled and the unknown bring to mind the entire history of salvation and prepare us to the first and second coming of the Son of Man.

Our study of the names in the Matthean genealogy showed us that Matthew was following the Hebrew Bible, not the Septuagint. It is probable that the Gospel was first written in Hebrew and then in Greek, for the original readers of Matthew were non-Palestinians who knew both languages, and the name of Aram (Syria) may point to the location of its composition.

It is in this first literary unit of his Gospel that Matthew exhibits singular adroitness. The monotonous fathering to fathering turned out to be a bombshell. It is an explosion of praise for those who believe and casts in confusion those (the Jews) who do not. It was intended to be read by those who possessed the Hebrew Old Testament, for only in Hebrew could one grasp the nuances Matthew infused into his genealogy by the selection of names as well as the changes and insertion of names. Only in the study of the story—where it is available—behind each of the names selected by Matthew in his genealogy can we know the role and function of each in the wonderful account of the birth and life of Jesus, the Messiah.

From our investigation we have gleaned that the purpose of the genealogy *is not only to trace the lineage of the Messiah, through the founding fathers of the people of Israel and the rise and fall of the house of David, but also to draw the attention of the readers toward the identity and personality of the one who has been deemed worthy to become the husband of the woman who would give birth to the Messiah.* Matthew accomplished this in a very unique way. The genealogy invites the readers to contemplate the history of God's people, chosen by Him to become a blessing for all the nations through the patriarch Abraham and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ.

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