

2021–2022 PW/Horizons Bible Study



# What My Grandmothers Taught Me

Learning from the Women in  
Matthew's Genealogy of Jesus

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With Suggestions for Leaders by Magdalena I. García



God's Rebels

...the steps onto the stage she finds her voice and  
...rebels in glory to influence kings. Bernhebe's

## INTRODUCTION

# Tales of the Grandmothers

We like to know where we came from. I remember my mother telling me stories of the farm where she grew up in the high tablelands of northern New South Wales, Australia, and my father telling me about his early life playing around the docks of Sydney Harbor. Dad was a minister and we moved states several times during my childhood, never living in the same place as our relatives. Through these stories, though, I felt connected to a family I seldom got to see.

I have no doubt that these stories helped shape me, as much as the DNA of my ancestry shaped me. Sometimes we have no access to our birth families, but the stories that surround us as children in the families that raise us still give us a sense of connection. As we get older, we might make choices about which stories to live from—those that nourish us, rather than those that reduce us.

Reading the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew has long given me this same feeling. We are being invited into the family stories that helped shape Jesus and that, therefore, shape us too. The women who are mentioned in Jesus' family tree, in particular, have back stories that are exactly the kind of story you can imagine hearing while sitting spellbound as a grandmother reminisces about her early life.

I wonder how Jesus might have heard these stories. What might the young Jesus have felt, as he heard about his family? What might the stories of these women have added to his sense of identity, as part of a particular family in a particular place and time? Why have these women been mentioned? Jesus obviously had many more women in his family tree than these five. Some of them must have been more famous and socially acceptable. However, Matthew chose to mention just these several: Tamar, an

outsider who outwitted Judah to make a place for herself in the story of Israel and whose actions allowed that story to continue; Rahab, a prostitute who saved her entire family and whose intelligence and fidelity helped the Israelites enter safely into the Promised Land; Ruth, a despised foreigner whose Godly love towards her mother-in-law brought about salvation for the family line of David; Bathsheba, only named by Matthew as “the wife of Uriah,” a woman defined by her relationship with men who nevertheless managed to find her own power; and Mary, the young unmarried girl who, with Joseph, risked disgrace and abandonment to say “Yes!” to the Holy Spirit, to carry and nurture within her body the very incarnation of God.

I wonder what you wonder! Have you thought about Jesus’ grandmothers, and what they might have taught him? What can they teach us? Let’s start with some questions, and then return to these questions after we have explored the lessons

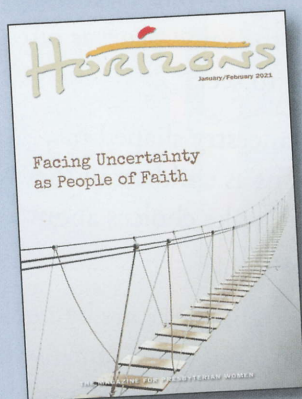
together. When we have learned from these women, and from the women with whom we study, we can ask ourselves if we managed to answer these questions. Perhaps we will even think up new ones!

As we enter into these stories together, think about your own family stories. What do you know about the history of your family? What is hidden or secret? Are there skeletons in your closets? Which stories are proclaimed with pride? What might those long-ago ancestors have been struggling with to survive? What might they have hoped to pass down the generations to you?

Matthew has named these women for a reason. Their stories will lead us into the Gospel, the Good News about Jesus Christ. My hope is, having explored their stories together, we will have a richer idea about what the good news is.

—Merryl

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*Sarah and the Promise*

## LESSON ONE

# Family Trees

*"Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers . . ."*

### Main Idea

Family stories shape our sense of identity. Matthew begins his Gospel with a list of Jesus' ancestors. In this list we find the names of some rather unusual women—Jesus' grandmothers. Why are these women in this list and what does their inclusion have to say about the coming Messiah? What might Matthew be teaching us through their stories?

### Scripture

Matthew 1

### Opening Prayer

Creating and loving God,

As we read your Word together, may we allow it to read us.

As we enter into your Story, may we understand our own stories  
with more clarity and wisdom.

Help us to remember that you have always worked through the lives of  
ordinary women and men, with all their faults and failings—people like us.

We bring our ordinary lives before you today. Transform our expectations,  
so that as we study stories of the past, we may be open to your extraordinary future.

Amen.

## Introduction

**B**eginnings are important. When we pick up a book, we may read the first few paragraphs to get a sense of the plot and characters before we decide to commit to reading it. A clever author quickly will set up themes that pull us in and establish a lens through which we are meant to read the rest of the book. This is no less true for biblical books.

Think about Genesis 1, the introduction to the Bible. It presents the cosmic story of God's creating activity as the backdrop for the particular story of Israel. It shows God concerned with all of Creation, with order, with good; and with continuing to work in partnership for the benefit of the human community. With a beginning that focuses on good, how do we read the story of Genesis 3 (sadly labeled by Church Fathers as "The Fall")? How should we enter into the long family story of Israel, with its failures and fresh starts? Where do we see ourselves in this story? Where are the branches for us in the family tree of God's Creation?

*Which biblical characters might you include in your own personal family tree?*

## Genealogies in the Bible

When we read the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, it is about as exciting as reading the phonebook:

"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren;

And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram;

And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon;

And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab; and

Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse;

And Jesse begat David the king; and David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias . . ." and so on, and so on.  
(Matt. 1:1–6, King James Version)

We sometimes call lists like these "the Begats," and dread having to read them aloud in worship because of all the hard-to-pronounce names! At least more recent translations of the Bible, like the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), use slightly more accessible language. "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 . . ." (Matt. 1:1–3) and so on, although the list still fails to grab us.

For many of us, it is hard to list our ancestors beyond a couple of generations, although we might be able to tell the odd story about particular stand-out personalities in the more distant past. Perhaps others of us have done some research into our family trees back as far as we can go, and have been surprised, even shocked, at what we have discovered. If we put enough effort into it, we may have even followed the various branches and worked out far-reaching relationships among our own generation. Family reunions that bring together people with a common family tree can help us discover certain characteristics in people we have newly met and give us a wider sense of belonging (or reinforce the wisdom of the saying, "at least you can choose your friends, if not your family").

So why on earth does Matthew begin an otherwise gripping narrative with this off-putting list?

To answer this question, we need to go back into how these lists (known as genealogies) were used in

the Old Testament. Genealogies were a common way of telling a certain kind of story in the ancient Near East. Matthew's original audience would have known exactly what they were hearing and would have recognized echoes of ancient stories with each name.

### Families in the Old Testament

In the ancient world, it was vitally important to know who your family was. Life was fragile and dangerous, with no organized police force or state judicial system. Family provided the safety net, and the further back you could list your family, the wider the net that you could call into action. This might be for something as simple as a local border dispute, or as serious as all-out war.

For example, 1 Samuel 11 tells the story of a threat to the tribal group of Jabesh-gilead. The townspeople send word to Saul (who, while known as king, was really little more than a local ruler). Saul immediately leaves off plowing, sends word out for tribal support, and races to the rescue. Following the story back to Judges 21:10–14, we find that women of Jabesh-gilead were taken as wives for the men of the tribe of Benjamin. Saul probably was giving not only the help expected of a king, but also was springing to the defense of relatives—a much more urgent call.<sup>1</sup>

This story illustrates the significance of making careful alliances through marriage because of the strategic importance of family in defense.

Families also carried out blood revenge. With no law enforcement, it could be all too easy to think about murder as a solution to disagreements. However, if the proposed victim had a large family of big, muscular brothers and cousins, the avenger might think twice! This was especially true when the victim had a formal “avenger of blood” in the family who, as a close kinsman, would hunt down

the killer and take a life for a life. The importance of this responsibility is seen in Numbers 35:9–29, which gives instructions for setting up of “cities of refuge” that could be used in cases of accidental killing. If the killer could get to a city of refuge, and the citizens of that city accepted that this was not a case of murder, the killer could live there safely. (This was a common practice in the ancient Near East.)

*It is difficult to think about an “avenger of blood” in our modern world, where revenge has become such a toxic idea. We might find it easier to think about justice. Have you had someone stand up for your rights, when you didn’t feel you had a voice? Have you spoken up for someone else?*

The family also had the responsibility of providing a social safety net. There were no Social Security deposits, pension checks, or insurance policies in the ancient world. The aging and infirm were looked after by the wider family. Beyond this, if a family member needed to sell themselves into servitude, or some of their land to pay off debts, a close kinsman had the responsibility of buying back persons or land to keep the family intact. (See Leviticus 25. We will study more about this concept in the lessons on Ruth.)

Many Old Testament stories have the complexities of family relations at their center, often because the relationships were not working as they should. Then, as now, families were tricky things. If we examine the genealogy of David, many of the struggles surrounding his kingship revolve around family in-fighting and difficulties with his extended family. Joab, commander of David’s army, was also his nephew. David had trouble controlling Joab, who ends up killing Absalom against David’s express orders. Complicating matters, when David needs to be confronted with hard truths, Joab is not afraid to be the one who tells him. In 2 Samuel 12:26–28, David is busy committing rape and murder in Jerusalem while his

1. John Rogerson & Philip Davies, *The Old Testament World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

army fights on his behalf. The triumphant Joab sends word to tell the king that he'd better come and join the army, or the conquered city will be called after Joab, not David. Similarly, after the final battle against Absalom, David stays in his tent mourning the death of his son rather than walking among his exhausted troops. Joab lectures him on the correct actions of a king: to leave aside his personal grief and to look after his soldiers who have given everything to defend him (2 Sam. 19).

*What does family mean to you? How has the family you came from helped you form an idea of who you are?*

## Genealogies in the Bible

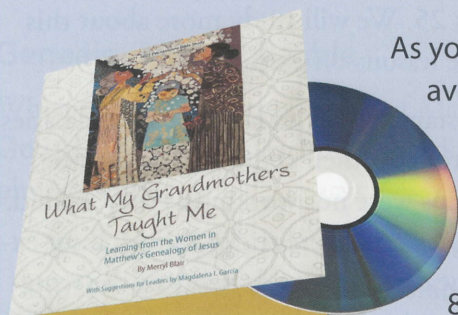
All of this illustrates the importance of family relationships. However, there is more to the genealogies than that. They are placed strategically throughout the biblical narratives to make particular points. For example, the book of Genesis includes genealogies that structure and classify the

growth and spread of humankind. Genesis 2:4 begins this pattern in a startling way:

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created;  
in the day that the LORD made the earth and the heavens.

This verse is the pivot between the creation narrative of Genesis 1, with its majesty and rhythmic sequences, and the more narrative storytelling style of Genesis 2, which gets down into the soil of the garden. The genealogy in this narrative suggests that, at the very base of all relationships, the human story is part of a cosmic story and we can consider ourselves truly family only if we see that we are also related to the “heavens and the earth,” and all that dwell in them.

*What does it feel like, to think of being related to “the heavens and the earth”? (One example is singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell’s lyrics to her song, “Woodstock,”*



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*"We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.")*

The following regular sequences of genealogies divide the stories of Abraham's family into segments and show branching relationships as society becomes more and more complex. Beyond immediate families, the genealogies show that the Israelites thought of themselves as more closely connected to some groups of people than others. As the families expand, divide, and travel, beginnings of other tribal groupings are explained (for example, Esau giving rise to the group of Edomites; Lot's descendants being the basis of the Ammonites, and so on). Later stories will pick up on relationships and tensions between various groups, which can be better understood in light of these early family stories.

Later genealogies in the books of Chronicles perform a slightly different function. Chronicles arose in the period after the exile when the shattered Israelite people, scattered forever or limping back from Babylonian exile, needed to remember who they were. The telling of family stories provided opportunities to remember and helped the people cohere as a particular group. The genealogies of Chronicles tightened family bonds in a time when these ties were in danger of being completely broken by distance and inter-marrying. The identity of ancient Israelites was one of the very few that survived through this period. Stories of the ancestors and of the heroes of Israel gave the people back pride in their identity and pointed them toward a renewed purpose for being different from everyone else.

*What stories do you tell yourself when you feel a need to remember who you are meant to be?*

In the New Testament, Matthew and Luke are the only Gospels that provide a genealogy for Jesus. Luke's genealogy works backwards from Jesus all the way to Adam, "the son of God" (Lk. 3:38) and

follows the usual format of including only the male line. Matthew works forward, from Abraham to Jesus and as we know, and will learn more about, includes female ancestors.

### **The Women in Jesus' Family Tree**

With all that in mind, we come back to Matthew 1, and find some startling oddities. If family is important for defense, it is important to list the men who were considered to be the defenders. Why are women also listed here? When women do pop up in earlier genealogies, it is usually to show strategic alliances. In Jesus' genealogy, however, the women listed are "outsiders" who would have been seen as detracting from the family line, rather than adding to it. Why not list women such as Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel, the mothers of the tribes of Israel? Why these women? Many were foreigners (except for Mary and the unknown nationality of the "wife of Uriah"). Many were associated with ambiguous sexual activity, were poor, and were unconnected to power figures. Surely these are the skeletons in the family closet that most families would rather hide.

*Are there people you wish were not in your family tree? Might they have brought some sort of gift to your family, even if it was not seen as socially acceptable?*

Yet these women break into the flow of begats with startling emphasis. We are not meant to slide over their names and move on; rather, they call for exploration and explanation. Their stories call out for our attention, and we are invited to hear, wonder, and anticipate what Matthew might be about to tell us in the rest of his Gospel.

*Have you felt that you were an outsider in your family, or in the family of your spouse or partner? What do you think were their expectations, and what unexpected gift can you see yourself bringing to them?*

# Prayer

Creating God,

your mind saw everything in terms of relationship:

heavens and earth, sea and dry land,

animals and humans, male and female—

partnerships all working together for good.

We are human, we are complicated,

and despite our best efforts, we break down relationships,

compete where we should cooperate,

name foreign where we should welcome as family.

Give us your desire for all things to work together for good

and help us, alongside you, to cultivate the garden of the earth family.

Amen.