

The Royal Genealogy of Jesus

By T.D. Alexander

The five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy form the first section of the Hebrew Bible known as the Torah. Unfortunately, the Hebrew term *torah* is often misleadingly translated into English as “law.” Torah is better understood as meaning “instruction.” As instruction, the books of Genesis to Deuteronomy provide an essential foundation for understanding all of Scripture. As the opening stages in the grand story of divine redemption, these books set the scene and give direction to all that follows.

The diverse but coherent contents of Genesis to Deuteronomy are linked in a rich variety of ways to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The four Gospels all associate Jesus’ sacrificial death with Passover, and Paul speaks of Jesus as our Passover sacrifice (1 Cor. 5:7). The author of Hebrews draws heavily from Genesis–Deuteronomy, seeing Jesus, among other things, as a royal priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:6–7:17; see Gen. 14:18; Ps. 110:4). Although these connections and others enrich our appreciation of Jesus, this essay will concentrate on another aspect: the royal dimension. This picks up on the all-important affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah.

In the New Testament, Jesus is frequently called either “Jesus Christ” or “Christ Jesus.” Whereas Jesus is a personal name, the word Christ is a title, meaning “Anointed One.” *Christos* is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew term *mashiach*, from which we derive the English title “Messiah.” When the New Testament writers speak of Jesus as “the Anointed One,” they see him as a king. More than this, they see him as the legitimate heir to the Davidic throne. For this reason, Matthew’s Gospel in particular emphasizes how Jesus is the son of David.

The link between Jesus and the Davidic dynasty lies at the heart of the biblical understanding of Jesus’ messiahship. While this is commonly acknowledged, it is not always appreciated that the importance of David’s dynasty finds its roots in the book of Genesis. What begins in Genesis leads to David, and from David to the Christ. For this reason, Matthew starts his royal genealogy of Jesus with Abraham and not David.

To understand how Genesis anticipates the importance of the Davidic dynasty, we need to observe that the whole book is structured around a unique family line. Through a careful use of genealogies, Genesis traces a remarkable lineage that begins with Adam and ends with the 12 sons of Jacob. Important members of this family line are Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah, all of whom play a significant role in the outworking of God’s purposes. While other siblings are occasionally introduced into the story, they are merely branches in the family tree. The main trunk is what matters, and it eventually leads us beyond Genesis to David and then to Jesus Christ.

The book of Genesis underlines various ideas about this unique family line:

- its continuation owes much to the intervention of God;
- its members enjoy the status of firstborn, although they are not always the first to be born;
- it anticipates the establishment of a royal dynasty;
- through this family line will come a unique king who will restore the broken relationship between God and humanity.

A distinctive feature of Genesis is the divine provision of children to the barren matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel in order to preserve the family lineage. While much is made of this in the case of Abraham and Sarah, the same theme is repeated first with Rebekah and then Rachel. Without God's intervention, the special family line would not exist.

Another unusual feature of Genesis is the number of occasions a younger brother is promoted to the status of firstborn. While this reversal is especially obvious in the case of Esau and Jacob, it also occurs with others: Isaac and Ishmael; Joseph and Reuben; Perez and Zerah; Ephraim and Manasseh. With the non-identical twins Esau and Jacob, the younger twin, Jacob, wants more than anything else the privileges associated with being the firstborn, whereas his older brother, Esau, is willing to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew. Jacob appreciates the importance of the family line. Negative factors account for every case where the son born first is denied firstborn status. This explains why Genesis includes episodes that might otherwise seem unnecessary.

Although it is not immediately obvious, the unique family line in Genesis is closely aligned with royal expectations. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Joseph story where his dreams are interpreted by his brothers as signifying kingship: "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" (Gen. 37:8). By itself, this might not seem significant, but Joseph's dreams come in the light of a family tradition that has regal expectations running through it. Abraham, who rubbed shoulders with kings (Pharaoh, Melchizedek, Abimelech), was promised by God that kings would come from him (Gen. 17:6). When Isaac blesses Jacob, his words resound with royal hopes: "Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you" (27:29). Later, Jacob blesses Judah using royal language: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (49:10).

Genesis undoubtedly has a special interest in a unique family line through which God will later establish the Davidic dynasty, leading to Jesus Christ. This raises the question: Why is the existence of a royal line so important to God's plans? Two related answers may shed light on this question.

First, when God responds to the willful disobedience of Adam and Eve, he states that the offspring of the woman shall overcome the cunning Serpent. Whatever we may make of this talking snake, it is clearly God's archenemy. As such, it persuades Eve and Adam to betray God. The full tragedy of Adam and Eve's actions becomes apparent when we realize that God has delegated to them responsibility for ruling over the earth. Given royal authority, their readiness

to trust the Serpent is an act of gross betrayal. By obeying a creature rather than the Creator, they make the Serpent ruler of this world, becoming themselves his subjects. In response, God not only punishes the human couple by removing their royal and priestly status, but, in an act of profound grace, promises that the Serpent will eventually be overcome by the offspring of the woman (3:15). After this, the identity of the woman's offspring is intimately linked to the special family line at the heart of Genesis. Having led astray the divinely appointed royal couple, Genesis fittingly anticipates that the Serpent (elsewhere identified as Satan or the Devil) will be overthrown by a future king who is fully obedient to God.

Second, building on this expectation, the patriarchal stories in Genesis introduce the idea that the nations of the earth will be blessed through Abraham and his offspring. We see this most clearly in Genesis 22:17–18. God swears to Abraham, “And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” While some interpreters take Abraham's offspring to refer to the whole nation of Israel, in this quotation the offspring is an individual. From this point on, divine blessing is linked to the “firstborn” descendants of Abraham. The etymological link between firstborn (Hebrew: *bekorah*) and blessing (*berakah*) provides an interesting wordplay that is developed most fully in the Jacob-Esau story, where the motifs of firstborn and blessing are important. The theme of blessing continues to play an important part in the Joseph story, with Joseph bringing blessing to many nations, a picture that prefigures the much greater blessing that comes through Jesus Christ.

Genesis gives priority to Joseph as the one designated firstborn by his father, Jacob, and the one associated with royalty. However, following Joseph's departure to Egypt, Genesis 38 unexpectedly focuses on Judah's offspring. The chapter concludes with a brief report of twins being born to Tamar, with the younger brother Perez pushing aside his older brother Zerah in order to become the firstborn. From Perez comes the royal line of David (Ruth 4). According to Psalm 78:56–72, the royal line of Joseph was rejected by God due to its sinfulness in the time of Samuel. At this stage, David is appointed by God to continue the family line that begins in Genesis.

While the actual designation Messiah is never used in Genesis, the entire book anticipates that through the offspring of the woman, the Evil One will be defeated and God's blessing will come to the nations of the earth. All importantly, this divinely promised royal offspring takes us from Abraham to David and on to Jesus Christ.