

Βίβλος γενέσεως: The Opening of Matthew’s Gospel and Ethnic Ambiguity

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INTRODUCTION

“Although Matthew’s Gospel is the most carefully structured of the four Gospels, there is no agreed understanding of Matthew’s plan.”¹ Paradoxical as it may sound, this statement in an introductory textbook on the Gospels seems essentially to represent the common opinion in scholarship. In fact, the perceived superiority of the Gospel of Matthew in terms of structure has for a long time been one of the major arguments against Luke’s dependence on Matthew—who would even venture to improve on such a perfected outline, and with such a messy result as that of Luke?—although this received wisdom is currently being challenged with some success.² Regardless of how they evaluate Matthew’s ordering of his material vis-à-vis that of the other evangelists, most scholars apparently agree that it reflects a very well-thought purpose, although they do not agree as to exactly what this purpose was. But the unanimous sentiment seems to be that very few aspects, if any, of Matthew’s composition are the result of random processes or unsystematic scribbling. In view of this, it seems reasonable to surmise that the

¹ Edward Adams, *Parallel Lives of Jesus: Four Gospels – One Story* (London: SPCK, 2011), 61.

² See, e.g., Heather M. Gorman, “Crank or Creative Genius? How Ancient Rhetoric Makes Sense of Luke’s Order,” in *Marcian Priority without Q: Explorations in the Farrer Hypothesis*, ed. J. C. Poirier and J. Peterson, LNTS 455 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 62–81.

opening of the Gospel of Matthew also reflects a conscious and deliberate choice on the evangelist's part. Why did the author choose to open his book about the life and teachings of Jesus with the words Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Matt 1:1)?

This opening is susceptible of multiple interpretations in terms of its reference and meaning, and in fact the aim of the present contribution is to suggest that it was meant to be so. I will argue that the phrase serves as a deliberately ambiguous title of a Gospel that tells a story of how ethnic boundaries are gradually redefined through the ministry of the Messiah and different reactions to it.³ My argument consists of three parts. First of all, I will review different proposals concerning the range of the opening phrase, coming to the conclusion that, while it may certainly carry special reference to the genealogy of Jesus, the infancy narrative and the introductory section of Matthew's Gospel, it should also be viewed as a superscript to the Gospel as a whole. Secondly, I will discuss how the Pentateuchal background of the phrase invites the reader to interpret it as a signal that one of the major themes of the Gospel will be that of ethnic origins. Thirdly, I will demonstrate how this fits into the overall pattern of ethnic ambiguity and redefinition in the Gospel of Matthew. What seems to begin as the book of the origin of Jesus Christ

³ In linguistics, ambiguity can be and has been defined in many different ways, for example, as a "property of expressions that can be interpreted in several ways, or, rather, that can be multiply specified in linguistic description from lexical, semantic, syntactic and other aspects" (Hadumod Bussmann, *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, trans. G. P. Trauth and K. Kazzazi [London: Routledge, 1996], 50), as the property of an "expression that has two or more meanings ... if there are at least two distinct semantic specifications underlying a single overt form" (William Frawley, *Linguistic Semantics* [New York: Routledge, 2009], 58), or simply as the phenomenon of a word, clause or phrase "hav[ing] more than one meaning" (Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck, *Linguistics for Everyone: An Introduction* [Boston: Wadsworth, 2010], 248). Although in some contexts it might be crucial to distinguish ambiguity from neighbouring, overlapping or more precisely defined linguistic and literary phenomena such as irony, double-entendre and polysemy, for the present purposes I deem it superfluous to go beyond the broadest description: to be ambiguous is to have more than one meaning.

turns out, in the end, to be not only that, but also and above all the book of the posterity of Jesus Christ.

Studies of ethnicity in the Gospel of Matthew have commonly taken a social-scientific approach, aiming not only to assess the topic as a theme within the narrative world of the Gospel but also—even primarily—to discuss whatever role ethnic identities played in the real-world community whose circumstances and concerns the narrative allegedly addresses.⁴ By contrast, the perspective of the present study is entirely literary-theological. The ethnic ambiguity and redefinition recognised here belong to the narrative strategies employed by the evangelist and perceived by his ideal audience. Whether or not they also reflect a real-world situation in the lives of the author and/or the audience is a quite different question, which lies beyond the scope of this contribution.

MATTHEW 1:1 AS TITLE OF THE GOSPEL

In this first section of the article, I will begin by arguing that the reference of Matt 1:1 extends throughout the Gospel as a whole. Put differently, one of its functions is that of the Gospel's title.⁵ I will then go on

⁴ See J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); David C. Sim, "Christianity and Ethnicity in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Ethnicity in the Bible*, ed. M. G. Brett, BIS 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 171–95; David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Anders Runesson, "Judging Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew: Between 'Othering' and Inclusion," in *Jesus, Matthew's Gospel and Early Christianity: Studies in Memory of Graham N. Stanton*, ed. D. M. Gurtner, J. Willitts and R. A. Burridge (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 133–51.

⁵ "Title" is to be understood here in a functional, non-technical sense, as distinguished from *titulus* as a specific *Gattung*. See Moisés Mayordomo-Marín, *Den Anfang hören: Leserorientierte Evangelienexegese am Beispiel von Matthäus 1–2*, FRLANT 180 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 207.

to discuss the interpretation of the title as an expression of the alleged “new creation” theme of Matthew’s Gospel and some weak points in this interpretation.

Prolegomena or Gospel? The Opening’s Referential Extent

Most modern translations of the New Testament take βίβλος γενέσεως in the sense of “[record/book/roll of the] genealogy” ([NET/RSV/NJB] NIV) and thus seem to understand the first verse of the Gospel with reference to the genealogy in Matt 1:2–17. A good number of commentaries take the same position.⁶ This is not at all surprising, since one of the two occurrences of βίβλος γενέσεως in the Septuagint introduces the list of generations from Adam to Shem, Ham and Japheth in Gen 5:1–32. Several similar lists in the Septuagint are introduced by the phrase “these are the generations” (αὗται αἱ γενέσεις, Gen 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12; 36:9; Ruth 4:18; 1 Chron 1:29), and it is well known that both the singular γένεσις and the plural γενέσεις in these cases translate the Hebrew תולדות. It is not far-fetched, then, to take βίβλος γενέσεως as the superscript of the genealogy of Jesus to follow in Matt 1:2–17.

On the other hand, this understanding is far from self-evident. Of the two occurrences of βίβλος γενέσεως in the Greek text of Genesis, neither really performs the function ascribed to the phrase in Matt 1:1. English translations correctly render the Hebrew ספר תולדות אדם in Gen 5:1 as “the record of the family line of Adam” (NET), “the roll of Adam’s descendants” (NJB) or “the written account of Adam’s family line” (NIV). David Carr remarks that here, as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, תולדות is “followed by the parent who produced the ‘descendants’” and not “by the items which were themselves produced.”⁷ Since the Matthean genealogy does not list Jesus’ descendants, but rather his

⁶ See, e.g., John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 71.

⁷ David Carr, “Βίβλος γενέσεως Revisited: A Synchronic Analysis of Patterns in Genesis as Part of the Torah (Part One),” *ZAW* 110 (1998): 159–72 (165).

ancestors, an interpretation of Matthew's βίβλος γενέσεως as strictly equivalent to ספר תולדת in Gen 5:1 is difficult to maintain. The genealogy in Matt 1:2–17 does not describe “what came of” Jesus Christ but from what and whom Jesus Christ came.

Already the Greek translators of Genesis seem to have twisted the meaning of ספר תולדת. The translation of Gen 5:1 as αὕτη ἡ βίβλος γενέσεως ἀνθρώπων cannot plausibly be understood to mean that “the human beings” are the “parents” of the “descendants” to be listed; rather, “the human beings” are themselves the “descendants.”⁸ By introducing the same phrase in Gen 2:4, the Greek translators solved the exegetical difficulty of the Hebrew text’s seeming mention of the “descendants of heaven and earth” (תולדות השמים והארץ).⁹ In both Gen 2:4 and 5:1, βίβλος γενέσεως must be taken in the sense “account of the origin” of something or someone.

If this understanding is applied to the Gospel of Matthew, βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ could be construed as the title of the genealogy and birth narrative proper (1:2–25),¹⁰ of the infancy narrative as a whole (1:2–2:23)¹¹ or of the Gospel’s entire introductory section up to the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry (1:2–4:16).¹² These readings could be supported by the occurrence of the phrase τοῦ ... Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις with reference to the events preceding Jesus’ birth in

⁸ See also Thomas Hieke, “Biblos Geneseos: Mt 1,1 vom Buch Genesis her gelesen,” in *The Biblical Canons*, ed. J.-M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge, BETL 163 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 635–49 (640–41).

⁹ See John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis*, SBLSCSS 35 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 22.

¹⁰ Anton Vögtle, “Die Genealogie Mt 1:2-16 und die mathäische Kindheitsgeschichte,” *BZ* 8 (1964): 45–58.

¹¹ See, e.g., Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 1–2; more recently, but with some hesitation, R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 34.

¹² Edgar Krentz, “The Extent of Matthew’s Prologue: Toward the Structure of the First Gospel,” *JBL* 83 (1964): 409–14.

1:18. It would not be out of place for Matthew to use βίβλος γενέσεως in order to indicate that the first section of the Gospel is an account of the origin of Jesus Christ.

In view of what has already been said about the careful compositional strategies evident in the Gospel of Matthew, one may ask whether it is likely that the evangelist should have opened his narrative by a phrase that pertained exclusively to its prolegomena. More importantly, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison point to the fact that several early Jewish and Christian writings open with a phrase combining “book” (βιβλος/βιβλίον) with a personal name referring to the author or the subject. For instance, the Book of Tobit is introduced by the phrase “Book of the words of Tobit son of Tobiel” (Βίβλος λόγων Τωβιτ τοῦ Τωβιηλ); the Testament of Job opens with “Book of [the words of] Job who was called Jobab” (Βίβλος [λόγων] Ἰώβ τοῦ καλουμένου Ἰωβάβ); and 2 Esdras begins “Book of the prophet Ezra son of Seraiah” (*liber Ezrae prophetae filii Sarei*).¹³ As Davies and Allison remark,

it is noteworthy that several of these openings have an anarthrous βίβλος or βιβλίον ... and further that in five out of seven instances a υἱός-formula follows the mention of the author or subject ... Now because Mt 1.1 likewise opens with an anarthrous βίβλος which is immediately followed by a υἱός-formula and then a genealogy, the texts cited offer firm support for understanding 1.1 as a general title.¹⁴

Although Gen 2:4 and 5:1 provide unobjectionable evidence to the fact that βίβλος γενέσεως might indeed designate a section within a larger document, it is dubitable that this would be the self-evident understanding of the formula when it stands at the beginning of a text, particularly as the text in its entirety is concerned with the person mentioned in connection with the formula.¹⁵ There seem to be good reasons, then,

¹³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997), 1:151–52.

¹⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:152.

¹⁵ See Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 1–7)*, 5th ed., EKK 1/1 (Düsseldorf: Benziger Verlag, 2002), 117–18.

for the conclusion that βίβλος γενέσεως is “a *double entendre* that refers both to an introductory section and to the entire text.”¹⁶ The phrase also introduces Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, rather than only the genealogy, the birth narrative, or the introductory part of the Gospel.

A Book of (New) Creation? The Opening’s Thematic Coherence with the Gospel

If this much can be agreed, it still remains to be explained what this title conveys to an ideal reader of the text. Moisés Mayordomo-Marín claims that an ancient audience would not necessarily expect “extensive congruence” between the title and the work “in all its individual parts.” He points to the use of “Genesis” as title of a book that begins with, but does not limit itself to, a description of the origin of the world, and to the use of “the Law” as a *pars pro toto* designation of the Pentateuch. According to Mayordomo-Marín, it is quite possible to understand the function of Matt 1:1 as the title, and at the same time to recognise that the theme of γένεσις strictly speaking only occurs in the first chapter of the Gospel.¹⁷ It is questionable, however, that the alleged analogies warrant this conclusion. The giving of the law, while not the only matter dealt with in the Pentateuch, is one of the dominant themes in that collection of books and does not seem out of place as a title covering the whole. The theme of the world’s origin is hardly marginal to the Book of Genesis, and Philo’s discussion of the title indicates that he saw the rest of the book’s contents as closely related to that theme (*Abr.* 1–2). By contrast, the theme of Jesus’ origin and birth is confined to Matt 1–2 and cannot in any way be regarded as a dominant theme in the Gospel.

¹⁶ David E. Aune, “Genre Theory and the Genre-Function of Mark and Matthew,” in *Mark and Matthew I: Comparative Readings: Understanding the Earliest Gospels in their First-Century Settings*, ed. E.-M. Becker and A. Runesson, WUNT 271 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 145–75 (172).

¹⁷ Mayordomo-Marín, *Den Anfang hören*, 211–13.

It seems reasonable to search for some thematic coherence between Matt 1:1 and the main part of the Gospel, albeit not necessarily “in all its individual parts.”

Davies and Allison see an allusion to the first book of the Hebrew Bible, which was known as Γένεσις in Greek-speaking quarters already by the former half of the first century CE. The sections to which βίβλος γενέσεως refers in Gen 2:4 and 5:1 recount, among other things, the creation of the cosmos and of the first human beings. Davies and Allison suggest that the use of the same formula to introduce Matthew’s book about Jesus fits well with the early Jewish eschatological notion of the end as a new beginning, with the interpretation of the coming of Jesus as a “new creation” in several New Testament texts, and with the recurring allusions to creation motives in Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus. Accordingly, they propose that Matt 1:1 should be interpreted as “Book of the New Genesis wrought by Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.”¹⁸

Graham Stanton and John Nolland, as part of their endeavours to demonstrate that Matt 1:1 is unlikely to be understood as the title of the Gospel in its entirety, have raised a number of objections to the specific interpretation of βίβλος γενέσεως in terms of “book of (new) creation.” Some of Nolland’s counter-arguments to the thesis of Davies and Allison seem to be quite strained. It is true that only Philo provides us with secure first-century evidence that the Book of Genesis was already so called, but this is evidence nonetheless; it is true that the genitive relationship between Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ and γενέσεως is of a different kind than that between Δαυίδ/Ἀβραάμ and υἱοῦ on Davies and Allison’s reading, but so it is on any reasonable reading of the passage; and it may be true that Gen 2:4 LXX and 5:1 LXX are retrospective summaries of

¹⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:151, 153. See also Dale C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 157–62; J. Andrew Doole, *What Was Mark for Matthew? An Examination of Matthew’s Relationship and Attitude to his Primary Source*, WUNT II 344 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 181–83.

what has just been told in the Greek Book of Genesis, but this can hardly throw any light on the Gospel of Matthew, where there is no preceding narrative to be summarised.¹⁹ Moreover, Nolland's claim that since the beginning of the Gospel emphasises continuity with Israel's past, the theme of new creation would "introduce a jarring note of discontinuity"²⁰ does not carry much force in view of Matthew's general tendency to portray Jesus as someone who simultaneously upholds continuity with the past and brings about a new era (e.g., Matt 5:17; 9:16–17; 13:52).

Two other objections to the interpretation of Davies and Allison are stronger. Firstly, Nolland observes that whereas the semantic range of *γένεσις* does allow for the word to be used in a wide variety of senses beside the basic "origin," there is nothing in the literature earlier than or contemporaneous with Matthew to suggest that the precise meaning "creation" had developed for it.²¹ Even on the assumption that *βίβλος γενέσεως* in Matt 1:1 refers back to the Book of Genesis in general and to the sections referred to by the same expression in Gen 2:4; 5:1 in particular, one cannot assume that it is precisely the theme of creation that is being invoked. Secondly, that theme does not seem to be prominent in Matthew's Gospel, despite Davies and Allison's attempts to underscore it. Stanton remarks that "[w]hile Paul (and perhaps John 1,1) sees the coming of Jesus as the counterpart of the creation account narrated in Genesis, there is no evidence which suggests that Matthew did so."²² As Nolland points out, Matthew does refer to a future eschatological recreation in 19:28, but the term used there is *παλιγγενεσία*, with no significant links to *γένεσις* in 1:1.²³ One might add here that some of the

¹⁹ Cf. J. Nolland, "What Kind of Genesis Do We Have in Matt 1.1?," *NTS* 42 (1996): 463–71 (465–66, 467–68).

²⁰ Nolland, "What Kind of Genesis," 467.

²¹ Nolland, "What Kind of Genesis," 469 n. 25.

²² Graham N. Stanton, "Matthew: *βίβλος, εὐαγγέλιον, or βίος?*," in *The Four Gospels 1992, FS Frans Neirnyck*, ed. F. Van Segbroeck et al., BETL 100 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 1187–1201 (1189).

²³ Nolland, "What Kind of Genesis," 465.

further instances of an alleged “new creation” theme in Matthew, such as Jesus going to Egypt and returning from there in an Exodus-like manner (2:15),²⁴ are quite tenuous.

While these valid points cannot serve to undermine the understanding of Matt 1:1 as the entire Gospel’s title, they do invite us to consider the possibility that βίβλος γενέσεως is not as closely linked to the theme of creation as Davies and Allison argue. But if the expression does introduce – beside the genealogy and infancy narrative – the Gospel in its entirety, and if it does allude to Gen 2:4 and 5:1 (and even to the Book of Genesis as a whole), but does not evoke the theme of creation specifically, then what is its purpose? In my opinion, scholarship has not paid sufficient attention to a more obvious common denominator between the uses of the expression in the Book of Genesis on the one hand, and the Gospel of Matthew on the other, that is, the discourse of ethnicity. I will devote the next section of this article to unfolding the theme of ethnicity as connected to the term γένεσις in the Old Testament, with special reference to the Book of Genesis. After that we will come back to the Gospel of Matthew.

ETHNIC ASPECTS OF THE ΓΕΝΕΣΙΣ IN GENESIS

Apart from the expression βίβλος γενέσεως (Gen 2:4; 5:1), the Greek Old Testament employs the term γένεσις in the singular a number of times in the sense of an individual’s “birth” or “origin” (Gen 31:13; 32:10; 40:20; Ruth 2:11). Not to be overlooked, however, are the sections connected with the plural γενέσεις, translating the Hebrew תולדות, which more often than not seem to have “ethnic” implications, that is, they function to explain the origins of and distinctions between different peoples. The plural γενέσεις in these contexts can often be appropriately translated as “[record of] descendants.”

²⁴ Cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:153.

Occasionally, the set phrase “these are the descendants of...” (αὐται αἱ γενέσεις τινός) refers back to the preceding section (Exod 6:24; 1 Chron 4:2). More commonly, the phrase introduces a list of a person’s descendants (Gen 11:10, 27; Ruth 4:18; 1 Chron 1:29) or a narrative section of a person’s achievements, including the names of his offspring (Gen 6:9; 37:2; Num 3:1). In the constructions κατὰ (τὰς) γενέσεις αὐτῶν or ἐν ταῖς γενέσεσιν αὐτῶν, the plural γενέσεις translates not only תּוֹלְדוֹת (Exod 28:10; 1 Chron 5:7) but also מִשְׁפָּחָה (Exod 6:25; Num 1:18; 1 Chron 4:38) and denotes categories based on common descent: “families” or “clans.”

Of primary interest here are the genealogies in Genesis 10 (the so-called Table of Nations); 25 (the records of Ishmael’s and Isaac’s descendants); 36 (the record of Esau’s descendants). All three of these are “segmented genealogies,” that is, genealogies which contain “more than one line of descent from a given ancestor.”²⁵ Each of the three genealogies is introduced with the phrase “these are the descendants...” (αὐται αἱ γενέσεις), and each of the three includes explicitly “ethnic” vocabulary (ἔθνος and λαός). These three genealogies will be considered in more detail.

The Descendants of the Sons of Noah (Gen 10:1–32)

The “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10 opens with the heading “These are the descendants (תּוֹלְדוֹת/γενέσεις) of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth” (10:1). On this follow lists of descendants from each of the three brothers: Japheth (10:2–5), Ham (10:6–20) and Shem (10:21–31) before the conclusion of the genealogy as a whole (10:32).

Each list of descendants concludes by juxtaposing “peoples” (ἔθνη) with references to distinctive languages and territories. The list of Japheth’s descendants concludes: “From these were designated islands of the peoples in their land, each one according to (his) tongue, by their

²⁵ Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 9.

tribes and by their peoples' (םבגויב/έν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν αὐτῶν, 10:5), while those of Ham's and Shem's posterity both end with similar formulae: "these are the sons ... by their tribes, according to their tongues, by their territories and by their peoples (םבגויב/έν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν αὐτῶν)" (10:20, 31).

The entire chapter concludes with "These are the tribes of the sons of Noah, according to their generations (םתדלת/κατὰ γενέσεις αὐτῶν) and according to their peoples (םבגויב/κατὰ τὰ ἔθνη αὐτῶν). From these were scattered islands of the peoples on the earth after the flood" (10:32). Again, descent is juxtaposed with peoplehood and territories, which makes clear the genealogy's function of establishing the origins of ethnic identities.

The Descendants of Ishmael and Isaac (Gen 25:12–26)

In Genesis 25, we find the records of the descendants of the two sons of Abraham, beginning with "These are the descendants (םתדלת/γενέσεις) of Ishmael, the son of Abraham" (25:12) and "these are the descendants (םתדלת/γενέσεις) of Isaac, the son of Abraham" (25:19) respectively.

The list of Ishmael's descendants (25:13–16) concludes with "These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names ... twelve rulers, according to their peoples (םתמאל/κατὰ ἔθνη αὐτῶν)" (25:16). When it comes to the record of Isaac's descendants, no genealogy is given, apart from the brief mention of the fact that Abraham fathered Isaac. Instead, what follows on the introductory formula is a short narrative about Isaac's marriage to Rebecca, Rebecca's pregnancy and the birth and naming of Esau and Jacob (25:18–26). Accordingly, no concluding formula such as that in 25:16 is found, but the oracle given to Rebecca is clear enough in its ethnic implications:

Two nations (םיג/ἔθνη) are in your belly,
 and two peoples (םמאל/λαοί) will be sent forth from your womb,
 and [one] people (םאל/λαός) will dominate [the other] people (םלמ/λαοῦ),
 and the greater will be a slave to the lesser. (Gen 25:23)

In different ways, the γενέσεις of Ishmael and Isaac confirm the pattern already established in connection with the Table of Nations. Overtly ethnic vocabulary is employed, suggesting that the function of these “records” is to explain how ethnic identities originated.

The Descendants of Esau (Gen 36:1–43)

Finally, Genesis 36 contains several units of genealogical material connected with Esau. Following Robert Wilson, we can divide the chapter into the following parts: a first record of the descendants of Esau, which in reality consists of a list of Esau’s wives and sons and a narrative about his migration to Seir (36:1–8); a second record of the descendants of Esau, consisting of a list of his sons and grandsons (36:9–10); a list of the chiefs of Esau (36:11–19); a list of the descendants of Seir the Horite (36:20–28); a list of the chiefs of the Horites (36:29–30); a list of the kings of Edom (36:31–39); and another list of the chiefs of Esau (36:40–43).²⁶ The heading “These are the descendants (תולדות/γενέσεις) of Esau” occurs twice. The first time, Esau is said to be identical with Edom (36:1); the second time, he is called “father of Edom” (36:9). Both formulations serve to connect Esau closely with an ethnic identity.

At the beginning of the last unit, in the Masoretic Text, we find the concluding formula “These are the names of the chiefs of Esau, according to their tribes, according to their places, by their names” (36:40). The Greek translator, under influence from Gen 10 and 25, expanded this into a fuller formula: “These are the names of the chiefs of Esau, by their tribes, according to their place, by their territories and by their peoples (ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν αὐτῶν),” thus introducing explicitly “ethnic” language also in this list of descendants. At the end, it is once again stated that Esau is “father of Edom” (36:43).

²⁶ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 167.

Γενέσεις and Ethnic Origins

The genealogies of Genesis, then, indicate that ethnic origins are a matter of major importance in the γενέσεις or ΠΤΛΗΤ. This pertains especially to the three genealogies discussed above. In the words of Matthew Thomas, these genealogies are “reminding us that the story of Israel is not alone in the world, but part of a much bigger drama in which God is involved.”²⁷ The “universalistic” tendency of these genealogies is made explicit through the use of “ethnic” vocabulary.

What is the relevance of the γενέσεις for the understanding of Matt 1:1? If the expression βίβλος γενέσεως alludes not only to Gen 2:4 and 5:1, but also to the Book of Genesis as a whole, it is not unreasonable to consider an allusion to the γενέσεις to be present in Matt 1:1. The formal pattern “x begat y,” which dominates Matt 1:2–16, imitates not only Gen 5:1b–32 but also Gen 10:1b–32. Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the light of the γενέσεις would then lead us to expect the story of how Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham gave rise to a specific ethnic identity (or specific ethnic identities). In the next section, I will argue that this reading of Matthew as a narrative about ethnic origins is far more natural than Davies and Allison’s suggestion about the theme of “new creation” being present in the Gospel.

MATTHEW 1:1 AND ETHNIC AMBIGUITY IN THE GOSPEL

It can hardly be contested that notions of ethnicity are of central importance in the Gospel of Matthew. Several passages of crucial significance for the interpretation of the Gospel as a whole employ “ethnic” vocabulary, the precise implications of which are under much discussion (see Matt 1:21; 21:43; 27:25; 28:19). In this section, after briefly outlining Matthew’s theology of “ethnic inclusion,” I will address the Gospel’s often ambiguous use of “ethnic” vocabulary in some of those passages and

²⁷ Matthew A. Thomas, *These are the Generations: Identity, Covenant, and the “Toledot” Formula*, LHBOTS 637 (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 93.

then consider βίβλος γενέσεως in 1:1 as another ambiguous expression that functions to convey the redefinition of ethnic categories in the Gospel of Matthew.

God's People and the Peoples: Matthew's Theology of Ethnic Inclusion

The Gospel of Matthew has traditionally been interpreted along the lines of a theology of “replacement.” On this reading of the narrative, Jesus’ and his disciples’ initial mission only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6; 15:24) is met by increasing hostility on the part of the Jewish people, culminating in “all the people” taking responsibility for the death of Jesus (27:25), thereby rejecting definitively the Messiah. As a consequence, “the kingdom of God” is “taken away” from Israel and “given to a people that bears the fruits” of the kingdom (21:43), that is, the Church (16:18), which is made up of “all the nations” (28:19). Israel may certainly be included among “all the nations,” but the original people of God has lost its special status. Israelites who become disciples of Jesus belong to the people on exactly the same premises as do Gentiles, with the latter seeming even to make up the majority (8:11–12). A complete substitution of ethnic identities appears to have taken place.²⁸

This old consensus view is rarely maintained in current scholarship. More careful study of the pertinent passages and of the narrative as a whole has resulted in more nuanced interpretations of Matthew’s depiction of the relationships between Jesus, the people of Israel, the Gentiles and the Church (ἐκκλησία).²⁹ While strictly speaking no new consensus

²⁸ See Kenneth W. Clark, “The Gentile Bias in Matthew,” *JBL* 66 (1947): 165–172, for a straightforward formulation of this reading.

²⁹ See, e.g., Amy-Jill Levine, *The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Salvation History* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1988); David L. Turner, *Israel's Last Prophet: Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew 23* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Anders Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew: The Narrative World of the First Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

has emerged to replace the old one, Matthias Konradt's important study represents the current tendency in Matthean studies and argues for a view that, on the whole, does justice to the text from the literary-theological perspective also applied in the present contribution.³⁰ It will therefore be used here in order to provide the theological backdrop against which Matthew's use of "ethnic" vocabulary will then be analysed in more detail.

Konradt's investigation confirms the obvious point that the pre-Easter mission of Jesus and his disciples is, in principle, confined to Israelites. Although Jesus occasionally encounters non-Jews in his healing ministry (8:5–13, 28–34; 15:21–28), there are textual signals that make clear that these healings are proleptic, extraordinary events, as they take place before the appointed time (πρὸ καιροῦ, 8:29), that is, before the death and resurrection of Jesus (cf. 26:18) which will open the gates to the Gentiles.³¹ The most explicit limitation of the pre-Easter mission comes at the beginning of the mission discourse where, as Konradt points out, Jesus defines the mission not only in ethnic terms but also in geographical ones: at this point in the narrative, the disciples must not depart on a Gentile road or enter into a Samaritan city, that is, they are to stay in Galilee (10:5).³² Only at a later stage is a mission to all "the cities of Israel" envisioned. This is a mission that will not be completed even at the time of the coming of the Son of Man (10:23). Accordingly, it cannot be the case that the commissioning of the disciples to go to

³⁰ Matthias Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. K. Ess (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014). The English translation incorporates some revisions and updates as compared to the German original, *Israel, Kirche und die Völker im Matthäusevangelium*, WUNT 215 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

³¹ Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 55–74. On a marginal note that does not weaken his argument as a whole, Konradt's identification of the Gadarene demoniacs (8:28–34) as non-Jews is less persuasive. See Florian Wilk, *Jesus und die Völker in der Sicht der Synoptiker*, BZNW 109 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 139; more cautiously, Levine, *Social and Ethnic Dimensions*, 112–13.

³² Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 78.

“all the nations” in 28:19 causes or presumes an abortion of the mission to Israel specifically.³³ That mandate remains in force.

The continued mission to Israel is congruent with the fact that, despite earlier scholarly claim to that effect, Matthew never portrays the Jewish people as rejecting the Messiah. When “all the people” accepts responsibility for Jesus’ death (27:25), this refers not to Israel as a whole but to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who have earlier been depicted as in conflict with Jesus (2:3; 21:10) and who will ultimately be punished for their rejection (22:7).³⁴ Jerusalem is also connected with the religious leaders, who from the beginning of the narrative to its end indeed reject Jesus. It is against these leaders, and not against the people of Israel as a whole, that Jesus directs the prediction that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you” (21:43).³⁵ In other words, what is replaced according to Matthew is not the people of Israel but its leadership.

The positive stance towards non-Jews that comes to overt expression in 28:16–20 is introduced at the beginning of the Gospel, where the designation of Jesus as “son of Abraham” (1:1) alludes to God’s promises of a universal blessing through Abraham (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). The same theme is evoked by John the Baptist’s proclamation of God’s ability to raise up children of Abraham from the stones (Matt 3:9) and by the reference to the “many [who] will come from east and west to recline with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (8:11). Further evidence of a positive view of the inclusion of Gentiles can be found in the genealogy (1:2–16), in the episode about the magi (2:1–12) and in several of Matthew’s quotations from Isaiah (Matt 4:15–16; 12:18–21).³⁶ The commission to include fully the Gentiles in 28:16–20 is, thus, the culmination of tendency present throughout the Gospel.

³³ Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 82–84.

³⁴ Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 153–66; see also Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation*, 301–303.

³⁵ Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 172–93.

³⁶ Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 265–81.

In the end, the Church includes both Israel and Gentiles. Israel has not lost its privileged position, but Gentiles have been invited too. This could be described as a theology of inclusion rather than one of replacement. According to Konradt, the Church is an overarching, non-ethnic category: the Church is never depicted as the (new) people of God; Israel is still God's people, although the Church in fact takes over Israel's role as the community of salvation in what Konradt calls a new "system of coordinates."³⁷ Ethnic identities as such are not redefined. It is here that I wish to take issue with Konradt's conclusions.

A People Redefined: Matthew's Ambiguous Use of "Ethnic" Vocabulary

Is it really the case that Matthew does not employ "ethnic" vocabulary for the ἐκκλησία, that is, that the Church is never called a (new) "people" (of God) in the Gospel of Matthew? On the surface level of the text, this may indeed be so; granted the observation that the Church does seem to assume some of the traditional functions of Israel as God's people, and in view of Matthew's use of ambiguity (or irony, double-entendre) as a literary strategy,³⁸ the answer may be less clear-cut. Two passages are to be considered here: Jesus' statement about the kingdom of God being given to an ἔθνος that bears the fruits of the kingdom (21:43), and the angel's announcement that Jesus will save his λαός from their sins (1:21).

Matt 21:43. Whereas the plural ἔθνη is used frequently in the Gospel of Matthew, the singular occurs only here and in 24:7. The traditional translation of ἔθνος as "nation" or "people" is often challenged in current scholarship, especially since Anthony Saldarini suggested that the term can refer to a "voluntary organization or small social group" and that it

³⁷ Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 327–53.

³⁸ See especially Karl McDaniel, *Experiencing Irony in the First Gospel: Suspense, Surprise, and Curiosity*, LNTS 488 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013).

should be understood here as “a group of leaders.”³⁹ Wesley Olmstead has questioned that this interpretation is at all natural in view of how ἔθνος is commonly used in biblical literature.⁴⁰ While Konradt demonstrates that “group of people” in a non-ethnic sense is clearly within the semantic range of ἔθνος also in early Jewish literature,⁴¹ the word is used in the ethnic sense in an overwhelming majority of instances, and only the context would invite consideration of another meaning.

It is precisely the context that is usually invoked as an argument against the traditional interpretation. Jesus is speaking to “the high priests and the elders among the people” (21:23). It is “the high priests and the Pharisees” who realise that Jesus has been speaking “about them” in the parables (21:44), that is, they are the vinedressers in the parable of 21:33–41; they are the ones from whom the kingdom of God will be taken away (21:43). Since 21:43 is addressed, not to the people of Israel, but to the leaders, it seems natural to understand ἔθνος as referring to the new group of leaders that will replace the old ones (cf. 21:41).⁴²

This line of interpretation, however, overlooks the asymmetry between the parable’s conclusion and the saying of Jesus introduced by the formulation ποιῶντι τοὺς καρπούς in 21:43. While 21:41 calls for new vinedressers who will “hand over” (ἀποδιδόναι) the produce in due time, the ἔθνος of 21:43 will not only hand over but itself “bear (ποιεῖν) the fruits,” which means that the ἔθνος is not analogous to the vinedressers but to the vineyard (cf. 3:10; 7:17; 13:8, 26). There is, within 21:43, a

³⁹ Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community*, 59–61.

⁴⁰ Wesley G. Olmstead, “A Gospel for a New Nation: Once More, the ἔθνος of Matthew 21.43,” in *Jesus, Matthew’s Gospel and Early Christianity: Studies in Memory of Graham N. Stanton*, ed. D. M. Gurtner, J. Willitts and R. A. BurrIDGE (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 115–32.

⁴¹ Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 181–83.

⁴² See, e.g., John S. Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine*, WUNT 195 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 191–93; Turner, *Israel’s Last Prophet*, 243–47; Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation*, 50 n. 26.

subtle shift that makes the saying go beyond the parable and its conclusion: not only will the leadership be replaced, but the people itself will also be redefined.

It is likely, therefore, that ἔθνος does refer to Jesus' future community of both Jews and Gentiles and that the choice of vocabulary alludes to biblical texts that promise the future formation of a nation. Especially noteworthy are the promises in Genesis that God would make Abraham "into a great nation" and that all nations of the earth would be blessed by his seed (Gen 12:2; 18:18). As mentioned already, the theme of inclusiveness through Abraham is present elsewhere in the Gospel.⁴³ As Olmstead remarks,

... not only will all nations be blessed through Abraham and his descendants ... but also ... many from the nations will help compose the great ἔθνος that God promised to make from Abraham ... The nations who are blessed by their interaction with the nation in the end are incorporated into that nation! Sadly, many of the original citizens lose their heritage.⁴⁴

Matt 1:21. It is commonly recognized that the angel's words to Joseph in Matt 1:21 are of crucial importance as a programmatic statement of Jesus' task according to the Gospel of Matthew: "She will give birth to a son, and you shall call him by the name Jesus; for he will save his people (τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ) from their sins." Many have noticed that this statement is ambiguous and that its interpretation depends on whether it is read in the context of Matthew 1 alone or in the light of the subsequent narrative development of the Gospel as a whole. Since Jesus' lineage from Abraham and David has been spelled out in detail in 1:1–17, and Joseph's identity as a "son of David" has just been reaffirmed by the angel in 1:20, a first-time reader of the Gospel would have no reason to suppose that "his people" refers to anything else than the Jewish people.

⁴³ See also Wesley G. Olmstead, *Matthew's Trilogy of Parables: The Nation, the Nations and the Reader in Matthew 21.28–22.14*, SNTSMS 127 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 89–95.

⁴⁴ Olmstead, *Matthew's Trilogy of Parables*, 95.

Moreover, all other instances of λαός (“people”) in the Gospel of Matthew seem to refer to the people of Israel, either in whole or in part.⁴⁵

On the other hand, there are good reasons for reading this phrasing as an ambiguous statement. Matt 1:21 seems to be modelled on LXX-Psalms 129:8: “He [the Lord] will redeem Israel from all their transgressions” (καὶ αὐτὸς λυτρώσεται τὸν Ἰσραὴλ ἐκ πασῶν τῶν ἀνομιῶν αὐτοῦ). Matthew’s substitution of “his people” for “Israel” opens the possibility of doubting that the reference is indeed to the Jewish people. Later in the Gospel, Jesus will speak of “my church” (16:18) and “his [the Son of Man’s] kingdom” (13:41; 16:28; cf. 20:21). When the statement in 1:21 is reread in the light of these later formulations, it becomes more likely that it refers not only to the people from which Jesus was born but, in the end, to the composite people of which he is the progenitor and ruler.⁴⁶ Karl McDaniel has substantiated this understanding by demonstrating that it is commonplace for ancient reports of prophecy and dreams to utilize ambiguity in this way. The narratives studied by McDaniel “indicate that Greek literature assumed a place for reader manipulation. Authors deliberately crafted texts to provoke false anticipation that, when the expected outcome fails to realize, demands correction through retrospective reinterpretation.”⁴⁷ As Matt 1:21 is part of a dream-report, its ambiguous nature is fully in line with ancient Greek literary conventions.

The reader’s initial expectation, that Jesus will save his Jewish compatriots from their sins, is modified within the Gospel narrative. Jesus does shed his blood “for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28; cf. 20:28),

⁴⁵ J. R. C. Cousland, *The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew*, NovTSup 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 75–86.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Lidija Novakovic, *Messiah, the Healer of the Sick: A Study of Jesus as the Son of David in the Gospel of Matthew*, WUNT II 170 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 65–66.

⁴⁷ McDaniel, *Experiencing Irony in the First Gospel*, 42–62 (quotation on p. 62).

but “the many” includes both Israelites and Gentiles.⁴⁸ In the end, the *λαός* of 1:21 also seems to suggest a redefined ethnic identity.

Progeny and Progenitor: Matthew’s Gospel as Βίβλος γενέσεως

Noting the anomaly of Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus as a list of ancestors rather than descendants, Raymond Brown claims that “[i]n Christian salvific history there can be no genealogy of Jesus’ descendants because history has reached its goal in Jesus.”⁴⁹ This does not seem to be true of Matthew’s outlook. Matthew presupposes that history will continue and that Jesus’ death and resurrection will be followed by the time of the Church (Matt 16:18–19; 18:15–20). There is certainly no place for *physical* descendants of Jesus within Matthew’s narrative world, but the theme of the disciples as Jesus’ true family (12:49–50) can be extended into the notion of a new people of which Jesus is the progenitor.

If the reading advocated above is correct—that one important theme of Matthew’s Gospel is the Son of Abraham’s establishment of the “great nation”—then one should question the judgment on seeing Matt 1:1 as the title of the entire Gospel as either “fanciful”⁵⁰ or “over-subtle.”⁵¹ If it is reasonable that the statement that Jesus “will save his people from their sins” (1:21) is indeed ambiguous and open to re-evaluation as the narrative develops, then it is just as reasonable to understand *βίβλος γενέσεως* (1:1) as marked by the same ambiguity. On a first hearing or reading of the Gospel, it is quite natural to take the expression to refer to the genealogy that follows immediately upon it, and thus as pertaining to the ancestral line of Jesus. In view of the Gospel as a whole, how-

⁴⁸ Konradt, *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles*, 340–45.

⁴⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2nd ed., ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 67.

⁵⁰ Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 59.

⁵¹ Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 13.

ever, it makes sense to understand it as the title of the work—the book about how Jesus, son of David, son of Abraham, gave rise to a new people including both Israelites and Gentiles.

CONCLUSION

I have argued three points in this article: (1) That the identification of Matt 1:1 as a heading of the Gospel of Matthew as a whole is correct, in view of the comparative evidence and Matthew's competence as an author. (2) That in order to elucidate the conceptual background of βίβλος γενέσεως we should not restrict ourselves to the two occurrences of that exact phrase in the book of Genesis, but also consider the γενέσεις, the Pentateuchal genealogies at large, several of which employ the explicit language of "ethnicity." (3) That the reading of βίβλος γενέσεως within the discourse of ethnic origins, rather than the discourse of "new creation" as proposed by Davies and Allison, fits very well with the overall Matthean plot and should thus be preferred.

How, then, would ancient hearers or readers of Matthew's Gospel understand the introductory phrase of the Gospel: Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ? Initially, they would probably catch the reference to Gen 2:4 and 5:1 and thus expect the following narrative to tell the story of Jesus in a mode akin to the Genesis narrative. The subsequent genealogy would modify this expectation somewhat, as it would not be entirely out of place to understand βίβλος γενέσεως as introducing the genealogy, even if it does not enlist Jesus' descendants but his ancestors, in contrast to the Old Testament *תּוֹלְדוֹת*. But as the story of Jesus unfolded, they would have reason to reconsider again the significance of the Gospel's introduction. The mention of Jesus' "people" in Matt 1:21 is ambiguous. It takes on a new meaning in the light of the Gospel as a whole, a meaning that was unexpected at the outset but seems fully plausible in retrospect. In the same way, the introduction of the Gospel as βίβλος γενέσεως is marked by ambiguity, and it is only gradually that the hearer or reader discovers its deeper sig-

nificance: to signal the beginning of the story about how the great people promised to Abraham originated with Jesus Christ.