

A New Creation in Christ:
Jesus and Genesis Fulfillment in Matthew 1:1

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In the Eastern tradition, the Christmas Eve liturgy begins with a reading from Gen 1:1-13,¹ immediately followed by Matt 1.² Though the origins of this liturgy are not fully known, they point to an largely forgotten link between the creation narrative of Genesis and the new creation narrative of Matthew, a link exemplified in the opening line of Matthew's gospel: "This is the genealogy [literally, the βιβλος γενεσεως—book of genesis] of Jesus Christ."³ Such an opening statement would have caught the attention of Matthew's hearers, bringing to mind the first book of their Torah, whose title was already well-established as "Genesis" by Jesus' day.⁴ Why did Matthew open his gospel by echoing this ancient creation narrative? This paper will explore Matt 1:1, employing both modern textual criticism and pre-modern patristic interpretation in an attempt to understand the passage as Matthew and his audience might have, sharing in their "delight in searching for patterns of fulfillment"⁵ of OT themes.

The particular "patterns of fulfillment" of interest to this paper are those of the Genesis narrative: the creation of the world, the fall of man, and the establishment and redemption of a holy people. The length and scope of this paper will not permit a detailed examination of every instance of Genesis fulfillment in Matthew. However, the gospel broadly follows the creation narrative along the contours described in the section below.

¹ All scripture citations from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

² W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 1998), I:153.

³ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2008), 127.

⁴ Davies and Allison, 151.

⁵ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 12.

Genesis Fulfillment Instances in Matthew

- Jesus is the new genesis, or new creation narrative (Matt 1:1; Gen 2:4, 5:1).
- Jesus' baptism (Matt 3:16) depicts the Spirit hovering over the waters as in Gen 1:2.
- Similarly, the Spirit moves over Mary's womb to bring life from material things (1:18, 20) evoking the Spirit's role in creation in Gen 1:1-2.
- Jesus calms the sea (Matt 8:23-27), again evoking the God's presiding over chaotic waters in Gen 1:1-2, as well as the many OT depictions of the "majestic king of creation who rules the chaotic waves" (cf. Job 38:8-11; Ps 89:9, 104:5-7; Prov 8:27-28; Jer 5:22).⁶
- The three 14s of Jesus' genealogy (Matt 1:17)—totaling 42—as six 7s, echoing the six days of creation followed by the seventh day of rest (Gen 2:1-3), symbolizing the commencement of a new creation and "the dawn of the eternal sabbath" by Jesus Christ, Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8). Although not a favored modern interpretation of Matt 1:17, this view is reflected in some patristic sources,⁷ as well as Jewish apocalyptic literature contemporary to Matthew.⁸

⁶ Davies and Allison, 153.

⁷ For example: "The reason why forty-two generations are given according to the flesh of Christ being born in the world is this: forty-two is the product of six times seven. Six, however, is the number that signifies work and toil, for the world was made in six days—it is a world made in work and toil and pain. So, appropriately, there are forty-two generations before Christ being born into the world in toil and pain, and these generations contain the mystery of work and toil." *Incomplete Work on Matthew, Homily 1*, quoted in ACCS (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 10-11.

⁸ Davies and Allison, 162. See also Heb 4:1-10, which clearly declares Jesus as the one to fulfill the promise of entering God's rest.

- Just as God ordered the stars in the heavens (Gen 1:14-19) “for signs and for seasons and for days and years,” so also he sent the star of Bethlehem as a sign to the Magi of the birth of Jesus. This star moved in a miraculous act of divine guidance, celestial coronation, and heavenly worship of the newborn “king of the Jews” (Matt 2:1-2).
- A faint echo of the creation of the stars in Gen 1:14 may be read into the genealogy of Matt 1:2-17, which begins with, and centers chiastically on,⁹ the patriarch Abraham whose descendants were to be “numerous as the stars of heaven” (Gen 26:3, Ex 32:13).
- Jesus’ temptation in the desert (Matt 4) is a recapitulation and reversal of Adam’s temptation (Gen 3). In Matthew’s account, the Edenic garden of Gen 2:8 has become the barren wilderness of Matt 4:1, a fulfillment of the cursed ground of Gen 3:17. There, as in the beginning, Satan comes first to tempt by an appeal to the belly (Matt 4:2-3). But rather than offering fruit, he suggests bread, the food of toil and mortality that resulted from the curse of Gen 3:19. However, unlike the first Adam, Jesus the “last Adam”¹⁰ resists this and all the enemy’s temptations, reversing the curse of Adam.¹¹ Both temptation accounts end with angels; in Gen 3:24, angels seal off access to the garden of the tree of life, whereas in Matt 4:11 angels attend to the Messiah who has come to open

⁹ Turner, 132; Davies and Allison, 149;

¹⁰ Rom 5:12-21. See further development of Jesus as the “last Adam” in the section titled *NT New Creation Narratives* below.

¹¹ One might argue that Jesus even mystically redeems bread itself in his personal identification with life-giving bread (e.g., Matt 26:26, John 6:35)

the way of life through his crucifixion on a tree and his resurrection from a garden tomb. Countless patristic sources drew such parallels.¹²

- Immediately after the temptation of Adam, Genesis recounts the dawn of a new civilization marred from its inception by jealousy, violence, and isolation (4:1-16). Likewise, immediately after the temptation of Jesus, Matthew also recounts the dawn of a new civilization. But this civilization appears to reverse the tragic fate of Cain, drawing people from isolation to community and from darkness to light (Matt 4:13-16). The new civilization of Jesus is united not by blood relation, but by obedience to the call of Jesus and repentant submission to the coming heavenly rule (Matt 4:17, 22).

The above list is certainly not exhaustive, and each of the named parallels could serve as its own paper topic. Therefore, this paper will not give extensive attention to any particular Genesis parallel in Matthew, but will instead focus on Matt 1:1. As the introduction to the book and the announcement of its contents, Matt 1:1 presents the account of Jesus Christ as a fulfillment of the Genesis narrative, inviting its audience to observe multi-layered creation parallels in continuity with OT, Jewish, and NT tradition.

Matthew's Gospel as a "Book of Genesis"

Matthew opens his gospel with a word of introduction: "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."¹³ Much has been made of this simple introductory sentence, which functions as a title to the book. As stated above, though commonly translated as "genealogy," Matthew's opening words actually repeat verbatim the formula of Gen 2:4 and 5:1, so much that Davies and Allison

¹² See ACCS, 155-159.

¹³ Matt 1:1.

suggest a more theologically and textually accurate translation might be, “Book of the New Genesis wrought by Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ Why does Matthew introduce his book in such a manner? Does he mean to echo the words of Genesis so strongly? And—perhaps most hotly contested—to what does “this” refer? Opinion is divided. Some scholars have argued that Matthew’s “this” only introduces the genealogy that follows in 1:2-17, just as Gen 5:1 introduces the genealogy of Adam in 5:2-32. Others have argued that Matthew’s “this” refers only to the first four chapters of his gospel, which serve as a prologue to the start of Jesus’ ministry at the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5. Still others have proposed that Matthew’s “this” does in fact cover all 28 chapters of his gospel as a complete book, but does not accurately describe all the contents therein.¹⁵

However, Davies and Allison argue persuasively in their exhaustive Matthew commentary for an alternate viewpoint, which is, simply, that the titular “this” refers to the entirety of Matthew’s gospel *and* accurately describes the entirety of its contents. If their argument is correct, then Matt 1:1 provides a fresh interpretive key for the whole of the gospel, one that places the advent of Jesus Christ within a larger cosmic drama of a new creation. Such an interpretation “does not place upon that verse an idea foreign to Matthew,” but rather arises from the gospel itself in its literary and cultural context, as supported by OT use of “book of genesis,” Jewish eschatology, and NT new creation language.¹⁶

OT Use of “Book of Genesis.” As stated previously in this paper, the title of Genesis was already fixed as such by the time of Matthew’s writing, and his use of the

¹⁴ Davies and Allison, 153.

¹⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 69-70.

¹⁶ Davies and Allison, 153.

term can hardly be considered coincidental when one considers the immediacy with which his hearers would have associated his language with that of the first book of the Pentateuch. What's more, βιβλος γενεσεως (hereafter referred to by the English "book of genesis") is only used twice in the OT: Gen 2:4 and 5:1. Do these occurrences refer only to genealogies, or more broadly to creation itself? Its use in 2:4 suggests the latter, as the phrase is not associated with a genealogy at all, but is instead a bridge between two creation narratives, summarizing the creation of the heavens and earth in 1:1-2:3 and introducing the creation of man and woman in 2:5-25. The use of "book of genesis" in 5:1 does introduce the genealogy of Adam in v2-32, but this genealogy includes far more than a list of names: the creation of mankind, the ages of the ancients, and the taking up of Enoch. Moreover, "book of genesis" is not the term commonly used to preface genealogies in the OT, nor does it follow the formula of naming genealogies by their first entry, which in Matthew's gospel is Abraham, not Jesus (1:2). Thus Matthew's use of "book of genesis" would most likely be associated with creation history in general, not with genealogies, for its audience.¹⁷

But what of those who would argue that "book of genesis" refers only to Matt 1-4, or refers to all of Matthew, but does not appropriately describe its contents? Such an argument is inconsistent with the NT use of "book" to refer to, simply, an entire book. Patristic sources provide a similarly limited use of the term to its plainest sense: an entire book. Thus, it seems unlikely that Matthew or his earliest readers would believe the "book" of 1:1 applied only to a portion of the manuscript, such as Matt 1-4. Further, such early readers would have been well accustomed to the use of an introductory title sentence to announce a book's contents, a convention at use in multiple books of the

¹⁷ Ibid., 150.

OT as well as Jewish wisdom, prophetic, and apocalyptic literature. Matthew 1:1 seemingly employs this convention and would likely have been recognized as doing so.¹⁸ For all of the above reasons, the plainest interpretation of “book of genesis” in 1:1 is a title of introduction to the entire gospel, indicating that Jesus’ story is one of new creation.

Jewish Eschatological Ideas. That Matthew is an eschatological work can hardly be doubted; it tells a story of God’s redeeming work in the world that begins at creation and ends with a commission spanning all human geography and extending “to the end of the age.”¹⁹ What, then, was the eschatological understanding within which Matthew wrote and his audience heard his gospel? Davies and Allison illuminate:

Judaism conceived of the eschatological redemption and renewal as a new beginning. Not only would the last redeemer (Messiah) be as the first (Moses), but . . . the world would once again be as it was in the beginning. Matthew was manifestly familiar with this aspect of eschatology (note 19:28: παλιγγενεσία) and he saw the coming of Jesus in its light. . . . Thus he announces a return to the initial order of things.²⁰

When Matthew opens his gospel with “book of genesis,” then, he announces that Jesus Christ has inaugurated the fulfillment of the eschatological hope for a new creation.

Such fulfillment patterns have long been acknowledged in Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus as a “new Moses.” For example, Jesus’ flight to Egypt echoes Moses’ infant rescue among the reeds; his baptism, Moses’ passage through the Red Sea; his temptation, Moses’ wandering through the desert; his Sermon on the Mount, Moses’

¹⁸ Ibid., 150-152.

¹⁹ Matt 28:20.

²⁰ Davies and Allison, 153. Matt 19:28, referenced here, reads: “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things [παλιγγενεσία], when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory’”

receiving the law; and his Transfiguration, Moses' mountaintop epiphany.²¹ But while much has been written about Matthew's Jesus' fulfillment of Moses, less has been written about his fulfillment of creation. Can both fulfillment patterns coexist? Indeed they can; in fact, "in the Jewish mind the Exodus was linked with the act of creation."²² Jewish eschatology affirms a Mosaic framework and centers it within a broader work of creation renewal; just as Jesus is like the original redeemer of Moses, so his new creation will be like the original creation of Genesis. In other words, Moses-fulfillment and Genesis-fulfillment are not opposing interpretations of Matthew's gospel. Rather, they inform and allude to one another in their eschatological understanding of the meaning of Jesus Christ.

The church fathers affirmed a similar eschatological understanding of multilayered meaning, seeing in Matt 1 the mystical coexistence of creation, Israel's redemption, and Jesus' birth and death. For example, a 5th century work called the *Martyrology of Jerome* spoke of commemorating a day on which "our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, and conceived, and the world was made," combining in a single event the creation of the world and the redeeming work of Jesus.²³ The *Incomplete Work on Matthew* speaks of creation, the Jewish people, and the Messiah all proceeding "from the dark womb of the world," weaving together beginning, end, and everything in between using the earthy language of birth.²⁴ This same work, as well as John Chrysostom's *The Gospel of Matthew*, both convey eschatological hope as they marvel

²¹ Turner, 159, 301.

²² Davies and Allison, 153.

²³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Publishing, 2006), 24.

²⁴ *Homily I*, quoted in ACCS, 7.

at the simultaneous containment and uncontainability of Jesus Christ. Jesus “contains all” of creation in his divinity, and all creation “was not able to contain” him in his resurrection; nonetheless, he was contained within the womb of Mary and the wood of the manger.²⁵ Thus, Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection inaugurates a new creation that both contains and cannot be contained by the first creation of Gen 1.

NT New Creation Language. Supporting such a reading of Matt 1:1 is the prevalence of “new creation” language throughout the New Testament, implying that Matthew was not alone in seeing Jesus’ ministry as ushering in a new beginning. The most notable example is John’s gospel, whose opening lines more explicitly reference the language of Gen 1 and place the Jesus, the Word, at the center of the creation account: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”²⁶ So strong are the parallels that Hauerwas claims, “John’s prologue provides a fitting commentary on the book of Matthew.”²⁷ The gospel writers, then, shared a similar vision of creation in the story of Jesus.

And so did Paul. On multiple occasions, he describes Jesus and his ministry using Genesis concepts. In Rom 5:12-21, Paul frames Christ’s work of justification as a fulfillment of “Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.” Similarly, when describing the resurrection of Christ’s followers, he likens Christ to a “last Adam”, one by

²⁵ ACCS, 13, 20.

²⁶ John 1:1-5.

²⁷ 24-25.

whom humans formed of dust “will bear the image of the man of heaven.”²⁸ This typological reading of Adam infuses language of justification and resurrection with Genesis echoes, conveying that Paul “sees the coming of Jesus as the counterpart of the creation account narrated in Genesis.”²⁹

Patristic sources saw similar parallels between Eve and Mary; just as Jesus was the “last Adam,” Mary was imagined as a sort of mystical last Eve, reversing the curse through the new Adam in her womb. Chromatius of Aquileia compares the Genesis account of Eve with the Matthew account of Mary: “The devil first spoke to Eve the virgin long ago, and then to a man, that he might administer to them the word of death. In the latter case, a holy angel first spoke to Mary and then to Joseph, that he might reveal to them the word of life. . . . In the former case, the man fell through the woman; in the latter case, he rose through the virgin.”³⁰ The patristic *Incomplete Work on Matthew* draws similar parallels, inviting the reader to “see in what way the similarity here follows in everything that happened with Adam.”³¹ The patristic tradition thus observed and elaborated upon Paul’s Adamic typology as it interpreted Matthew, anchoring Matthew’s Jesus account within the Genesis’ narrative.

Such Genesis themes are more explicitly evidenced elsewhere in Paul, when he speaks of the “new creation” ushered in by Christ. For example, reflecting on the finished work of Christ and the resulting life in the Spirit for Christ’s followers, Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:17-19, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old

²⁸ 1 Cor 15:42-49.

²⁹ Davies and Allison, 150.

³⁰ Chromatius of Aquileia, *Tractates on Matthew*, 2.3-4, quoted in *Matthew 1-13*, ACCS, 15-16.

³¹ Quoted in *Matthew 1-13*, ACCS, 17.

has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself . . .”³² The saving work of Jesus Christ is nothing less than a “new creation,” which is imagined as the renewal of the original creation (“ everything has become new”; “reconciling the world to himself”). Paul uses similar language in Gal 6:14-15: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” This statement concludes a lengthy reflection on Christian freedom and the applicability of Jewish law, implying that the cross effected not only human salvation, but also a renewal of all creation.

One might be tempted to read such verses in a strictly anthropocentric and individualistic manner, as though the “new creation” of which Paul speaks is solely a work of personal renewal of the redeemed individual. Such a reading would limit the scope of Christ’s new creation. But Rom 8:19-23 suggests a far more generalized reading of “creation”:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

This passage makes a clear distinction between the creation and the individual—“not only the creation, but we ourselves”—as it weaves together themes of personal salvation and cosmic creation renewal. Paul views Jesus’ new creation work as vast in

³² Emphasis added.

scope, akin to the eschatological “renewal of all things” that Jesus speaks about in Matt 19:28. Together, the NT and patristic use of creation language suggest that Matthew’s audience would have plausibly read in Matt 1:1 the fulfillment of a new creation.

Conclusion

Hauerwas writes, “Matthew starts by suggesting that the genealogy of this man Jesus requires our revisiting the very beginning of God’s creative acts. . . . In Jesus we now rightly understand the beginning because we can now see the end.”³³ The rediscovery of Genesis fulfillment—heralded in Matt 1:1 and demonstrated through the remainder of the gospel text—offers modern readers a much-needed right understanding of the beginning as Hauerwas describes. Such a view expands one’s vision for Jesus’ new creation far beyond the salvation of individual souls to the restoration of the entirety of the created order to its original design. Such a view has the potential to invigorate a renewed sense of Christian connectivity to the earth, the cosmos, and every living thing at a time otherwise marked by technological absorption, distraction, and isolation. May Christians read Matthew with fresh eyes and fresh hope for Jesus’ “renewal of all things” (19:28) and their own participation in it.

³³ 23.

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