

The Verse that introduces Christianity, Doug Hayhoe, August 2022

One short verse of the Bible, found in its logical place, teaches us six key points of Christianity.

Christianity is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. But although those scriptures foreshadowed Christ, they weren't the beginning of Christianity. That was the New Testament. In fact, the very first verse of the New Testament, [Matthew 1:1](#), was carefully structured to introduce the key points of Christianity.¹ Using eight Greek nouns, it makes six key points about Christianity. (This essay follows closely R.T. France's *The Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, 2007.)

<u>Βίβλος</u>	<u>γενέσεως</u>	<u>Ἰησοῦ</u>	<u>Χριστοῦ</u>	<u>υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ</u>	<u>υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ</u>
Book ...	of the genealogy/beginning ...	of Jesus ...	the Christ (Messiah) ...	son of David ...	son of Abraham

1. Βίβλος (Book): Christianity is a religion of the book

The very first word in the New Testament is “Biblos” or book, a word that often refers to the Bible or parts of the Bible. We call the Bible God's second book. Now here's a story from my past.

King Josiah was my childhood hero. Someone had given me a book, *The Kings of Judah and Israel*, by Christopher Knapp. It was easy reading and the battles it described fascinated me. Many of the kings were evil, including the grandfather and father of Josiah. But when he was 16, “he began to seek the God of his father David” ([2 Chronicles 34:3](#)). And when he was 26, he “found the Book of the Law” in the Temple ([2 Chronicles 34:17](#)). He immediately ordered his officials to reorganize everything in Judah according to this book. As a result, no Passover in Judah or Israel was ever celebrated like King Josiah's ([2 Chronicles 35:18](#)).



[King Josiah listening to the Book of the Law](#)

Judaism was “the first religion of the book,” as scholars have pointed out. At the beginning, all Israel followed the *Torah* of Moses, “the Book of the Law.” Sadly, this didn't continue. Then, after several centuries of the nation losing sight of the *Torah*, Josiah reinstated it as the foundation of the kingdom's laws and celebrations. Christianity, the natural sequel to Judaism, is also a religion of the book. Even today, any conservative group of Christians, especially evangelicals, are thought of as people who take the Bible seriously. Perhaps that's why more copies of the Bible have been printed and distributed around the world than any other book – five billion, according to the [Guinness World Records](#). It's only natural, then, that the first word of the New Testament is “biblos,” book, the Greek word that our “bible” derives from.

¹ John 3:16 is probably the “heart” of the New Testament; but Matthew 1:1 introduces the New Testament.

2. γενέσεως (genealogy/beginning): Christianity marks a new beginning

This Greek word can mean genealogy. And the rest of Matthew 1 gives us the genealogy of Jesus. But it can also mean origin or beginning. In fact, the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament uses these same two words Βίβλος γενέσεως at the beginning of the Bible: “These are the generations [i.e., beginnings] of the heavens and the earth when they were created” ([Genesis 2:4 ESV](#)). Since this is the only place these two words occur together in the Old Testament, Matthew may have used them on purpose to introduce a new beginning in his Gospel, not the beginning of creation but of the beginning of a new creation, when Jesus was born.

3. Ἰησοῦ (Jesus): Christianity is about Jesus saving us from our sins

The Greek name Jesus is equivalent to the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “Yahweh saves.” Joshua was the great victorious leader, who followed Moses. He saved the Israelites from their enemies when he led them into the Promised Land. In New Testament times, many Jewish baby boys were named Jesus after him, which also means “Yahweh saves.”

Some Jews naturally expected Jesus would save them from the brutal Romans who were oppressing them, just as Joshua saved Israel. But Jesus was not coming to save his people from outward enemies, but from a much deeper problem, their inward sinful condition. As the angel told his father Joseph, a few verses later, “You are to give him the name Jesus, for he shall save his people *from their sins*” ([Matthew 1:21](#)).

4. χριστοῦ (Christ): Christianity is also about Christ, the long-awaited Messiah

Many people think Jesus Christ is a compound name, like most of ours. Dave Johnson, for example, consists of a given name “Dave” and a surname “Johnson” that goes back to an ancestor who was the “son of John.” Since Jesus was a common Jewish name, it’s easy to think that Christ further qualifies it. But R.T. France points out that when the Bible distinguishes Jesus from other people with the same name, it calls him “Jesus of Nazareth,” since Nazareth was the city where he grew up.² In fact, Jesus introduced himself as Jesus of Nazareth, when he appeared to Saul on his way to Damascus: “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting” ([Acts 22:8](#)).

But what about the Greek “Christos” then? It is not primarily a name but a title. It’s the same as the Hebrew Messiah. Both mean “the Anointed One.” Israel’s kings were anointed by men, but a special king was coming, who would be anointed by the Holy Spirit. We see this in [Isaiah 61:1](#), a verse that Jesus applied to himself when speaking in the synagogue in Capernaum: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has *anointed me* to proclaim good news.”

Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah, or Jesus the Anointed One is similar to the expression “King Jesus,” although that is not used in the New Testament. The Romans were in charge when it was written, and Caesar referred to himself as “Lord” not king.³ Therefore, the New Testament writers were careful to point out that Jesus was Lord, not Caesar. “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus as Lord’ ... you will be saved” ([Romans 10:9](#)).⁴ Thus, Jesus is not only Saviour but also the Messiah, promised a thousand years before he was born. And, in addition, he is Lord!

² See Matthew 21:11; 26:71; Mark 1:24; 14:67; Luke 18:37; 24:19; John 1:45, 18:5; 19:19; Acts 2:22; 10:48; 26:9.

³ They had kings under them, such as King Agrippa in Israel.

⁴ NT Wright has written on this topic extensively, in books such as his *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.

5. υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ (son of David): Christianity began with one nation

God's plan was always to bless his people Israel through King David, the man after His own heart, or through a direct descendent. He had made His covenant with David.⁵ So Israel's Messiah had to be a "son of David," descended from the royal line of David.⁶ The Gospel of Matthew, therefore, begins by tracing Jesus' genealogy, step by step, from David down to Joseph, Jesus' legal father ([Matthew 1:6-16](#)).

This continues through Matthew's Gospel. Everyone understood that Jesus, the Messiah, would be David's royal son. Blind people called him "s(on of David)" ([Matthew 9:27](#); [20:30-31](#)). The common people addressed him as "son of David" ([Matthew 12:23](#); [21:9](#)). The Canaanite woman acknowledged him to be "son of David" ([Matthew 15:22](#)). And the Pharisees knew that the Messiah, when he came, would be the "son of David" ([Matthew 22:42](#)). We were never meant to take Jesus out of his Jewish context. He is and will always be David's heir, son of David.

6. υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ (son of Abraham): Christianity encompasses all nations

In Matthew 1:1, Jesus the Saviour is the Messiah (the Christ) and the son of David, as we have seen. But he is also the son of Abraham in this verse. Thus, the chapter that follows traces Jesus' lineage through David all the way back to Abraham. This last point is a key aspect of Christianity. For while "son of David" speaks of Jesus' unique relationship with one people, the nation of Israel, "son of Abraham" reminds us of God's concern for all peoples, all the nations.

In the book of Genesis, before David was even thought of, God made a covenant with Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" ([Genesis 12:3b](#)). In fact, the name Abraham means "father of many nations" ([Genesis 17:5](#)). How do we know that Matthew had this in mind, when he added "son of Abraham" to his first verse? Because he ends his Gospel with Jesus' commanding his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" ([Matthew 28:19](#))!

My youngest daughter and son-in-law worked with Wycliffe for quite a few years, helping translate the Bible into "Cloudlands" Zapotec, one of the many indigenous languages in the world. They now live in Toronto, helping new immigrants from all parts of the world hear God's good news in their mother tongue, and laying the groundwork for future translations. Half of the six million people around Toronto were born outside of Canada. Many just arrived recently. The mention of Abraham in Matthew 1:1 reminds us that Christianity is for all people everywhere.

Conclusion

The first verse of the New Testament introduces us to six key points of Christianity. It is based on a book, the Bible, which has been translated and printed billions of times in thousands of languages. It had a beginning, when Jesus came. He is the one "who saves us from our sins." He is also the Anointed Messiah, promised by God's prophets of old. He came first for Israel, as the royal son of David, and one day they will recognize this. But he is also the son of Abraham, fulfilling God's promise to Abraham thousands of years ago, that through him all nations on Earth would be blessed. This is happening at present, as the good news spreads worldwide. We pray it may continue to happen, until that Day when Jesus the Lord comes again to this Earth.

⁵ 2 Chronicles 7:18; Psalm 89:3; Isaiah 55:3; Jeremiah 33:21-22.

⁶ Psalm 18:50; 132:11; Isaiah 9:7; 16:5; 55:3; Jeremiah 23:5; Ezekiel 34:24; 37:25; Hosea 3:5.