

“A Genealogical Look at Jesus”

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Text: Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 3:23 – 38

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Now, have you ever heard the genealogy of Jesus read in public worship? I’m sure we all had the same approximate reaction to it as well. At first pass it is about as interesting as watching paint dry. We can easily overlook this passage because to us it seems so unimportant. But for Matthew and Luke (who also had a list) it was important. To them the genealogy of Jesus said something meaningful about Jesus. And when we think about it that way I think it is easier for us to get it. Hands up: how many of you have dabbled in researching your own family history? I’ve read that genealogy is Canada’s most popular hobby, and I suspect it is because we find our family heritage meaningful. So maybe there is something here for us to learn.

Well, to start off, perhaps we should ask the first question a genealogist would ask: “how accurate is this listing of Jesus’ ancestors?” Well, not that accurate. There are a few problems with these lists, to be sure. Among the descendants of King Solomon, for example, Matthew skips over three kings between Joram and Uzziah—kings who are clearly listed in the Old Testament. So Matthew must have chosen to skip over them for a reason. Matthew presented Jesus’ ancestry in a 14-14-14 generation scheme, and that seems to have been more important to Matthew than accurately listing the names. More on this in a moment. Today’s genealogist runs into further difficulties when Matthew’s list is compared to the one found in Luke’s Gospel. The two lists agree with each other from Abraham down through King David, but then it diverges. Matthew has Jesus descended through David’s son King Solomon, while Luke has Jesus descended through David’s son Nathan. The two different accounts of the family history join back together with Jesus’ great-grandfather. But then, after all that, there is another difference: Luke and Matthew provide different names for Jesus’ grandfather.

For today’s genealogist this would be simply unacceptable. But we need to recall two things. First, and most obviously, the people 2,000 years ago and more did not benefit from the kind of recordkeeping we insist on today. This is a fact any genealogist knows who tries to push their family history back beyond 1800. The further back you go the harder it gets. But there is a more important consideration than this. For the ancient Jewish writers of the accounts of faith – those who wrote down the stories of the Bible – the emphasis of their writing was on the meaning of the story and the lesson the story conveyed. So Matthew could skip three names in his genealogy of Jesus because it was more important to convey the summary we find in verse 17: “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.” For the Jewish people the number seven was the most perfect and holy of numbers, representing completeness and fulfilment. So Matthew’s genealogy of

three periods of 14 generations is really also six periods of 7 generations. Matthew is telling us that Jesus was inaugurating the seventh era of God's people since Abraham. So what Jesus was inaugurating was the fulfilment of God's will. That is what Matthew wants us to take from this part of Jesus' family history.

But even the breakdown into these three eras of 14-14-14 generations is an important message, for this scheme shares the message of the Gospel. Luke's genealogy of Jesus goes all the way back to Adam. Personally I haven't been that successful myself with my own family tree! But Matthew didn't do that. He takes it back only as far as Abraham, even though anyone can read in Genesis 11:27 that Abraham's father was Terah. So Matthew wanted to send us a message in his choice to start the family tree with Abraham. Abraham was the one God made covenant with. God promised to bless Abraham's descendants, making them numerous. But God also promised to give them a promised land. It took them a long time to get there, and a long time to attain it. And if you asked of a Jew in Jesus day when that promise was completely fulfilled they would say that it happened in the days of King David, at the end of Matthew's first 14 generation era. The number 7 means fulfilment. So Matthew is telling us that when God makes a promise God keeps a promise. The message of that first era is that God is faithful.

The second era gives a totally different message, because Matthew purposefully shortens the list of ancestors to ensure that 14 generations ends with the Babylonian exile. In Jesus' day every Jew could tell you that the end of the nation Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the deportation of captives to Babylon in the 6th century BC was the lowest point in their history. They would tell you that their faithlessness was so great that they left no recourse for God but to demonstrate this act of tough love to force the people of God to come back to God. By highlighting the Babylonian exile Matthew was sending a message to his reader. The first 14-generation era reminds us that God is faithful in keeping his promises. The second 14-generation era ending with the Babylonian conquest reminds us that people are not as faithful, and can never be as faithful to God as God is to us.

The third era of 14 generations points to God's solution to that problem, because it ends with Jesus. Just before and during the time of Babylonian exile prophets of God started to declare that God would send a Messiah, a Saviour, who would inaugurate a new era of faithfulness, a new capacity for faithfulness, a Saviour who would create a new covenant with all humanity. And that was fulfilled, Matthew said, by Jesus at the end of the final 14-generation era. So what is Matthew saying here? As God has proven faithful to his promises in the past, so God was again proving faithful in his promises that were fulfilled in Jesus. So the 14-14-14 generation scheme sends this message: God is faithful, humanity can't be faithful, God promises to send a Saviour to help us be faithful. The birth of Jesus is the fulfilment of that promise.

But if you dig deeper into this list there is even more to draw from it, such as the fact that both Matthew and Luke's genealogies end with Joseph. Now at first blush this seems odd because both Matthew and Luke are quite insistent that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father. So given that, why would Matthew and Luke draw up these grand genealogies from Joseph rather than from Mary? The most widely accepted answer is that in Jesus' day one's legal relationship with one's father was not based on biology. Jesus legal relationship with his father was based on Joseph being Mary's husband. If Joseph and Mary were married then they were legally the parents, regardless of whether Joseph was the biological father or not. So having the genealogy go from Joseph makes another point: that Jesus was legally descended from these ancestors. And who did these ancestors include? King David. Old Testament prophets commonly asserted that God's Messiah would be a new king, descended from King David's line. Matthew, in doing a genealogy of Joseph, was telling his readers that Jesus was descended from King David, legally. And in this again affirming that God keeps God's promises. God is always faithful to us.

If we dig even deeper again there is another surprise, and in that another message: a message of inclusivity. This genealogy lists four women, not just men. It lists two Gentiles as ancestors of Jesus, not exclusively Jews. It includes people of low virtue and terrible reputations. Ahaz was one of the worst kings in Jewish history. David and Bathsheba were adulterers, David a murderer. Rahab was a prostitute. Matthew tells us that people like this were the ancestors of Jesus. But it reminds us of the depth of meaning of the famous verse from John, "For God so loved the world...", the whole world, with an all-encompassing love. A love that could embrace the likes of those found in Jesus' family tree. A love that embraces us as well as part of Jesus' family.

For that we are. Later in Matthew we hear Jesus say, "For whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (12:49). The apostle Paul tells us that our sibling status is ours because of the work of Christ on the cross. "God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph. 1:5). God destined us for adoption according to his will – God keeps God's promises. So, unexpectedly, we discover that this is our family tree as well. The story of these our ancestors tells us that God is always faithful. This genealogy demonstrates God's grace in action, loving even the rogues, the outsiders and sinners among Jesus' ancestors, just as God continues to love the rogues, outsiders and sinners today, working with them and for them and through them. And again we are grateful, for this means that God's gracious love is so wide that it will embrace us too.

But one final word. Those who come after Jesus are part of that seventh era of seven. That suggests this is the age of consummation, completion, fulfillment. I think Matthew would hope we realize that just as God has proven faithful, so God will continue to prove faithful, and this should inspire our hope for the people of God, who will be those who follow after us.

Recall the words of our responsive reading from Psalm 78. Ours is to remember this family history of ours. Ours is to remember the stories of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Ruth and David, of Mary and Joseph, and of Jesus. For as the Psalmist reminds us, "I will utter sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told to us. We will not hid them from our children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and the mighty wonders that God has done... that the next generation might know them, the children of the yet unborn, and rise up and tell them them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God" (2-4,6-7).

For this is what genealogists love to do: to discover the family stories of old and tell them to their family, that they not be forgotten. For these stories tell us who we have been and who we are. And who is that? People who have been made the family of God, out of God's gracious love for us.