

The Christmas Genealogy

If you were telling your story, where would you begin? Would you start, “Yesterday, I had to stop for gas because my ‘empty’ warning light had come on”? Or would you start with your last move, or your first car or the biggest moment in your life so far — and make the rest of the story the anti-climax?

It’s much more likely that you would begin something like this: “My family came to Canada in the early 1900’s”, or “I don’t remember my grandparents very well - they died when I was still quite young.” Your family history puts your own story into its context. Once someone knows a little bit about what your roots are, they can better understand some of the details of what you’re all about as a person. Context is important in any of our stories, but when God comes to earth, it’s essential.

That’s why Matthew begins his gospel with the story of Jesus’ background. The Jewish people had been given some expectations about the coming of their Messiah and Matthew, in particular, is written to an audience that was primarily Jewish. So it was of importance to him to explain where this Jesus came from, how He fulfilled the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures and to prove that He was legitimately the son of David promised long ago.

But Matthew doesn’t just throw out a list of names. He constructs this genealogy with great care, and great skill. He begins with the words “*biblos geneseos*”, which literally means, “the book of origins”, of Jesus the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham. This is a new Genesis, a new beginning, and it starts like the old Genesis, “in the beginning”. Notice that it connects to two key figures from the Hebrew Scriptures: Abraham and King David.

Abraham represents the beginning of the covenant people of God. He was the father of the Hebrew nation that was later named after his grandson, Israel. It was to Abraham that God had made His great promises - as we’ve seen while studying the letter to the Galatians - and so Abraham is the pioneer of faith who is beloved by God and the recipient of God’s promises - especially that all nations on earth would be blessed through him, through his descendant.

David represents another person from the Hebrew Scriptures who is known as being beloved by God. And David, too, had received great promises from God, particularly that he would always have a descendant on the throne of Israel. When David told the prophet Nathan that he wanted to build a temple where God could be worshiped, Nathan received a message that night which said, in part,

And now I declare that the LORD will build a house for you - a dynasty of kings! For when you die, I will raise up one of your sons, and I will make his kingdom strong. He is the one who will build a house - a temple - for Me. And I will establish his throne forever. I will be his Father, and he will be My son. I will not take My unfailing love from him . . . (2 Chronicles 17:10b-13)

There's something else that ties Abraham and David together and it becomes a major New Testament theme, one we've seen in our Galatians study and which is suggested by this first verse of Matthew's Gospel. Abraham was told by God that he would be the father of many nations, and David wrote and sang about God receiving the worship of the nations. Both men saw the glory of God extending to all peoples.

So, from Matthew 1:1, we can see that this writing will be about a new beginning, a new Genesis. We see Matthew hinting that it will be about promises that God made long ago ... and when Matthew uses the title "Christ" or "Messiah", he includes the promises given by the prophets of the coming "anointed One" who would be Israel's salvation. We also see that this opening verse of the opening Gospel of our New Testament suggests that God is about to act in a way that will impact the nations, not just Israel. The time for prophetic fulfillment had come - and we see it richly presented in the first verse of Matthew's gospel.

The next fifteen verses tell us the names of the fathers who were descended from Abraham and who continued the generations that would carry the fulfillment of God's promises.

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (their mother was Tamar). (1:2-3a)

The names of the men don't tell us a whole lot. We can read the stories of some of them in the Hebrew Scriptures. We can certainly read stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's twelve sons, Boaz, Jesse and David. The names in the middle are the names of the kings of Judah and the names at the end are the names of some of the exiles and some from the line of David that returned from the exile.

What we will find interesting is the names of five women who are mentioned in this genealogy - five women with interesting backgrounds ... and stories. And it starts from right near the beginning with the story of Tamar. Matthew doesn't retell the whole story in any of these cases - he just mentions their names, with the knowledge that, because he's writing to a Jewish audience, the whole story will come to the minds of the people as they're reading or hearing this genealogy.

Judah, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, or Israel, had married a Canaanite woman and they had three sons. Judah arranged for his oldest son to marry a young woman named Tamar. After awhile he died. The custom of the time was that the next oldest brother would marry the deceased brother's wife and father a child with her so that the dead man would have an heir. The second brother refused to have children with Tamar, so God put him to death. Judah didn't want to lose the only son he had left, so he refused to let his youngest boy give Tamar a child. Tamar went home to live with her parents and, some time later, Judah's wife died. After some time had passed, Tamar took off her widow's clothing and disguised herself as a prostitute, waiting by the side of the road that she knew Judah would be travelling on his way home from sheep shearing. He slept with her, and three months later, news got back to Judah that his

daughter-in-law was pregnant. “Bring her out and burn her!” Judah shouted. But she sent him proof that he was the father, and Judah admitted that she was more in the right than he was, because he had refused to let his youngest son marry her.

God’s judgment, a man’s cowardice, another man’s refusal to do what was right, a woman’s deception, illicit sexual relations, and the evidence of true guilt, all bound up in the story of Tamar. And Matthew includes her name among the ancestors of the Messiah. Why does he do that?

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Ram.

Ram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz (his mother was Rahab). (3b-5a)

Last spring I taught a series on some of the major difficulties that people have with the Old Testament. In one of the talks I described the conclusions of some modern archaeologists who now believe that the walled cities that Israel destroyed in their conquest of Canaan were basically military outposts.

Each would have a guest-house or hostel which would require a civilian to act as host or hostess and provide meals for the guests, usually travellers.

Jericho was the first of these outposts that Israel encountered and the person who ran the guest house was none other than Rahab, known as the harlot ... a side-line to the business of running the hostel. When someone reported to the “King” or military commander, of Jericho that some Israelites had been seen entering the town, he immediately went to Rahab’s house and asked her to turn them over. That seems to agree with the theory of the archaeologists about the way these military outposts worked.

So, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and had a son who became an ancestor of Jesus, and now we read that Rahab, a prostitute who was rescued from Jericho because she protected Israel’s spies, is also part of the line that leads to the birth of Messiah. Rahab, once the harlot of Jericho, becomes the wife of Salmon and they give birth to a son named Boaz.

Boaz was the father of Obed (his mother was Ruth).

Obed was the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of King David. (5b-6a)

Ruth’s story is told in a four-chapter book by that same name, a story of faithfulness and loyalty that is inspiring. Ruth was not an Israelite - she was born and raised in Moab - but she married an Israelite man after he and his family came to live in Moab during a time of famine. But her husband, his brother and their father all died within ten years of their marriage, leaving Ruth, her sister-in-law Orpah and their mother-in-law Naomi without any support. Naomi went back home and despite her pleadings with Ruth to stay in Moab and remarry there, Ruth went with her back to Bethlehem, where she was cared for by none other than Boaz, who married her. They were the

great-grandparents of King David. Now we add a foreign woman to the list of Jesus' ancestors.

The latter part of verse 6 opens another story:

David was the father of Solomon (his mother was Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah). (6b)

The fourth story is a tragic drama of abuse of power, adultery and murder. King David is home at the time kings go to war and he sees a woman that he wants, a woman who happens to be married to one of his 37 mighty men, who are listed in 2 Sam. 23, a Hittite named Uriah. Uriah's wife seems to have been from an Israelite family - her father's name is Hebrew. David sent for her, slept with her, and later was told that she was pregnant. When his plans to make it look like Uriah was the father failed, he ordered that Uriah be placed in extreme danger in the battle. This was done, Uriah was killed, and David took Bathsheba to be his wife. The child did not live, but later another son was born to Bathsheba, Solomon, who would become king after his father's death.

What an intriguing list of names - women who could have been shunned, discriminated against, looked down on - but women who Matthew chooses to include in his listing of the family tree of Jesus the Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

The last woman mentioned in that list is, of course, Mary, the mother of Jesus. She must also have endured the shunning of the townspeople of Nazareth when it was discovered that she was pregnant before her marriage to Joseph.

What do these five women have in common? And what is significant about their names being included in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah? All knew what it was to be shamed, to be judged by others, to be known for their indiscretions rather than anything positive. Even Ruth, although people generally spoke well of her, was a foreigner relying on the generosity of others. She had known poverty and the loss of her husband. She had been on the margins of society, an outsider looking for help.

I think it's critical to our understanding of the New Testament to realize that, from the beginning, there is a message of hope for the downtrodden, the over-looked, the underprivileged of this world. Those five women who are mentioned in this genealogy are not otherwise likely to make a "Who's Who" list that typically features the rich and famous. They are humble people, trying to make the best out of life, and their enduring legacy is that they brought hope to the world through their offspring. Not just to their families, not just to their nation, but the whole world is given light and hope through those who were thought, in their time, to be unworthy of any honour or recognition. I like that Matthew included these names, that he allowed their stories to rise up in the minds of his readers, and so gave us a glimpse of the revolutionary character of the Gospel. In Jesus, those who were last were going to be first and the first would be last and the old order of things was passing away. Here's the first taste of the revolutionary nature of the Gospel.

One more name from the list that I want to give some attention to is the name Manasseh. Matthew's genealogy lists all the kings from David through to Jehoiachin. And in that list we read:

*Uzziah was the father of Jotham
Jotham was the father of Ahaz
Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah
Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh
Manasseh was the father of Amos (or Amon). (1:9,10)*

Manasseh was the worst king Judah ever had. He was a gross idolater, worshiping the gods of the Canaanites and even set up a carved idol that he had made in the Temple of the LORD. Here's a summary:

He rebuilt the pagan shrines his father Hezekiah had destroyed. He constructed altars for the images of Baal and set up Asherah poles. He also bowed before all the stars of heaven and worshiped them. He even built pagan altars in the Temple of Yahweh, the place where Yahweh had said His name should be honoured forever . . . Manasseh even sacrificed his own sons in the fire in the valley of Ben Hinnom. He practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and he consulted with mediums and psychics. He did much that was evil in the LORD's sight, arousing His anger. (2 Chron. 33:3-6)

In 2 Kings we read that Manasseh had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood and that it was because of Manasseh's great evil that God sent the tribe of Judah - the Jewish people - into exile in Babylon.

Now, let's go to a passage a little later in 2 Chronicles 33 and hear the rest of the story about Manasseh:

So the LORD sent the Assyrian armies, and they took Manasseh prisoner. They put a ring through his nose, bound him in bronze chains and led him away to Babylon. But while in deep distress, Manasseh sought the LORD his God and cried out humbly to the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed, Yahweh listened to him and was moved by his request for help. So Yahweh let Manasseh return to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Manasseh had finally realized that Yahweh alone is God. (2 Chron. 33:11-13)

And Manasseh lived a reformed life from then on, including removing altars and idols from where he had placed them. The worst king Judah ever had was given the grace to humble himself and to seek the LORD and it changed him completely.

When I look at Matthew's genealogy, I see people whose lives were turned upside down by the grace of God. At one level they had failed, were broken by life, had experienced a ton of pain and rejection and disappointment. But on other levels, if they could see it, they had been blessed by God. Tamar was able to raise twin boys who became key in the line of Judah. The line of Judah is the people who became known as the Jews - including Jesus of Nazareth, the Saviour of the world. Rahab was able to marry into the tribe of God's chosen people and later Ruth did the same. Bathsheba became the mother of the man who built the temple of the LORD in

Jerusalem and Mary gave birth to the Messiah, the One who became the new Temple, the new Centre of Worship for God's people.

The Gospels are the stories of a great upheaval in the way the world works. Jesus said it simply: the first will be last and the last will be first. Those who are outsiders, rejected, unloved and poor will be given all the riches of heaven if they remain humble enough to trust God instead of themselves. At the same time, those who are proud and self-confident and blind to their need for God will find themselves sitting in the place of the poor and needy. We'll see this theme picked up again and again during the birth narratives in both Matthew and Luke, including next week when we look at Mary's song of praise, often called the *Magnificat*.

The hints are there in abundance. The Gospel will present a new beginning, a new way of knowing and serving God. It will bring a sea change in the values that people had taken for granted. Those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, will be the ones who are blessed by God - but that comes later in Matthew's Gospel. For now, we can see that we are being introduced to an upside-down world in which God honours those the world has despised and remembers those the world has forgotten.