

29 December 2019

**Genealogies**  
Matthew 1:1-17

We read today the very first words of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew chapter 1, verses 1-17:

*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

*<sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, <sup>4</sup>and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup>and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup>and Jesse the father of King David.*

*And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, <sup>7</sup>and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, <sup>8</sup>and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup>and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup>and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup>and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.*

*<sup>12</sup> And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup>and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup>and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup>and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

*<sup>17</sup> 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.*

Okay, so it isn't the most interesting text to read in worship. Trust me, though: it meant more to the original readers. For starters, they knew all these names. First century Jews knew their genealogies, knew whom they were descended from, and which lines of descent were important. Last May, when I was in New Zealand, I heard a Maori bishop of the Anglican Church recite from memory his family genealogy going back for at least 500 years. Biblical Jews had that kind of respect for genealogy.

Anyone here into genealogy? It can be compelling. I haven't gotten into it myself, but even I know some highlights, though. I'm related to Colonel William Phillips who commanded

Union forces in Oklahoma during the Civil War and later founded the city of Salina, Kansas. Who do you have in your background? [Pause]

Notice that we all stress the famous, important, influential people. Well, we still can't beat Jesus. Nobody in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine could beat his genealogy: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, King David, King Solomon and the whole line of kings of Judah right down to Jechoniah the last king before Jerusalem was destroyed, then Zerubbabel, the governor of Judea after the exile, right down to Jesus. Jesus has quite a pedigree.

Except not everyone in his list is a point of family pride: v. 3, *and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar*. By Tamar. Do you know that story? It's in Genesis 38. Here's the gist of it: Judah had three sons and he married the oldest one to a Canaanite woman named Tamar. Then that oldest son died, before he had a son. Now Israelite law wanted to make sure that every family was perpetuated, so it required that when a man died without a son, that man's brother had to marry his brother's widow and have children by her. Got that? So Judah sent his second son to marry Tamar, and that son died, too. Judah decided this Canaanite woman was bad luck and decided not to risk his last son on her. Well, Tamar knew she wasn't being given her rights, so one day she dressed up in a heavy veil and the clothes of a prostitute and tricked her father-in-law Judah into having sex with her. She had twin boys, Perez and Zerah, and Perez was one of Jesus' ancestors. Nothing like a tawdry tale of deceit and illicit sex to add to family pride.

There's more. Verse 5: *and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab*. By Rahab. Remember Rahab? This is from the Book of Joshua. Joshua's leading the Children of Israel across the Jordan River to conquer the Promised Land, and the first city they come to is Jericho. Big city. Great big walls. The Children of Israel get a little nervous, so Joshua decides to send in some spies, to scout it out. They dress up like Canaanites, whatever that looked like, and slip into the city, where they go first of all to . . . the house of a prostitute. That's Rahab. Well, they're not any better as spies than they are as husbands, and the word gets out that they're in town. Rahab hides them from the city rulers, and in return is allowed to live with the Israelites and even marry one of them when Joshua and the Israelites take Jericho. So, in Jesus' genealogy there's a foreign woman theme going. Also kind of a prostitute theme.

Wait, there's more. Continuing verse 5: *and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth*. By Ruth. Okay, here's a slightly more familiar story. Most of us have heard of Ruth. She was a Moabite woman – foreign woman theme again – who married a Hebrew from Bethlehem, and when her husband and father-in-law both died, Ruth stayed on with her Hebrew mother-in-law to take care of her. It wasn't easy. Ruth had to work in the fields, picking up the leavings of the harvesters. Then one day she worked in the field of a certain Boaz, who had heard about this Moabite woman who was caring for her mother-in-law and Boaz made sure Ruth was kept safe. When Ruth's mother-in-law heard about this, she sent Ruth to, ah, follow up. At the harvest festival, Boaz got drunk and fell asleep in the barn, as one does. When he woke up in the middle of the night, he found a woman in bed with him. "Whoa! Who are you?" "I'm your maidservant Ruth. I've come to ask if you'd like to marry me." Which he did. So far as we know, nothing happened that night, but it was still suspicious enough that in the morning Boaz told Ruth, "Say, why don't

you slip out before it's light. You know. Nosy busy-bodies and all that." So, a foreign woman yes but not a prostitute. Just a woman who crawled into a man's bed while he was drunk.

Not done yet. Ruth's great grandson was King David. From v. 6: *And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah*. By the wife of Uriah. Remember who that was? Bathsheba. That's the woman that David saw taking a bath on the roof of her house, which was next door to the king's palace. David sent for her and had his way with her. When she turned up pregnant, David ended up having her husband Uriah murdered, to keep him from suspecting. That child died in infancy, but David married Bathsheba and had another child, Solomon. Now we don't know a whole lot about Bathsheba. Was she a foreigner? Maybe. Her first husband was a foreigner, Uriah the *Hittite*, and her name literally means "daughter of Sheba," which is modern day Yemen. So, could be. And we don't know if her extra-marital relations with David were forced or consensual. It doesn't say. All we can say for sure is that the whole story is disreputable, especially regarding David, and so for the fourth time we have to note that Jesus has as much dirty laundry in his genealogy as he has royal robes.

And Matthew makes sure we know it.

So, those of you who do genealogy, do you have any of those stories? The rascals and ne'er-do-wells and black sheep and card sharps and embezzlers and weasels? [Pause] My great-grandfather Morris moved to Oklahoma and took up with a woman of questionable reputation, lived with her for a while, then left her and married a good church-going woman and had several kids, including my grandfather, John Wesley Morris. Then my great-grandfather evidently got tired of virtue and went back to his previous wife – if they were ever married, I'm not sure – and I think began selling liquor. The family located his grave recently, in Leavenworth, Kansas. What do you know about Leavenworth, Kansas? Right, the Federal Penitentiary. Probably a coincidence.

Matthew wants to make a point. When we say that God became human. We mean that in every sense. Jesus was a human *just like us*. No fairy tale prince or legendary hero. Sure he was of the royal line, but he was also a descendant of all the sorts of people we normally try to sweep under the family rug. Foreigners muddying up his Jewish bloodline. Illegitimate births. Checkered pasts. Questionable behavior. Murder. Like us, Jesus was the descendent of great men, great saints, great disappointments, great scandals. He was the King of the Jews. But he's more than that. He's the King of the Foreigners, King of the Immigrants, King of the Outcasts, King of the Prostitutes. King of the Rascals. That's who we celebrate this season. That's who our king is. Thank God. Someone like us.