

## The Family of the Messiah

Matthew 1:1-17

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On Sunday we looked at the text right after the genealogy of Jesus. It's the famous and simple story of the virgin birth of Jesus, his origin from above, if you will. His vertical origin in God, manifested through the power of the Holy Spirit. Here, in the genealogy, we have what we might call his horizontal origin. His human origin in the history of Israel. Now, for most of us, genealogies are pretty boring. We want to get past them to where the action starts. But I can assure you: this genealogy is anything but boring. And we know the Jews took them – and the associated record keeping - with utmost seriousness.

The Book of Ezra, speaking of Israel returning to the land after the Babylonian exile (6<sup>th</sup> c. BC), says they searched in the registered family records and, when the names of certain people were not found, they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. Long before ancestry dot com, the Jews were meticulous about these records. No provable descent from the tribe of Levi – no priestly ministry. And here, as in Luke's gospel, the genealogies are used to verify the tribal ancestry, and thus the legitimacy, of Jesus' claims to be the Messiah. They could not be more important.

The genealogy here then – by its very existence, even before we look at it - tells us something crucial. It tells us that we are in the realm of history, not myth, not fairy tale. Jesus has a deep and documented human history. These are flesh and blood people, in the flesh and blood, very real, and very traumatic, very public, history of Israel. And we don't have a mere list. We have a history – prepared by God across centuries, that is moving purposefully. The list builds to a climax. Jesus comes to fulfill the hopes and fears of all the long and dark and desolate years.

So, if we look – and I'm just going to pick a few names out – if we look at this as Jesus' pedigree, his resume, we will see that Matthew doesn't do what we do with our resumes. Namely, touch them up to make them look as good as possible. Matthew gives us the family of Jesus warts and all. With all of its squalor and its occasional nobility. It's an untouched resume.

With that, we notice, in v.1 that this is the “genealogy of Jesus the Messiah (Christ), the son of David, the Son of Abraham.” Matthew starts with David, then moves back in time to Abraham. In the next verse he will start with Abraham and

then go forward in time, from Abraham, through David, down to Jesus. So, Abraham and David are the two decisive figures in the list. The point here is that, as Son of David, Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel, the one who reigns in mercy as the Davidic King. As the son of Abraham, he fulfills the promises made to Abraham, that through Abraham's seed (descendant) all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

For our purposes tonight, think of it this way: this combination — Son of David, Son of Abraham — means Jesus comes as Israel's Messiah to be sure, but he does so for the salvation of the world, of all nations, of Jew and Gentile. The light of Christmas, universality of the love of God for broken and lost humanity, engulfed in darkness, is signaled at the outset then. And broken and lost humanity is what we get. Though there are noble people here, they are all sinners, all stained, all leveled in needing the Christ to come as their Savior.

Abraham, with whom v.2 begins, was a Gentile idolater at the time of his calling. And though he became great, the father of the faithful, he lied about his wife (Sarah) being his sister on multiple occasions, putting both her life, and her purity, at risk. At her suggestion he slept with her servant, not trusting in the promise of God. An act of disobedience with enormous historical ramifications for Israel's well-being.

He is the father of Isaac who becomes the father of Jacob. Jacob who was an unscrupulous liar. Who deceived his aged father for the blessing and the birthright. And who had to live as a fugitive as a result. He is the father of Judah and his brothers. The heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. But Judah. The head of the great, prominent tribe of Judah. The dominant tribe of the southern kingdom.

Judah takes the lead in selling his brother Joseph into slavery. While he may have saved him from murder – we know this: He was human trafficker before we had the term. He faked the murder of his brother, deceived his aged father, bringing down years of inconsolable grief on his head.

Later, as v.3 alludes to, he commits incest. Sleeping with his daughter in law Tamar, who had - in response to Judah's injustices and lies toward her - dressed up as a prostitute—an act of desperation, to try and fulfill the levirate law, which required the raising up seed to her dead husband. When he found out that Tamar was pregnant by means of her prostitution, Judah, the self-righteous hypocrite, horrifically, wanted her burned alive, until it was shown that he was the client. At which point Judah was forced to confess that she was more righteous than he was. Yes, Judah grows morally across the span of his life. But it is sinners, deep and grievous, whom Jesus comes to save.

It is a stunning thing – given the surrounding cultures - that women are in this genealogy. And, including Mary, there are five of them. Tamar is the first. And she was likely a Canaanite.

The list moves down to Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Another Canaanite. A prostitute. Who, like Tamar, acted righteously, and was drawn into the covenant community of Israel. And Boaz's wife was Ruth. Another outsider. This time not even from within Canaan. From Moab. And Ruth was noble, she engaged in nothing improper, though she had what could be seen as a sexually charged encounter with Boaz. What ties all the women together (including Ruth) – with Mary – is this cloud of suspicion, of sexual immorality, that hangs over them all.

All three women named so far come from hostile nations. All are Gentiles. Jesus's very lineage has a fair amount of Canaanite or Moabite blood, Gentile blood already in it. God, in mercy, has been assimilating Gentiles into his people from the beginning. And Jesus, we are taught here, comes for male and female, Jew and Gentile, w/o racial distinction. The suspicious, the accused, the guilty, the exploited, the victims and the perpetrators. The noble and ignoble. Now, we move from Boaz and Ruth, down a few generations to David. Now that's somebody you want in your heritage, right?

Yet, his is a story of bloodshed, rivers of it, and adultery, the story of a shattered family, torn, shredded by strife, by rape, by political rebellion. David is the father of Solomon- and then we are bitingly reminded – that Solomon's mother *had been* Uriah's wife. The woman alluded to here is, of course, Bathsheba. She was married to Uriah, who was a Hittite. So, she also may have been a Gentile. David, sees her bathing, exploits his power, summons her, commits adultery. He has her husband, Uriah, one of his loyal soldiers, killed. That's why Bathsheba HAD BEEN Uriah's wife.

Solomon comes forth, and after a promising start, descends into idolatry and immorality. Under the recklessness and greed of his son, the kingdom of Israel is torn in two. We then get a list of kings. A few of whom are ok, a couple are good, and many are knaves and fools (brutal to read Kings). There are alliances with wicked nations, there is the usurping of the role of the priesthood, there are assassinations, the killing of one's own sons, there is the setting up of high places to worship foreign gods. There is human sacrifice, the burning of babies alive – in the worship of Molech. Hezekiah is a rare exception. Though he hands over the treasures of the temple to the King of Assyria. Josiah tries unsuccessfully to reform, but it's too late.

The whole history – to this point - ends with the tragedy of the exile. The nations covenantal relationship to God has been, from the human side, an utter failure. The cities are destroyed, the monarchy is in ruins, they are dispossessed from the land.

Next, I want to note that many of these names here are unknown. They left no footprint in history. They have names, but they are faceless, buried in the sands

of time. Anonymous. Like the vast majority of humans who've ever lived. For them, and not just for those who've made their mark, Jesus comes.

Finally, we come to the last woman around whom scandal and suspicion would swirl. Mary, of whom, the text says, Jesus was born – making it clear (at least indicating) that Joseph is not the biological father. From her flesh, he draws his humanity.

So, the point should be blindingly obvious. Jesus does not come from a nice stable family. He does not come from a line of mostly moral, clean, noble, honest, reasonable, decent people. But Messiah's own line, his ancestry, is stained by liars, murderers, adulterers, cowards, prostitutes, idolaters, and hypocrites. By incest and rape. And we are taught by this dysfunctional family – God's own family, Jesus' kin - that whether you are male or female, Jew or Gentile, known or unknown, you are a sinner who falls short of the glory of God.

I don't care who you are, or what you've done. The good news of Christmas, of Jesus the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Christ, born of Mary is – no one is beyond the pale of God's mercy. Including those people who are deluded enough, to think they can stand before God because they're good people (blind to their pride, self-righteousness). It is perhaps clearest of all that the gospel breaks down the barrier between the allegedly good and the bad. Between us – the good people – and them – the bad people. "There is no one righteous. No not one." Abraham, Josiah, Mary, the best people in the list, they are not the Christ. They too stand in need of a Savior. Of One who is not defiled by associating with our uncleanness, but One whose holiness purifies our impurity, our deep stains.

So, what does the genealogy teach? It teaches the gospel. The Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Christ, comes out of a family of sinners, and for the human family of sinners – no exceptions. And sinners Jesus does receive. Or in Paul's words: CJ came into the world to save sinners. For there is no other class of people in the light of Christmas. This is the best news imaginable. Though your sins be deep and many, though they be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.

Believe the gospel. For having assumed our humanity, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, the forgiven family of God. Joy to the world. Out of the defiled womb of Israel, the holy Christ has come! Amen.

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