

Sermon Notes -- 12/21/08

Jesus' Family Tree, Part 1 (Matthew 1:1-17)

This is not your ordinary family tree! The ancient Jews poured over their Scriptures, looking for hints and clues that would reveal the identity of the Messiah to come. Today (and next week), we will pour over Matthew's genealogy, looking for hints and clues that reveal the identity of the Messiah who *has* come. Matthew's genealogy shows us Christ in at least three ways:

[1] This genealogy is *story*

[2] This genealogy is *history*

[3] This genealogy shows us the way to *Sabbath rest*.

We will cover the first point today, and the rest next week. This is going to be rigorous Bible study – but a deeper knowledge of the Bible is exactly what the church needs today!! If we're going to understand who Jesus is, we need to understand the meaning of this genealogy.

How does Matthew's genealogy tell the story of Israel, as it comes to a climax in Jesus Christ? We have to consider the exquisite details of Matthew's opening section.

*"The book of the genesis of Jesus Christ...."*

Matthew is introducing Jesus (= Joshua) Christ (= priest/king). His name shows us something of his identity as the conquering priest-king, but it's only a start.

These opening words ("*biblos geneseos*") point us back to the book of Genesis. Matthew is writing a new Genesis because Jesus is bringing in a new creation. The phrase itself shows up in Genesis 2:1 and 5:1 to introduce *descendants*. Here, it introduces *ancestors*...unless Matthew has a few theological tricks up his sleeve. By unconventionally placing Jesus at the head *and* end of his own genealogy he is subtly implying that Jesus is more than a mere man. He is alpha and omega, first and last, Israel's creator and Israel's hope, Israel's root and branch (cf. Isa. 11). He is both Israel and Israel's God, fully human and fully divine.

*"...son of David, son of Abraham..."*

David and Abraham -- these are two of the most important figures in the Old Testament because God made key promises to them. God promised land (and ultimately the world) to Abraham and he promised an everlasting global kingdom to David (note how the promises to each dovetail). These promises remained unfulfilled in Israel's history, and after the exile even looked unfulfillable. But Matthew is saying that these hopes are *now* being realized in coming of Jesus. God is making good on the ancient covenant pledges!

How is Jesus the son of David? He is the Greater Solomon, the Wisdom of God in human form, the one who builds the temple (= the church), and the one who reigns over the nations forever (2 Sam 7, Ps. 89, etc.). He is Great David's Greater Son, the king Israel hoped in and hoped for.

How is Jesus the son of Abraham? He is the greater Isaac, born of the Spirit to a “barren” woman (= virginal conception), the one who undergoes death and resurrection in order to turn curse to blessing for all peoples (cf. Gen. 22). Jesus does not *come from* this line so much as he is *given to* this line...and he given in order that he might give himself in death as the ultimate sacrifice. His death overturns the curse and brings blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12).

*“Abraham begot Isaac...of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ.”*

The fact that Matthew begins his book with a genealogy links his gospel with Old Testament books that also start with genealogies, namely Ezra and Chronicles. In fact, Matthew is writing a new Chronicles, seen in the fact that he ends his gospel with a decree (= the Great Commission) that echoes Cyrus’ decree at the end of 2 Chronicles. Chronicles covers the whole history of Israel; the gospel of Matthew retraces all of Israel’s history in Jesus, showing that he fulfills Israel’s true purposes. Jesus is Israel done right. Chronicles shows that Israel served God by building his house in Jerusalem; Matthew shows that the church serves God by building him a “house” as the nations are discipled. Matthew is modeled on the literary plan of Chronicles for theological reasons, to show Jesus and his disciples begin a new Israel, a new humanity, a new history, the true “returned from exile” community. Of course, also implicit in this typology is Jesus as the new Moses/Cyrus and the church as the people of the new exodus.

*“So are all the generations...are fourteen generations”*

Further, Matthew breaks up his genealogy into three blocks. Three is the number of the Trinity, and the blocks correspond to the Father (= Abraham), the Son (= David), and the Spirit (= the age of the prophets). Matthew has woven a Trinitarian pattern into his genealogical narrative. Father, Son, and Spirit are all active in this gospel to bring about the fulfillment of the promises.

Another way to look at this is to consider the exile/exodus pattern built into the structure of the genealogy. Israel’s exile in 605 B. C. seemed to jeopardize God’s promises, as the nation lost both land and kingdom. Strangely, Matthew completely ignores the nation’s homecoming in 536 B. C., when Israelites returned to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. But Matthew is showing us that *that* return from exile was only a shadow of the *real* return, which takes place in Jesus. Ezra, one of the key books describing the return from exile, opens with a genealogy. Matthew is writing a new Ezra because the new and true exodus is taking place.

Even the Old Testament suggests that the return from exile in 536 B. C. was not complete. Israel’s exile ended geographically, but not spiritually. And that’s because the *real* exile began not in 605 B. C., but when Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden and the presence of God in Genesis 3. Ezra acknowledges this deeper reality when says “we are still slaves” (Ezra 9) even after the reconstruction project has been underway for quite some time.

Daniel 9 seems to imply that the exile is being stretched out 490 more years (though the dates are hard to place because of our limited historical knowledge). We sing about this in “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” which speaks of Israel’s “lonely exile” continuing “until the Son of God appear.” So Matthew is describing Jesus as a new Moses accomplishing the new exodus the prophets promised. In him, fellowship with God is being restored and access to the new Eden secured.

Finally, Matthew tells the story of God’s people by incorporating some strange features into his genealogy. In particular note the four women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba Matthew flags. The point is *not* that these women are sinners for whom Jesus came (though that is true); that point is made sufficiently well by the wicked *men* named in the genealogy. Besides that, these four women are generally *vindicated*, at least compared to the men they had to deal with. Rather, the point is that each of these women was an *outsider* in some way. All four of them have Gentile connections, three by birth, and one by marriage. Their “righteous scandals” all foreshadow the fifth woman in the genealogy, Mary, who creates a scandal of her own when turns up pregnant out of wedlock (though it is in a righteous way, as Joseph discovers). Jesus has come to include the outsider, and his family history already foreshadowed that.

What’s the point then? Jesus came for insiders as well as outsiders. *Anyone* can be included in Jesus’ family tree. It does not matter where we come from, what we’ve done, or what we’ve failed to do. Jesus himself is a “mudblood.” But he will not be ashamed to call us his brothers if we will come to him in faith and repentance. In his kingdom, kings and prostitutes, rich and poor, Jews and gentiles, all come together in one family. Matthew wants to present Jesus as the King of the Jews, yes, but more than that, he is showing us that Jesus is King of the world. Perhaps four women are included because four is the number of the creation as whole (e.g., the four corners of the world, the four winds, four directions [cf. Matt. 8:11f], etc.).

It’s so fitting that different countries and cultures have developed their own Christmas customs to celebrate the birth of the Savior. My kids have a book that looks at the way children celebrate Christmas all over the world. Christianity is not just a Western religion, or white man’s religion, or upper middle class religion. It is for *everyone* in all times and places. It is “catholic” – open to anyone, from anywhere. Again, Matthew’s gospel is something of a gospel invitation: no matter your background, what you’ve done, or failed to do, you can enter into this family by faith if you so desire.

The inclusion of these Gentile women in Jesus’ genealogy is a remarkable sign of expansive grace. Genealogies in the ancient world were generally used to prove one’s purity (and ultimately to prove one’s worth, status, and identity). For example, Herod the Great tried to keep his genealogy secret because he was a Jew/Edomite mix, and knew that Gentile blood could compromise his claim to the throne. A person’s genealogy was like his resume, and just as people are tempted to lie on their resumes today, so they lied about their genealogies back then. The fact that woman from outside the Jewish circle would be given such a place of prominence shows that Jesus is standing the usual badges of worth on their heads.

It is interesting that there are no more genealogies in the Bible after Jesus. Biblical genealogical record keeping comes to an end with Jesus. Genealogies are all over the OT, but we don't have genealogies for John or Peter, or any of the apostles. This is a sign to us: being a true Jew, a member of Jesus' family, is not a matter of blood, but faith. The question, 'Who is Israel?' can not be answered by a biological genealogy. Consider John the Baptist in Matt. 3:9: "Do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'..." A genealogical record is not enough. Your gene pool is no automatic guarantee of god's blessing. Jesus redefined the family in Mark 2:33ff: "Who is my mother, or my brothers?...Whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and mother."