



DIGGING DEEPER

Advent: *Waiting...*

“God’s chosen people, the Jews, have a history of waiting—from Adam to Job, Abraham to Joseph, and from the prophets to the Messiah. This week we will look at the lineage of Jesus and the theme of waiting on the Lord seen since the beginning.”

Not Another Genealogy...

Matthew’s way of showing how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament storyline is to begin with a genealogy. You might be thinking, “Not another genealogy!” But not so fast.

Remember that the genealogies in the Old Testament are always working to communicate multiple layers of information to readers. Genealogies obviously trace family trees, but they also help us follow priestly and royal lines through Israel’s story. You can see each of these types of genealogies in the first nine chapters of Chronicles. In fact, there’s little doubt that the author of Matthew had the book of Chronicles and its genealogies in mind when he wrote his own Gospel account and began it with a genealogy.

Okay... But why does this genealogy matter?

Well, let’s start with the opening sentence of the book. Matthew tells us the two key people who are most important in this genealogy. “The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Matthew 1:1)

From this opening statement, we expect this family tree to help us understand not only the ancestral past of Jesus but also his identity and mission. Jesus is called the son of both David and Abraham. Working backward from Abraham, let’s see how each of these people shape the genealogy that follows.

Son of Abraham

By calling Jesus the “son of Abraham,” the author is connecting Jesus to the father of the people of Israel. Abraham represents the moment when God selected and separated his family from the rest of the nations all the way back in the book of Genesis. It was through these Israelite people that God promised to bring blessing to all of humanity (Gen 12:1-3). By linking Jesus to Abraham, Matthew is bringing the reader’s attention back to the promise of God’s rescue plan for the world. He wants us to see that Jesus is the long-awaited son of Abraham who will bring God’s blessing to all humanity. But how, exactly? Well, look now at the second key figure in the genealogy: David.

A King from the line of David

Jesus’ identity as a descendant of David is a major focus of Matthew’s gospel. To understand Matthew’s theology and his portrait of Jesus, we will want to examine how Matthew is bringing David into the story.

“Son of David,” is a term that the author of Matthew is very fond of. Verse one is the first of ten appearances of the phrase in the book, and it draws our attention to the royal line of King David. Abraham’s name pointed to a belonging amongst the people of Israel. David’s name tells us that Jesus was royalty.

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That this was the author's goal can be seen by the fact that Jesus' ancestry is traced through David's son King Solomon. In Luke's gospel, the family line is traced through David's son Nathan. Matthew's author is not primarily concerned with genetic lineage, however. He is also attempting to establish Jesus as a royal successor and rightful heir to the throne of David's kingdom. The author traces the family line from Solomon to Jeconiah, who was the surviving king of David's line and alive at the time of the exile.

14 Generations

Just think about the separated sections of the genealogy of Matthew. It is broken up into three parts that cover 14 generations each. But why 14?

Within the written language of Hebrew, the letters are also used as their numbers, and so each letter is assigned a numerical value. The name of David in Hebrew is "דוד," and from here you just do the math. The numerical value of the first and third letter "ד" (called dalet) is 4. The middle letter "ו" (called waw) has a numerical value of 6. Put it into your mental calculator: $4+6+4=14$, the numerical value of the name of "David."

Matthew has created the genealogy so that it links Jesus to David both explicitly and in the very literary design of the list. In fact, Matthew wants to highlight this "14=David" idea so much that he's intentionally left out multiple generations of the line of David (three, to be exact) to make the numbers work.

Wait, Matthew has taken people out of the genealogy?

Yes, but this is not a scandal. Leaving out generations to create symbolic numbers in genealogies is a common Hebrew literary practice, going all the way back to the genealogies in Genesis (the 10 generations of Genesis 5 or the 70 descendants of Genesis 11). Ancient genealogies were ways of making theological claims, and Matthew's readers would have understood exactly what he was doing and why.

Matthew didn't make numerical adjustments only. He also adjusted a few letters in some names for the same purpose. For example, he changed the names of Asa and Amon to Asaph (the poet featured in the book of Psalms) and Amos (the famous prophet). Matthew is winking at us here, knowing that his readers would spot these out of place names. The point, of course, is that Jesus doesn't just fulfill Israel's royal hopes, but also the hope of the Psalms (Asaph) and the Prophets (Amos). Jesus is from a line of kingly succession that also culminates the rich tradition of worship and prophecy of Israel. This way, readers are thinking about all of Israel and her history as they meet Jesus for the first time. The irony is that some modern translations haven't gotten the pun, and so have changed the names back to their "original" referents. Ah, well.

Deeper Down the Rabbit Hole

But we still aren't at the bottom of the rabbit hole! Matthew's packed even more into this genealogy. Look at the unique appearance of four women in the genealogy of Matthew: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. All four are either non-Israelites or connected to non-Israelite families. Not only is it unconventional for Matthew to list these female names in an all-male genealogy, but these particular women are all associated with potential sex scandals. Matthew could have highlighted Jesus' connection to Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel, the matriarchs of Israel. But instead, he mentions Canaanites, prostitutes, and Moabite women, who would be associated with Israel's sin and covenant failure.

Matthew wants his readers to see that God has been using all types of people to move his plan forward. This portrait of an inclusive and expanding God and kingdom will continue to appear beyond Matthew's genealogy into the rest of his gospel. He will continue to include the rejects and outsiders into his family (see the list in Matthew 4:18-25). And this non-Israelite strand in Jesus' family history will expand even wider in his final commission to his followers to go and "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:19).

So we read the genealogy of Matthew and see the royal lineage of Jesus. He's the one who will bring the blessing of Abraham to the whole world. He's the royal son of David that all of Israel has been waiting for. He's the one that the prophets wrote about, and the psalmists sang about. He will be the king of Israel who blesses all of the nations of the world, especially the outsiders. We know all of this because Matthew tells us in a genealogy that carefully reveals the hope that has arrived in Jesus.