

“Stories at the Hearth”

Matthew 1:1–17

Where should we begin the story of Jesus?

If you were going to tell the story of Jesus, how would you begin? Perhaps, like Mark, you would plunge right into Jesus’ ministry and the proclamation of the Good News. Or you might choose to start with a lengthy account of Jesus’ birth and that of his cousin, John. But I am fairly sure you wouldn’t start the story of Jesus with a lengthy genealogy.



I can remember as a boy occasionally undertaking to read my Bible. I had a small red New Testament given to third graders. It was the King James Version, so Matthew’s Gospel opened with a long series of “begats.” By the time I reached the 42nd begat, I tended to lose my resolve. I guess I had an astoundingly short attention span back then. In any event, I could never figure out what all those “begats” had to do with anything. Why begin the first book of the New Testament with such a list? What was Matthew thinking? Didn’t he know that he needed to grab the audience (all right, me) right at the beginning? Or maybe he was happy if I simply skipped the “begats” and went on to the good stuff about the baby Jesus, leaving the “begats” for more patient readers. Now I know better.

A prophetic key: – unlocking Matthew’s Gospel¹

Why does Matthew begin with “begats?” Let us take a closer look at the genealogy. The first sentence of the Gospel lays it out for us. Jesus is the Messiah and can lay claim to the House of David and, like all Jews, to kinship with Abraham. Further, though the English translations all refer to Jesus’ “genealogy,” the Greek word is *génesis*, meaning “beginning” or “origin.” Matthew could have chosen the same word for “beginning” as did Mark, *arché*, but instead he chose the word which names the first book of the Bible. Surely, Matthew wants us to grasp that Jesus has been part of God’s work from the beginning. The creative work of Christ is the creative work of God.²

In all there are forty-two generations organized into three groups: fourteen generations from Abraham to David, another fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile (which ended the reign of kings in 587BC) and another fourteen generations from the Babylonian exile to Jesus.³ Even the fourteen is a clue to Jesus’ royal claim. As with the Roman numerals we all learned in elementary school, Hebrew numbers were represented by letters. The letters in David (DWD in Hebrew) sum to fourteen.⁴

There is still more to the genealogy. Five women are named: Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba (though, sadly, not by her name), Ruth, and Mary. Each is prominent in Israel’s history. But each was also touched by scandal. Even Ruth, who threw herself at Boaz in the middle of the night. Perhaps Matthew includes the women so that we are better prepared for Jesus’ scandalous birth, but there is more. Eugene Boring comments on this inclusiveness:

¹ The inspiration for this study is a slender volume, *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*, by Morna D. Hooker of Cambridge University. Dr. Hooker helps us to see how the beginning of each Gospel unlocks the rest of the Gospel for us – hence, the key.

² Matthew uses *génesis* again when he begins his story at 1:18, where it is translated “birth.”

³ Do not be put off by the fact that Jesus’ claim to the House of David is through Joseph. This is not about DNA. It is about Jesus’ legal claim to David’s throne . . . and that belongs to Jesus via Joseph, his legal, though not biological, father.

⁴ Using letters to represent numbers was common to all the ancient cultures. In Pompeii, there is graffiti left by a schoolboy that reads “I love her whose number is 545.” The letters in “Nero Caesar,” the infamous Roman emperor, add to 666, as in Revelation 13.

Genealogies

One of the most interesting things about Israel's many Old Testament genealogies is that in other ancient Near Eastern literature, genealogies are rare. Other cultures kept lists of kings, but the Israelites kept and passed on extensive family genealogies. Understanding why only Israel, will help us understand the importance of the biblical genealogies. We can think of the genealogies as providing length and breadth to God's people. First, the lengthy genealogies concretely tied God's people of each generation with the ancient ancestors who had first entered into covenant with God and those who had sustained it. Thus, Matthew's genealogy for Jesus goes back all the way to Abraham. Second, the genealogies provided breadth in that they expressed the Israelites' kinship, the social, religious, and political ties they shared. Ultimately, they were one tribe, one people . . . all of whom could trace their genealogy back to Jacob and then Isaac and then Abraham. The Good News of Jesus Christ is for all people, at all times, and in all places, who are bound together into one people through faith in Jesus Christ and faith alone. As Paul wrote, "Understand, then that those who have faith are children of Abraham." We have a genealogy of our own!

The messianic story is inclusive, extending to women and men of all nations. Inclusiveness is not merely a contemporary buzzword. It is a deep note sounded in the first paragraph of the New Testament, a paragraph that sums up the story of the Old Testament, binding together the two books of the covenant (testament means "covenant" in both Hebrew and Greek) into one book of the story of God's saving acts in history. God's purpose is to include all. The story of redemption, the story of God's reuniting of divided and scattered humanity after the judgment of the flood and the fragmentation and alienation of the tower of Babel (Genesis 6–11) began with God's act of calling Abraham and Sarah and the promise of blessings for all peoples through them (Gen 12:1–3). As "son of Abraham," Jesus is declared to be the fulfillment of God's promises to the Gentiles.

This inaugural note of inclusiveness corresponds to the inclusiveness of the whole genealogy, which names five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, "the wife of Uriah," and Mary. Since ancestry and inheritance were traced through the father's line, reference to women in a genealogy was uncommon, but not unheard of. Since all of the women mentioned are involved in some sort of questionable sexual behavior, it has often been suggested that this was Matthew's apologetic response to non-believers' insulting versions of the story of Jesus' birth from the virgin Mary. It could well be that, while not apologetic, Matthew is interested in affirming that the plan of God has often been fulfilled in history in unanticipated and "irregular" ways, as was the case in the birth of Jesus from Mary, and that Matthew is interested in showing that God worked through irregular, even scandalous ways, and through women who took initiative, like Tamar and Ruth. Yet the main reason for Matthew's inclusion of these women corresponds to one of the Gospel's primary themes: the inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of God from the beginning. All of the men in Jesus' genealogy are necessarily Jewish. But the four women mentioned, with the exception of Mary, are "outsiders," Gentiles, or considered to be such in Jewish tradition. Just as the following story shows Jesus to be the fulfillment of both Jewish and Gentile hopes, so also the genealogy shows that the Messiah comes from a Jewish line that already includes Gentiles.⁵

All of this prepares us for the shape of Matthew's story – Jesus is the fulfillment of all that has come before. No other Gospel writer is so careful to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Jesus is Isaiah's "Emmanuel" (Matt. 1:21). His birthplace of Bethlehem had been foretold by Micah (Matt. 2:6). Matthew wants his readers to be totally confident that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Indeed, as

⁵ M. Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 8, 132.

we read on in the New Testament, we find reference after reference to Jesus being all the prophets and writers had been pointing to. Far from some sort of one-off salvation event, Jesus is the climax of God's rescue that goes back to Abraham.

Meeting God's people

I am sometimes asked whether Jesus could have come to America or Britain or China, born in London or New York rather than Bethlehem. The answer is no. The Bible is the story of how God chose to reconcile humanity to himself through a people that he formed beginning with Abraham. The arrival of Jesus is the climax of that story. It is the event to which everything before had pointed. In the person of Jesus, God came to be with his people as he never had been with them before -- to meet them, to comfort them, to heal them, to save them.

Just as Jesus' disciples were among the people of God, so are we. It is here, among God's people, that Jesus begins with each of us. A wise Christian once wrote, "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church." What we think of as "church" can be messy, disappointing, and frustrating -- people often are. Just read the Gospels and you will quickly see how disappointing and frustrating the disciples were to Jesus and one another. Yet, they were his family, his true family, and so are we.⁶ Certainly, as we approach Christmas, we all have stories to share about the joy and the frustrations of family at the holidays.

Perhaps this year, as we prepare for Jesus' birth, we might all strive to ensure that FUMC, our own little corner of the Church, is as joyful and giving as Jesus' family ought to be.

Living the With-God Life

Of the many beliefs that made the Israelites seem peculiar to their neighbors, few were more peculiar than their belief that there was one God, the Creator of the Cosmos, who dwelt with them. They even built God a house! First, a moveable tent they called a tabernacle and then the temple in Jerusalem. God's people did not think they could somehow enclose God in a tent, but they did believe that God dwelt with them in a way that God did not dwell with others.

With the coming of Christ, all of God's people -- collectively and individually -- are dwelling places of God. This is what Paul means when he speaks of the church and the believers as being God's temples. During Advent, we sing of Emmanuel. When Matthew uses the title "Emmanuel" for Jesus (1:23), it is because he understands Jesus as the fulfillment of the biblical story of God's everlasting intent to live with his people. "Emmanuel" means "God with us."

Daily Bible Readings

More on Jesus' birth and his genealogy

Monday, Genesis 12:1-9	The story begins with Abraham and is fulfilled in Jesus.
Tuesday, Genesis 38	The story of Tamar, the first woman in Jesus' genealogy
Wednesday, Joshua 2	The story of Rahab, the second woman in Jesus' genealogy, and a Gentile
Thursday, Luke 3:23-38	Luke's genealogy of Jesus, going all the way back to Adam, to show that Jesus is the savior of all
Friday, Matthew 1:18-25	The birth story of Jesus that follows the genealogy
Saturday, Matthew 2	The story of Jesus' infancy, escape to Egypt, and the family's return to Nazareth

⁶ Paul wrote that though the people of God were once marked out by the "works of the Law," such as Sabbath-keeping and food laws, with the coming of Jesus Christ, God's people are marked out only by our faith in Christ.