

Matthew 1:1-17 God's Planning for Christmas

Introduction

You have in front of you a copy of the local or national paper. To which section do you turn first? The answer you give to this question will reveal something of your priorities and interests. Some people methodically work their way through from the first to the last page. Others start in the sports pages at the back. When I was growing up I distinctly remember an older person stating that they turned first to a central page in *The Lancaster Guardian*, to the deaths column, which indicated who had passed on and how much they had left behind in their wills. I fear the latter fact was the most important fact of the two! Step back in time 2,000 years to the Holy Land and go north to Galilee to the small rural communities of Jews with their socially conservative and highly traditional lifestyles that had been largely unchanged for centuries and see a different social priority. It was a Jewish world view that had been reshaped after the exile to Babylon in 587/6BC when their country had been destroyed and a large proportion of the inhabitants killed or dispersed among surrounding nations. When the small number of them that returned (the first group led by Zerubbabel the royal prince around 538BC; then a second party with Ezra the priest in 458BC; and lastly when Nehemiah was appointed governor in 444BC) re-entered the land they were both determined to honour the Lord, but also increasingly obsessive about proving your heritage and Jewish identity. Those families that could not prove their genealogical line for a significant number of generations were excluded from offices such as the priesthood (for example, Ezra 2:61-63: ⁶¹*And from among the priests: The descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai (a man who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by that name).* ⁶² ***These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean.*** ⁶³ *The governor ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there was a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.*) Fast forward to the New Testament and the book of Titus; This young pastor was a Gentile who had come to faith under Paul's ministry, served on his missionary teams and then was sent to Crete to take charge of the newly formed Christian congregations on that island. Paul gave him some firm instructions concerning things to do and things to avoid, including these words in Titus 3:9: ***But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the Law, because they are unprofitable and useless.*** I am not convinced that this was ever a major issue amongst Gentile Christians (unless we are talking about avoiding the cliques that can arise in churches when extended family groups have wanted to control congregational life on some occasions), rather it concerned the Jewish members of his congregations. To return to the question with which I began this message, a Jew of Jesus' day might have looked first, hypothetically, at any genealogical page in the paper as a top priority. However, even in God's Word, we Gentile believers have taken Paul's advice to Titus too seriously and avoided the genealogies of Scripture almost completely when there can be some profit in working out why God ordained them to be in the Bible in the first place. Although most genealogies are lengthy lists in the Old Testament, they are not absent from the New, including in the early chapters of Matthew and Luke's Gospels, with reference to the lineage of Jesus. I want us to look briefly at the first seventeen verses of Matthew's Gospel to see the significance of this information in relation to the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

1. The Significance of the Genealogy (Matthew 1:1)

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham. How many of you have been interested in tracing your family tree? Ever since Alex Haley's programme, *Roots*, that was turned into an ABC television mini-series, watched by 130 million Americans in 1977, millions of people have spent a considerable amount of time tracing the lives of their ancestors. Although, sadly, Haley's story was seriously questioned in court as a significant proportion of his book was shown to have been lifted from another novel, *The African* by Harold Courlander, and doubt was cast on his claim of a direct link with the people and places he listed in Africa, but many other people have made accurate records of the lives of their ancestors. The Jews were particularly careful to preserve details of their ancestral heritage. This was much more than a hobby, proof of their ancestry confirmed their link to the father of the nation, Abraham, and entitled them to claim the biblical promises for themselves. In this respect the uniqueness of the Jews as the chosen people of God stands out in the records of human history. Matthew's Gospel was written by a former tax collector and collaborator with the Romans called Levi. Mark (2:13-17) and Luke (5:27-32) record the story of his conversion. Mark's account stated that: *Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.* ¹⁴ *As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.* ¹⁵ *While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.* ¹⁶ *When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?* ¹⁷ *On hearing this, Jesus said to them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.* Levi was becoming a very wealthy man, but also increasingly lonely, like one of his fellow collaborators Zacchaeus in Jericho. He was stunned that the popular rabbi Jesus of Nazareth would defy the social conventions and speak to a collaborator, let alone invite him to become a disciple. Jesus almost certainly changed his name to Matthew, meaning 'gift of God'. It was a recognition that an aimless life –in spiritual terms- had now gained a sense of direction and purpose.

Matthew had become convinced that Jesus was not only significant for him, but also for the whole Jewish nation. This point is made crystal clear in Matthew 1:1: *A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.* This verse and its carefully chosen words is a very clear pointer to the fact of what Matthew understands about the person of Jesus. First of all, he refers to *Jesus Christ*. The latter name is a title not a family name meaning 'the Messiah' or 'the anointed one', with reference to the person prophesied about in the Old Testament. This is the person our ancestors longed to see coming in their generation. This is the person about whom a whole list of revelations were given through the prophets concerning His birth, life, death and resurrection, from the place of His birth, for example, given by Micah (Micah 5:2), an eighth century BC prophet; to the nature of his birth (Isaiah 7:14 / Matthew 1:20-23) to the nature of His mission (Isaiah 61:1-3 / Luke 4:17-21); to the manner of His death (Psalm 22 / Isaiah 53); to the fact that His body would not decay in the tomb (Psalm 16:10 / Acts 2:25-28). The basic biography of Jesus could have been written before He was born from these Old Testament prophecies –is there any other human being over the centuries whose life story, in terms of its major events, that could have been written prior to their birth? I don't think so. Time and again in this gospel quotations are prefaced from the Old Testament with words like: *then what was said by the prophet...was fulfilled* (for example Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23;). Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour, said Matthew. The question for each of us is this: what difference does it make to your life? He is the one whose

birth led to the chronology of the world being divided up between events before it and those after it. Is He your Saviour and Messiah? As the angel would say later to Joseph: *Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins* (Matthew 1:20-21). Have you had your sins forgiven? They can be if you put your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ?

2. The main men named in the genealogy

(a) **The structure of the genealogy** The structure of the genealogy is carefully planned. Matthew has arranged the ancestors of Jesus into three sections of fourteen. The first group is from Abraham to David; then David to the exile in Babylon; then after the exile to Jesus. It is important to note that this is not a complete list of names in the ancestry from Abraham to Jesus. A quick comparison with I Chronicles 3 will reveal (apart from different spellings of the same names) that a fuller list of names has been included in that Old Testament record. It is very clear that Matthew has not forgotten to include some names, rather his structure and choice of names has been deliberate and selective. It is also important to note that the word translated as *father* can in the context of a genealogy be translated as *ancestor of ...* the next named person. Some Bible commentators have noted that the numerical value of the Hebrew consonants in David's name (*dwd*) add up to the number fourteen (4+6+4) and suggest that this particular arrangement was designed to underline the fact that Jesus was the 'Son of David'. We have no way of knowing if this point was in Matthew's mind or not. What is likely though is that this genealogy in Matthew chapter one is that of Joseph and the other in Luke three comes from the line of Mary. It has been used by the gospel writer to make a theological point, not just to provide a list of names in a biological family tree.

(b) **The Son of Abraham** (Matthew 1:1-6) However, more significant to Matthew and Luke respectively is the first name at the head of their family tree for Jesus. Luke goes back to Adam, the first man and implies that Jesus is the Messiah for humanity –the whole race; Matthew by contrast goes back to Abraham and stresses that Jesus is the Messiah for the Jews, claiming all the covenantal promises that stretch back to the founding of the nation in Abraham, but he doesn't stop there, because salvation even in the Old Testament, may have been through the Jews, but for the world. Many Jews had never grasped that as early as the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, that God had revealed to His servant that *all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you*. Who did Matthew highlight as visitors to see the baby? It was the wise men, high-ranking Gentiles probably from Iraq. His gospel is concluded with the Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20, a message given to Jewish followers of Jesus, to take the good news of the Christian faith to the rest of the world. Jesus as the greater 'Son of Abraham' is doing what father Abraham was called to do, to be a light to the nations and proclaim truths not just for Jews but for people of every racial background and language group; for the socially privileged and the people on the margins of society.

Abraham is honoured in Hebrews 11 as a great man of faith. Note these words from Hebrews 11:8: *By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going*. He entrusted his life to God and despite a few setbacks brought honour to God by the way he lived. Yet this is not a mere history lesson as Paul explained in Galatians 3:6-9: *Consider Abraham: He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.⁷ Understand, then, that **those who believe are children of Abraham**⁸ The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: All nations will be blessed through you.⁹ So **those who have faith** are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith*. This includes you and me as twenty-first century believers, who are the present day spiritual children of Abraham, given the same

great commission revealed to him several thousand years ago. Paul explains this truth in more detail in Romans 4. *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring— not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all* (Romans 4:16). James, step-brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, stated in his letter a commendation of Abraham's conduct. *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.*²³ *And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend.*²⁴ *You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone* (James 2:22-24). The point of that whole chapter in the book of James is that a person who has been truly saved by God will show in their daily life evidence of the grace of God at work. Paul in his letters had selected examples of Abraham's trust in God; James by contrast chooses to highlight the practical application of his faith in obedience to God. In summary Matthew is declaring that Jesus the Jew, physical descendant and heir of Abraham the father of the Jewish nation, has come to proclaim the gospel Abraham was given to proclaim to the nations. The Jews were the chosen people- like the Christian Church today- not to make them or us 'proud as peacocks', but as God's ambassadors of good news to a lost and despairing world. We have a huge responsibility for our generation will we be faithful to our calling?

(c) **The Son of David** (Matthew 1:6-11) The second key 'father' of the Jewish people was David, the great ruler of the nation around a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. There are a significant number of monarchs listed here but only David is called *king* by Matthew. His reign and that of his son Solomon was seen as the greatest era in the nation's history. There was another age of prosperity when Uzziah was King over Judah, a couple of centuries later, but this was partly due to the relative weakness of regional superpowers at that time. David had the highest political profile and build up the kingdom, as well as leading the nation spiritually. Prophecies of the coming Messiah included references that suggested he would be a descendant of David. The best example of this comes from Nathan, David's pastor and the leading prophet of his generation. In II Samuel 7:12-13,16, Nathan uttered these words: *When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom.*¹³ *He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever...*¹⁶ *Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.'* The first words quoted of course refer to Solomon, David's young son who succeeded him as King, they then included men like Zerubbabel, the royal prince who led the first group of exiles back to the Promised Land from Babylon around 538BC, mentioned in the books of Haggai (chapter one) and Zechariah (chapter four). However, I Samuel 7:16 records words that imply a reference to a person or persons who are more than a merely human ruler; *Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.* In Jesus, the Son of David, these words would find their ultimate fulfilment, because as Jesus is, as hymn writer James Montgomery put it in his 1821 hymn (C.M.P.204):

Hail to the Lord's Anointed,

Great David's greater Son!

Hail, in the time appointed,

His reign on earth begun!

He comes to break oppression,

To set the captive free,

To take away transgression,

And rule in equity:

The mysterious lines in the royal wedding Psalm, Psalm 45:7: *Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom,* that could not be

applicable to a mere earthly ruler of the line of David are fulfilled in Jesus. Hebrews 1:8-9 in a quotation from Psalm 45 prefaces those lines with this telling statement: *But about the Son [Jesus] he says...* The future golden age for God's people would be realised this 'Son of David'. As Christians in the New Testament era we do not express our aspirations in the same way as the Jews of Jesus day, because we know who the Messiah is. However, we long for the final victory of King Jesus when all the sin and evil and injustice of this world will be swept away and paradise restored in *the new heaven and the new earth* (Revelation 21:1). The place where *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away* (Revelation 21:4). This reality, promised in the Old Testament through a 'Son of David', will be realised in this descendant of the great King –Jesus.

(d) **The Son of the Post-exilic Jews** (Matthew 1:12-17) The pain and suffering of the exile, and we would add the pain and suffering of the holocaust in the modern era, can cause people to ask the question –where is God? has He abandoned us? Or particularly in the modern era – does He even exist –if such things can happen on His watch? Psalm 137, a bitter song of lament, expressed so eloquently the pain of that era. *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.* ² *There on the poplars we hung our harps,* ³ *for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, Sing us one of the songs of Zion!* ⁴*How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?* (Psalm 137:1-4). This pain was part of Jesus' heritage and part of His early experience when His family fled as asylum-seekers to Egypt, for around four years, till the death of the Herod who had been trying to kill the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:16-23). Yet we are all sinners and need God's grace and forgiveness. Matthew 1:21 contains the wonderful message from the angel to Joseph: *She [Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.* God's people pass through dark days and painful experiences, but He has not forgotten us. His promises and our redemption will come to fruition, supremely in Jesus.

3. **The Women named in the Genealogy**

Genealogies in the ancient world routinely contain long lists of men followed by their eldest son or sons and so on to the next generation. This is not the case here in the record provided by Matthew. There are four women included here as significant people in the redemptive history of the people of God, and in the direct line of the Messiah. Unlike Matthew's first readers, we can so easily miss the significance of these names. Who were they?

(a) **Tamar** (Matthew 1:3) *Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar* Genesis 38 records the sad chapter in the life of Judah, who later would bring honour to his family and God in Egypt, but here went off the rails morally, in part due to his loss of self-esteem and apparently hopeless struggles as an apparently unsuccessful parent of his sons. In the midst of that tragic situation we see Tamar, the widow of his first-born son Er; whom the second son Onan declined to marry upon his death, in line with the custom of the day, and then despite her loyalty to her late husband's dysfunctional family, she is abandoned to fend for herself. In desperation to attract the attention of her backslidden father-in-law she poses as a prostitute, knowing his partiality to using prostitutes, and gets pregnant by him. After some appalling hypocrisy, this man eventually came to his senses and the realisation of the depths to which he had sunk. It brought Judah to the place of repentance and eventual usefulness to God. The complex marital customs of that culture are so different to our modern Western world. But in that setting Tamar, instead of becoming (understandably) bitter and walking away completely, was determined to do the right thing. She took a risk getting pregnant outside of marriage, yet through that action fulfilled the purposes of God. She was an

honourable young woman who would not let the appalling actions of men in her life turn her way from the ideals and principles with which she had been brought up. Mary would also take a huge risk to her honour in the society of her day to fulfil God's purposes for her life. It is a story that warns us how far even believers can sink into sin (Judah); but gives an example of a courageous young woman who stuck to her principles and was eventually vindicated.

(b) **Rahab** (Matthew 1:5) *Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab* Rahab was a prostitute (Joshua 2:1) who ran a brothel. The NIV marginal reading 'innkeeper', is a rendering that owes more to the embarrassment of the believing scholars who produced the translation than the Hebrew text. Yet this woman hid the spies sent by Joshua and came to faith in their God and for the rest of her life honoured God and was listed in Hebrews 11:31 as one of the great people of faith. She heard the words of the messengers of the God of Israel, sent by Joshua, and trusted them implicitly; Her words were: *Let it be as you say* (Joshua 2:21). As a result her life and that of her family were spared when Jericho fell and the Israelites took the land. Centuries later, in response to a message from Gabriel, the heavenly messenger of God, Mary would give this response: *I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her* (Luke 1:38). One a Gentile of ill-repute and the other a young devout Jewish girl, both made extraordinary faith commitments with which God was pleased.

(c) **Ruth** (Matthew 1:5) *Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth* a young Moabite girl from another faith background, maybe only a few years older than Mary when Gabriel spoke to her, came to faith in the God of Israel. Her words recorded in Ruth 1:16 refer to her decision to give up, as far as she knew the prospects of marriage and children and any future contacts with her own family to care for her elderly mother-in-law in a foreign land. *But Ruth replied, Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.* Her loyalty to Naomi and her trust in the God of Israel was rewarded, although as she made the long trek to Bethlehem, like Mary did twelve centuries later, this teenage girl must have been fearful at times about her uncertain future prospects. Both Mary and Ruth had left behind their secure world in order to trust in the God who would go before them to Bethlehem. God provided Boaz and Joseph respectively as husbands for them, men who believed that God had directed them to make the choices they had made. God today calls us to make choices and in His time will honour us as we honour Him.

(d) **Bathsheba** (Matthew 1:6) *David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife* The sad story of David's wicked plan to take the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers Uriah overshadowed the remaining years of his reign (see II Samuel 11-12). When ordered by the king to sleep with him Bathsheba had no choice in the matter. She was a vulnerable woman, especially so after the murder of her husband. Did she have mixed feelings about the child she was carrying? We will never know, but undoubtedly the loss of the child, only a few weeks old, would have been painful. Her agony of heart at her losses was not just hers. As a direct result of his sin, David, years later, would lose his favourite son Absalom. His lament recorded in II Samuel 18:33 conveys the agonies he experienced: *The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you— O Absalom, my son, my son!* Simeon, at the dedication of baby Jesus in Luke 2:35 predicted a painful death and told Mary that *a sword will pierce your soul also* - that she would see it. Bathsheba trusted in God throughout her trials as Mary did with hers. God honoured these women for their faith in Him and will likewise honour us as we give Him first place in our lives as well, Amen.