

THERE'S GOOD NEWS - EVEN IN A GENEALOGY!

Matthew 1: 1-17

Introduction

I wonder how many of you have heard a sermon on a genealogy before? In fact, I wonder if you've even **read** a genealogy! I must admit whenever I see them I tend to speed-read through the list - they're **so** boring! There are whole chapters of them in the Hebrew scriptures: great incomprehensible lists loaded with weird names and *begets* and *sons of*. The NT actually has only two chapters of genealogy: the one we've just heard and a similar one in Luke's gospel.

Today, however, I want to show you that: **There's good news - even in a genealogy!**

Point 1

Now it's the week after Christmas so in case anyone is feeling sleepy I'll give the main point now and then you can doze off - because the rest of the sermon is backing up my proposition in this one main point:

No matter how grim or grimy our background, or how shocking the circumstances of our birth, or how appalling our parentage, or how scandalous our ancestry - God is able to redeem it; to make something good out of it. Without that hope we are all destined to remain victims of our birthright. This is the Good News.

Point 2 - Clearing the rubble

Let's begin by clearing away a bit of rubble in order to find the message for us today in this passage. I'll do this by way of raising two questions:

1. Why does Matthew's genealogy of Jesus differ so greatly from Luke's account? Matthew records 41 ancestors and Luke 76. That's just one of the differences, but the names of people mentioned are also different at certain points in the account.

2. Next question. Matthew places great store by the numerics of his account - read verse 1:17. But my question is: how come it's inaccurate?

Firstly, why the difference between Luke and Matthew? Possibly Luke traced it thru' Mary and Matthew thru' Joseph. That was Luther's answer and it is **one** answer, there could be others.

Secondly, Matthew's account is inaccurate because he deliberately chooses to omit some names in order to have the magical number 14 highlighted. Why 14? (And even then in the third block of people he only has 13!)

One possible answer is: Hebrew letters also have a numeric value, as do many other languages, English isn't one of them. Remember also that in the original Hebrew only the consonants are written, not the vowels.

So tell me, which name crops up 5 times in this short passage? [6 in GNB] This name occurs only 17 times in the whole of Matthew's gospel and 5 of them are here. The name is, of course David. The Hebrew way of spelling David is D V/W D. The numeric value of these is $D = 4 + V/W = 6 + D = 4$ total: 14. (For the intellectuals in our midst this is called 'gematria' - a form of rabbinical interpretation.) [Thus Rev 13:18 - 666 the mark of the beast - put into Hebrew, the words could make 'Nero Caesar'. Not Henry Kissinger or the Pope or Adolf Hitler, or other such nonsense.]

But why did Matthew bother with this? Well, one of the key purposes of Matthew's Gospel is to prove to its Jewish listeners that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah of the House and lineage of David. No other House and lineage would be acceptable. It was therefore vital to link Jesus with David.

But, more importantly these questions are part of the rubble because they are the WRONG questions. We are superimposing 21st century questions on ancient texts.

Point 3 - Meaning in context

Genealogies were important to Semitic peoples, of which the Hebrews are a part. **But only rarely do Semitic genealogies serve to preserve strict biological ancestry.** Even the very word 'son of' i.e. 'ben' could mean son or grandson or simply descendent in the widest sense. ['Ben Hur' = Son of Hur] So these genealogies were never written for mere historical records. Rather they were **created** and recorded for social, political and religious purposes, e.g.

1. To show the identity of, or the duty a person performs.
2. To demonstrate credentials for power or property.
3. To structure history - with emphasis on 'story' or to indicate a person's character.

THAT was their original purpose. Our genealogical searches today are for reasons far removed from those of the ancient Hebrews **and we have no right to demand answers of a text or try and make scriptures say things that they were never intended to say.** We are asking 21st century questions when we need to be making first-century enquiries.

So what did genealogies mean for first-century people? When they looked back at ancient genealogies what meaning did they draw from them? They had meaning because they:

1. Showed national purity of descent
2. Fuelled Messianic speculation

We are now coming to the guts of the sermon. To me this is Good News of this passage. Because if we think that Jesus came from a line of unsullied purity then we've got it all wrong.

Point 4 - Meaning for us today

Take a look through the genealogy on your service sheet. What strikes you as unusual, bearing in mind that first century Judaism was very much a patriarchal culture? That's right - the names of women. And are they Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel - our foremothers in the faith? No! Apart from Mary (and possibly Bathsheba, although I doubt it) they are gentile, foreign, non-Jewish. They are neither young women nor virgins. **They are prostitutes, and traitors and seducers and adulteresses. They come from lines that were begun in incest, and they bore children who were conceived through illicit sex and trickery. And it's all here in the bible!**

Tamar: an Aramean. In Genesis 38 it tells us that she was widowed twice and according to Hebrew law was entitled and expected to marry her husband's brother. When that wasn't forthcoming she dressed as a prostitute and anonymously had sex with her father-in-law, Judah and through him she conceived. Listen to what happens when he finds out: Genesis 38: 24-26.

THIS is the lineage of King David and of Jesus the Christ.

Rahab: a Canaanite. In Joshua 2 it tells us quite categorically that she was a prostitute. She also acted as a traitor to her own people in order to help the children of Israel in their conquest of the promised land. Her name is recorded amongst the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11.

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Ruth: a Moabite, the race begun by incest [Genesis 19: 30-38]. In Deuteronomy 23, it clearly states that: 'no Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation...You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live'. Ruth was a widow and she seduced Boaz - it's a very cunning story - and by doing so produced the grandfather of King David.

THIS is the lineage of King David and of Jesus the Christ.

Bathsheba: her husband was a Hittite, a foreigner, she also could have been Hittite. Her specific name is omitted in the genealogy but her husband's is very much there, Uriah. Bathsheba and the great King David committed adultery [2 Samuel 11:1-26 and 12: 1-25]. And after the affair when she was pregnant, King David had her husband, Uriah murdered. After his death David and Bathsheba married but their child, a son died. In due course a second son was born. His name was Solomon. David had nineteen sons by eight wives plus others by concubines, but Bathsheba made sure it was Solomon, not the eldest son, who came

to the throne.

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Why did Matthew deliberately choose these women? One quaint old commentary, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, written in 1887, says that these women were 'stained with sin'. I thought it took two people to have sex and produce a child. Were their 'partners in crime' not also 'stained with sin'? By commenting in this way the author continues in the vein of St. Jerome who called these women 'terrible sinners'. Did Matthew choose them to show how great was the grace of God toward 'great sinners'. Maybe.

Luther says they were chosen because they were foreigners and to show that the gospel of Jesus Christ embraced those beyond the pale of Judaism. Possibly. But even by the first century **BC** these women were held in high regard by Jews as 'honorary proselytes' and rabbinical comments about them were usually complimentary.

No, perhaps these women were mentioned for being something more than foreign sinners.

All of these women, and we can now include Mary, were associated with sexual activity, some of which is highly controversial. You could say that the four non-Jewish women had a sexual history. Each of them had something odd or scandalous about their union with a male partner.

But most important of all, each of the four Gentile women played a crucial role sparked by their own initiative and at great personal risk. They are not shown in typical female passive roles. (Perhaps these women manifested the faith that the males do not.)

Conclusion

Matthew's genealogy is a mish-mash of people: kings and cowards, Hebrews and foreigners, prostitutes and prophets, adulterers and widows and warriors and traitors and schemers and seducers and soldiers. There are skeletons galore in **this** genealogical closet! And God does not separate out the saints from the sinners. The new thing that God is about to do in Jesus Christ does not mean that God expunges the past. No! The past in all its glory and unglory is still there - and God redeems it; makes something good out of it. God's redemption does not gloss over the past and pretend it didn't happen: the pain, the hurt, the mistakes, the misunderstanding and the risk. It did happen; nothing can eradicate that. Nor does God step in and discard it - or us. God instead brings meaning out of meaninglessness. And nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the lives of these four women described as 'stained by sin' but whose decisions were graced by God and have been incorporated into Messiah's bloodline.

In my previous life as a Pentecostal member and minister we used to sing this song.

Quote from *Songs of Praise*, 'Something Beautiful' by Bill Gaiter, Bk I: 204.

'Something beautiful, something good,
all my confusion, he understood.
All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife,
but he made something beautiful of my life.'

God can and does make something beautiful out of our lives; but God also does it in conjunction with us, taking our so-called mistakes, and with our co-operation and our decision-making weaves them into a future. **We are not tied to our past.** [Repeat main point at beginning.]

No matter how grim or grimy our background, or how shocking the circumstances of our birth, or how appalling our parentage, or how scandalous our ancestry - God is able to redeem it; to make something good out of it. Without that hope we are all destined to remain victims of our birthright. This is the Good News.

That indeed is Good News. *Selah* - pause and consider.