
Decoding Matthew's genealogy of Jesus

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Christ the True Vine

*O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home*
- from "O Come, O Come, Immanuel"

Opening the New Testament

Paradoxically, the lineage of Jesus in the first chapter of the New Testament is one of the most ignored portions of that entire body of literature, though the nativity narratives are considered and preached annually at Christmas. The Gospel of Matthew commences with a lineage which is largely regarded as so lacking in relevance that it may safely be ignored. But properly understood, the genealogy is a two-fold work of apologetics that defends against a charge of illegitimacy in the birth of Christ, and subtly affirms him as Davidic Messiah.

Firstly, the genealogy highlights four women in the history of Israel who were open to the charge of sexual immorality, but nevertheless participated in the divine plan - as famous mothers. Christian beliefs about the birth of Christ are commended to readers of the genealogy who therefore become better placed to recognise the legitimacy of his conception that was shrouded in controversy. The genealogist prepares his readers to consider a fifth mother Mary, who was initially regarded even by her fiancée Joseph to have sinned (Matthew 1:19).

Secondly, the genealogy contains a deliberately presented threefold structure of fourteen names, as a puzzle, which asserts Jesus as Son of David, by using Hebrew or Aramaic numerics, since the name *David* has the value fourteen.

As the genealogist laboured to refute attacks upon the legitimacy of our Lord, we today may follow that example and engage in apologetics - the reasoned defence of the historic faith, whenever it is under attack. We may further exalt Jesus as Davidic Messiah, commending his lordship to the world and claiming the promises made to him as the Son of David, which are our inheritance.

Refuting the charge of illegitimacy

The genealogical table in Matthew's gospel (1:3, 1:5a, 1:5b, 1:6) highlights four famous mothers in the history of Israel who were open to the charge of sexual impropriety, but whom Almighty God placed into his own plan and purpose. Matthew could have highlighted famous righteous mothers such as Rebekah or Sarah. Instead he drew attention to four women who have in common only one feature - they participated in the line of David despite allegations of sexual sin:

Tamar (Matthew 1:3) took action so her father-in-law Judah would impregnate her and thus provide his dead son Er with offspring who would carry Er's name. Her action (described in Genesis 38) placed her in the situation of being liable for the crime of sexual immorality. Judah therefore condemned Tamar. But when the truth was exposed, he conceded: *"She is more righteous than I"* (38:26). Tamar thus shared in God's plan as a mother in the Davidic lineage.

Rahab (Matthew 1:5a) was a prostitute in Jericho who aided Israel (Joshua 2). The genealogist names her as the mother of Boaz, a Davidic ancestor. Hence despite her sinful sexual background, Rahab participated in the divine plan.

Ruth (Matthew 1:5b) sought favour from Boaz, a *kinsman-redeemer* of her family. Questions of sexual impropriety are raised as she presented herself to Boaz: perfumed and wearing her best clothing (Ruth 3:3) she *uncovered his feet* as he slept (3:7). The term *feet* is a Hebrew euphemism for *phallus*. Boaz referred to her misconduct by urging Ruth to leave before dawn and saying, *"Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor"* (3:14). Despite the situation, Ruth became a Davidic ancestor as mother of Obed.

Bathsheba (Matthew 1:6) was adulterous with King David, yet she became the mother of Solomon, the wise philosopher and monarch (II Samuel 11-12).

After highlighting women who were open to charges of sexual immorality, but who were mothers in the Davidic line, the table highlights the mother of Jesus:

Mary (Matthew 1:16) was regarded by Joseph as a sexual sinner, since she was expectant without his own involvement as husband. So *he had in mind to divorce her quietly* (Matthew 1:19). While he was reassured by the angel as to God's own involvement (1:20), others came to their own conclusions. Thus the Jews rebuked Jesus, saying, *"We are not illegitimate"* (John 8:41). But like the four women listed in the table, Mary also was within God's plan.

Recognising the Davidic assertion in the Matthean genealogy

Hidden to the sight of modern readers is the numeric significance of the 3 by 14 structure of the genealogy in Matthew which asserts Jesus as the Son of David. This occurs as we recognise two facts about the chart.

Firstly, the composer of the genealogy has engaged in legitimate pruning of the family tree, so as to reduce the number of generations. The validity of such a contraction is clear from Matthew 1:1, which summarises the entire genealogy when it refers to *Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham*. Obviously, Jesus is not the immediate son of either David or Abraham. It is therefore legitimate for the genealogist to omit certain names among those he lists. He engaged in that emendation process to highlight the number fourteen:

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ (Matthew 1:17).

By comparing the Matthean genealogy with the Old Testament, we may see several omissions. For example, Matthew 1:8 refers to *Jehoram the father of Uzziah* but in fact he was his great-great-grandfather: In II Kings, Jehoram is father of Ahaziah (8:25), father of Joash (11:2), father of Amaziah (12:19-21) who begat Azariah (14:21) known as Uzziah. Further, Josiah (Matthew 1:11) is grandfather, not *father of Jeconiah*, known as Jehoiachin (II Kings 23-24).

Secondly, emphasis is given to the number fourteen, which in Hebrew is the numerical value of the name *David*. In a teaching method using riddle, puzzle or mystery called *gematria* (a coding system using the number value of words) the truth can be propagated by cleverly concealing its meaning. The name **דוד** *David* is written in Hebrew without any vowels, using the consonants DWD. Because a numerical value is applied to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *Aleph* (א) 1; *Beth* (ב) 2; *Gimel* (ג) 3; *Daleth* (ד) 4; *He* (ה) 5, *Waw* (ו) 6, it is clear that $D+W+D = 4+6+4 = 14$. Thus in a cryptic way the lineage in Matthew asserts Jesus as Davidic Messiah, by stating: *David, David, David*.

The goodness of hiding the truth is clear from Proverbs 25:2 - *It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings*. Moreover, the Davidic ancestry of Jesus provides legal warrant to him, by which he lays claim to the promises and the endowment belonging to David. Since Christians are in Christ, they too share in that same Davidic inheritance.

Appropriating the Davidic inheritance

Our status as *co-heirs with Christ* (Romans 8:17) requires us to recognise and apply all that the Son of David inherited, as we receive the same inheritance:

As noted in Psalm 2:4-10, God *enthroned in heaven* tells his Anointed One: *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth* Christian people may recognise that the messianic imperative to ask God for the nations becomes an imperative for each one of us, as we apply his wisdom needed in each country. We thus may exercise a kingly role (to reign) and a prophetic role (to warn).

Psalm 18:43-44, 49-50 also gives insights into the Davidic implication:

... you have made me the head of nations; people I did not know are subject to me. As soon as they hear me, they obey me ... Therefore I will praise you among the nations ... He gives his king great victories; he shows unfailing kindness to his anointed, to David and his descendants.

Without imposition, but by the Spirit's ministry of excellence, we may penetrate the culture and commend the wisdom of Christ. Thus the people of God shall be respected - like King David, whose *fame spread throughout every land, and the LORD made all the nations fear him* (I Chronicles 14:17).

Our role is to exercise the Davidic mandate in every situation, especially within civic government, public administration, in political parties, service clubs, trade unions, the arts, media, and in education, health care and business. Thus we represent Jesus, as the heir to David's throne, of whom it is written that God:

... raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything (Ephesians 1:20-23).

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness forever (Isaiah 9:7).



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