



Son of David, Son of Abraham

by Ron Julian

Writers are often told that they should start with a bang. They should engage their audience by starting with something interesting. It might look like Matthew didn't get that memo when he wrote his Gospel. He starts his Gospel with a genealogy, a list of the ancestors of Jesus. Could he have chosen anything more boring? We can picture a scene in a movie: someone is sitting in church, trying to stay awake, while the pastor is intoning: "Perez begat Hezron, and Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab..." And yet, I think Matthew believes that he has started with a bang. His genealogy hints at a fascinating story, a story relevant to every human being who has ever lived.

For Matthew's genealogy to have the power he intends, however, we must know some things from the Old Testament. In fact, that is true for the entirety of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew expects his readers to be well-acquainted with the Jewish Scriptures. This is true for the very first verse of the Gospel:

The record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
(Matthew 1:11)

A lot is packed into this introductory statement. To understand its significance, however, we have to know what the Old Testament says about Abraham, about David, and about the Christ because, as it turns out, Abraham and David are the most important ancestors in the history of the world. Abraham and David

are the two most important people for Jesus to be related to.

We will start with Abraham. Abraham was a man chosen by God for extraordinary things. In Genesis 12:1 we read:

*Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. **And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.**"*

God is promising blessing to Abraham and through him to all the families of the earth. God's promise concerns Abraham's descendants, and it soon becomes clear that it is through his children that Abraham will bless the world. In Genesis 26:4, God makes the same promise to Abraham's son Isaac: "...through your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." And then the promise passes down to Jacob, one of Isaac's sons. In Genesis 28:14, God tells Jacob, "...in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed." And of course, Jacob has twelve children who are the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

So then, what does it mean that God is going to bless all the families, all the nations, of the earth, through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? God is saying



that He is going to do something great, wonderful, desirable for all the nations of the earth through the descendants of Abraham. The word "nations" is the source of our word "gentiles." There are the Jews, and then there are the nations, the gentiles. So the promise to Abraham is one of the first statements of God's intention to work not just with the Jews but with the gentiles as well. As the book of Genesis ends, God has promised a great and wonderful blessing to all the nations of the earth, and this blessing will come through the Jewish people, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Jesus, as Matthew tells us, is a son of Abraham.

Matthew also tells us that Jesus is a son of David. This brings us to the next phase of God's promises. David was a man chosen by God to be king over the Jewish people. But David's importance extends far beyond the fact that he was king of Israel. God made a great promise to David, as great as the promise God had made earlier to Abraham. We find the entire promise spelled out in 2 Samuel, chapter 7. Verse 16 sums it up:

Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.

David is told that his descendants will sit on the throne of Israel forever. But again, the significance of this promise goes much farther than Israel. David understands that ultimately his throne will rule over all the earth. We can put it this way: God is going to bless the world through the throne of David. In fact, I would



Son of David, Son of Abraham, cont.

argue that David as a descendant of Abraham is a crucial part of how Abraham's descendants are going to bless the world. David and his sons are helping to bring the promised blessing of Abraham to the world through the throne of David. And who is qualified to sit on the throne of David? A descendant of David, a son of David. And, as Matthew tells us, Jesus is a son of David.

Now unfortunately, this promise to David didn't work out so well at first. Various of David's descendants did sit on his throne: first David's son, then his grandson, and so forth. But some of these descendants of David were very bad kings. Many did not do such a great job. Very quickly, the northern part of Israel split away from David's kingdom and formed a new kingdom with a new king. Ultimately, the entire nation fell into godlessness and evil. And God judged them by destroying the throne of David and sending the people into captivity in Babylon.

Things were looking very bad indeed. What had happened to God's promise to David about his throne lasting forever? Well, God sent prophets to answer that question. The prophets said that God was still going to keep His promise to David. David's throne *would* last forever. It would last because one king, a descendant of David, would come and sit on that throne forever. He would abolish evil, establish justice, bring peace, and conquer death. One king would come and bring blessing to the entire world. Over time, people started calling this coming king "the Anointed One." The word "Messiah" comes from the Hebrew word for "anointed one." The word "Christ" comes from the Greek word for "anointed one." So the Messiah, the Christ, is that one son of David for whom all of Israel was waiting. He would rule over all the earth, bringing God's promised blessing to all the nations.

Everything we have just been talking about provides background for the first verse of Matthew. God promised Abraham that his descendants would bring blessing to all the nations. God promised David that his descendants would rule over all the nations in peace. Those promises are fulfilled in Jesus. He is that one descendant of Abraham who will

completely fulfill God's promise to bring blessing to the world. He is that one descendant of David who will bless the world by ruling over it in peace. Jesus is the promised king, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ. The fate of the entire world is tied to these issues of Jewish genealogy. That is what Matthew means when he says that he is giving "the record of the genealogy of Jesus, the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham."

This story that I just told about Abraham, David, and the Christ, is further reflected in the structure of the genealogy itself. Jump ahead to Matthew 1, verse 17:

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ, fourteen generations.

This genealogy, which records the ancestry of Jesus, is divided into three parts as a record in miniature of God's redemptive work in history. God promises Abraham that the world will be blessed through his descendants. So the first list is that of Abraham's descendants, culminating in David. God's promises are then focused on David, who is promised that his descendants will sit on his throne forever and will bless the entire world through his rule. So the second list is that of the Davidic kings. But the line of kings comes to an end at the hands of the Babylonians. All hope seems lost during the years when the throne of David is destroyed, and people are waiting for the true king to come. And so the third list records David's descendants who were *not* kings, waiting for the true king to come. And that hope is realized with the birth of Jesus, the Christ. This, I believe, is the fundamental message of the genealogy in Matthew's Gospel.

Many questions remain about the specifics of this genealogy. How does it compare with Luke's? Why is Johoiakim missing? We are not going to talk about those questions here. One question, however, I would like to address. Matthew says that the genealogy can be broken into three parts with fourteen names each. But there are only forty-one names in the genealogy. How does that work? Various

explanations have been proposed, but I like the simplest: Matthew explains what he is doing in verse 17. He says all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations. And that is right: if we start with Abraham and end with David, there are fourteen names on the list. Then he says that "from David to the deportation to Babylon [are] fourteen generations." In other words, he has used David twice. David ends the first list, from Abraham to David, and then David starts the second list. That makes sense to me. If David starts the second list, then everyone on the second list was a full-fledged Davidic king. The list ends with Josiah, who was the last person on the list to be a full-fledged, independent king of Judah. That would make the final list start with Jeconiah, who is also known as Jehoiakim. He was conquered by the Babylonians and taken into captivity. Chronicles calls him Jeconiah the prisoner. And so the last list contains descendants of David who lost the opportunity to sit on David's throne—until we get to the last name on the list, Jesus.

Now, did Matthew actually mean to say that historically there were exactly fourteen descendants from Abraham to David, fourteen descendants from David to Josiah, fourteen descendants from Jeconiah to Jesus? This is an easy question to answer: no, he certainly did not. Matthew seems to have gotten the first two lists from the Old Testament book of 1 Chronicles, chapters 2 and 3. Anyone who looks at 1 Chronicles will immediately notice that Matthew left several names off the second list; there are kings that he did not mention. This, I believe, was common practice in genealogies. A genealogy of my family could easily jump from my father to my son, leaving me out. The line of descent is still clear. And evidently, Matthew left names off so that each list would have fourteen names. Perhaps he did that so that it would be easier to memorize each list. Other explanations can be given. My main point is this: it seems clear to me that Matthew did not make a mistake with his numbers. He wanted to have fourteen names in each list, even if it meant leaving some off. He repeated David twice because, in some ways, David is the most important name on the list. This gives him three lists of fourteen names each: 1) the lineage from Abraham to David; 2) the list of the Davidic

kings; and 3) the list of the descendants of David who lost the opportunity to be king, until the true king, Jesus, arrived.

Although the specific reasons Matthew had for wanting fourteen names or for making some of his other decisions are not clear, Matthew's general purpose in this section is very clear. He has started with a genealogy because God has made great promises to the world that are tied to a specific line of people. First, God is going to do great things for the entire world through the descendants of Abraham. Jesus is that one descendant of Abraham who is most important in bringing those promises about. The apostle Paul says the same thing in Galatians 3:8:

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU."

Paul goes on to say that Jesus died on the cross "in order that in Christ Jesus the bless-

ing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (3:14). Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is the one who fully accomplishes what God had promised to Abraham: all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through Abraham and his descendants. Likewise, God is going to do great things for the world through David and his descendants. And Jesus is that one descendant of David who will sit on the throne and fulfill the promises made to David. He will rule over all the earth in righteousness and peace. The New Testament is full of this theme. In Matthew, Jesus is called the son of David multiple times. Toward the end of his life, Paul writes to Timothy:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel... (2 Timothy 2:8)

Paul can sum up his gospel in this simple way: Jesus, who is the Christ, the promised descendant of David, rose from the dead. In other words, Jesus is the king who will sit on David's throne and rule forever.

These are the great promises that inform Matthew's genealogy. It takes a son of Abraham and a son of David to fulfill God's promises to the world. And that is who Jesus is. Matthew seems to think that this is a very big deal. His readers who knew the Old Testament well would understand why. God's promises were all about a complete restoration of all of creation. The world is full of sin and death and injustice and futility. And God was promising, through the descendants of Abraham and David, to transform the world into a place of righteousness and life and justice and fulfillment. He is going to do that through Jesus, the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham—whose story Matthew is about to tell in his Gospel.

Ron Julian is a tutor at Gutenberg College, the author of *Righteous Sinners*, and a co-author of *The Language of God: A Commonsense Approach to Understanding and Applying the Bible*.

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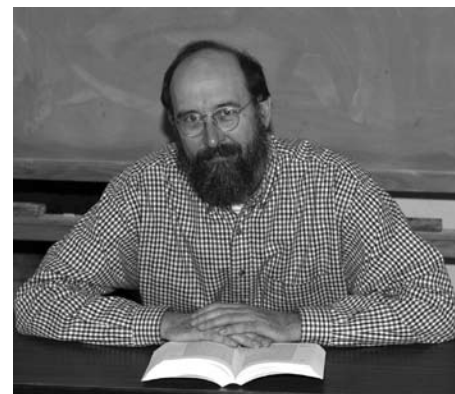
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News & Views • January/February 2018



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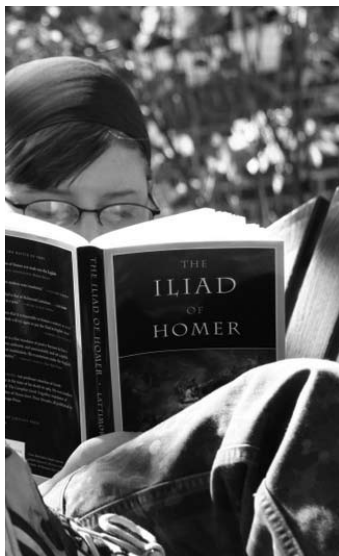
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