

MESSIAH'S TREE

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In 1982, *Reader's Digest* decided to make the Bible easier to read. Translators, paraphrasers and a variety of religious entrepreneurs have been providing more and more modern versions of the Bible to keep pace with our rapidly deteriorating use of the English language. *Reader's Digest* went one step further, condensing the Bible—cutting out what they considered to be “extraneous”—creating an abridged version called *The Reader's Digest Bible*.

Among the passages deemed “unnecessary” were the many genealogies. Yet, the frequency with which genealogies appear in the Scriptures should be evidence of their importance. Genealogies established one's Jewishness, one's tribal identity, one's right to the priesthood, and one's right to kingship.

The Jewish Pattern

From all the genealogies in the Hebrew Scriptures, two observations become apparent. With very rare exceptions, only the male line is traced and only men's names appear. The descendancy of women is not given and their names are only mentioned in passing. Since Biblically it was the father who determined both national and tribal identity, it was reasoned that only his line was significant.

In addition, only one line is traced from the beginning to the end of the Biblical history, the line of King David. The Scriptures reveal every name before David (Adam to David) and every name after David (David to Zerubbabel). Since the Messiah was to be of the house of David, this may also be labeled as the messianic line.

In fact, the genealogies progressively define the human origin of the Messiah: As the Seed of the woman, Messiah had to come out of humanity; As the Seed of Abraham, Messiah had to come from the nation of Israel; As the Seed of Judah, He had to be of the tribe of Judah; As the Seed of David, He had to be of the family of David.

The pattern of genealogy in the Hebrew Scriptures is followed by the New Testament, where two genealogies are found: Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. Of the four gospel accounts, only those two deal with the birth and early life of Jesus. Both Mark and John begin their accounts with Jesus as an adult, so it is natural that only Matthew and Luke would include genealogies. While they both provide an account of the birth and early life of Jesus, each tells the story from a different perspective.

In Matthew, Joseph plays an active role, but Mary plays a passive role. Matthew records angels appearing to Joseph, but there is no record of angels appearing to Mary. Matthew records Joseph's thoughts but nothing is recorded about Mary's thoughts.

On the other hand, Luke's Gospel tells the same story from Mary's perspective. From the context of each Gospel, it should be very evident that the genealogy of Matthew is that of Joseph, and the genealogy of Luke is that of Mary.

This question then arises: Why do we need two genealogies, especially since Jesus was not the real son of Joseph? A popular and common answer is: Matthew's Gospel gives the royal (figurative) line, whereas Luke's Gospel gives the real (actual) line.

This further suggests that, since Joseph, seemingly, was the heir apparent to David's throne, and Jesus was the adopted son of Joseph, Jesus could claim the right to David's throne. Although Jesus Himself also descended from David through Mary, His right to claim David's throne was through Joseph, the heir apparent.

Actually, the very opposite is true.

Who Gets to Be King?

To understand the need for these two genealogies, we must first recognize the two requirements for kingship in the Hebrew Scriptures. These developed after the division of the kingdom into Israel and Judah, following the death of Solomon.

One applied to the southern Kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, while the other applied to the northern Kingdom of Israel, with its capital in Samaria. The requirement for the throne of Judah was descentance from David. No one was allowed to sit on David's throne unless he was a member of the house of David. So when Syria and Israel conspired to destroy the house of David (Isaiah 7:5-6), God warned them that any such conspiracy was doomed to failure (Isaiah 8:9-15).

The requirement for the throne of Israel was prophetic sanction or divine appointment. Anyone who attempted to rule on Samaria's throne without prophetic sanction was assassinated (1 Kings 11:26-39; 15:28-30; 16:1-4, 11-15; 21:21-29; 2 Kings 9:6-10; 10:29-31; 14:8-12).

With the background of these two Biblical requirements for kingship and what is stated in the two New Testament genealogies, the question of Jesus' right to the throne of David can be resolved.

Matthew's Genealogy

In his genealogy, Matthew breaks with Jewish tradition and custom. He mentions the names of four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba (who is referred to as "her" in verse six). It was contrary to Jewish practice to name women in a genealogy. The Jewish Talmud states, "A mother's family is not to be called a family." However, Matthew has a reason for naming these four and no others.

First, they were all Gentiles. This is obviously the case with Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. It was also probably true of Bathsheba, since her first husband, Uriah, was a Hittite. Here Matthew hints at something that he makes clear later: while a fundamental purpose of the coming of Jesus was to save the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the Gentiles would also find their place in the new covenant of grace.

Second, three of these women were guilty of sexual sins. Bathsheba was guilty of adultery, Rahab was guilty of prostitution, and Tamar was guilty of incest. Again, Matthew only hints at a point that he later clarifies: that the universal purpose of the Messiah's coming was to save sinners.

Third, contrary to tradition, Matthew's list also skipped some generations.

However, none of these was the point that was driving Matthew's genealogical arrangement. It was something else.

Matthew traced the line of Joseph, the step-father of Jesus, by going back into history and working toward his own time. He started tracing the line with Abraham and continued to David. Out of David's many sons, Solomon was chosen, and the line was then traced to King Jeconiah, one of the last kings before the Babylonian captivity. From Jeconiah, the line was traced to Joseph. Joseph was a direct descendant of David through Solomon, but also through Jeconiah.

The "Jeconiah link" is significant in Matthew's genealogy because of a special curse that had been pronounced on Jeconiah in Jeremiah 22:24-30:

As I live," declares the LORD, "even though Jeconiah, the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, yet I would pull you off...

"Is this man, Jeconiah, a despised, shattered jar? Or is he an undesirable vessel? Why have he and his descendants been hurled out and cast into a land that they had not known?"

"O land, land, land, Hear the word of the LORD!"

"Thus says the LORD, 'Write this man [Jeconiah] down childless, a man who will not prosper in his days; for no man of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David, or ruling again in Judah.'

No descendant of Jeconiah would have the right to the throne of David. Until Jeremiah, the first requirement for messianic lineage was to be of the house of David. From Jeremiah, it was limited still further. Now, Messiah would not only be of the house of David, but must also be separate from Jeconiah's lineage.

According to Matthew's genealogy, Joseph had the blood of Jeconiah in his veins. He was not qualified to sit on David's throne. Joseph was not the heir apparent. Therefore, no real son of Joseph would have the right to claim the throne of David. If Jesus had been the real son of Joseph, He would have been disqualified from sitting on David's throne. Neither could He claim the right to David's throne by virtue of His adoption by Joseph, since Joseph could not be the heir apparent.

The main purpose of Matthew's genealogy, then, is to show why Jesus *could NOT be king* if He were really Joseph's son. His purpose was not to show the royal line. For this reason, Matthew starts his Gospel with the genealogy, presents the Jeconiah problem, and then proceeds with the account of the virgin birth which, from Matthew's viewpoint, is the *solution* to the Jeconiah problem.

In summary, Matthew deduced that if Jesus were really Joseph's son, He could not claim to sit on David's throne because of the Jeconiah curse; but Jesus was not Joseph's son, for He was born of the virgin Mary (Matthew 1:18-25).

Luke's Genealogy

Unlike Matthew, Luke follows strict Jewish procedure and custom, in that he omits no names and mentions no women. However, if by Jewish custom one could not mention the name of a woman, but wished to trace her line, how would one do so? He would use the name of her husband. (Possible Old Testament precedents for this practice may be found in Ezra 2:61 and Nehemiah 7:63.)

That raises a second question: If someone studied a genealogy, how would he know whether the genealogy was that of a husband or of a wife, since in either case the husband's name would be used? The answer is not difficult, but it is masked by the English language.

In English, it is not good grammar to use the definite article ("the") before a proper name (as in "the Matthew," "the Luke," or "the Mary"): however, it is quite permissible in Greek grammar. In the Greek text of Luke's genealogy, every single name mentioned has the Greek definite article "the" with one exception: the name of Joseph (Luke 3:23). Thus, someone reading the original text would understand from the lack of the definite article with Joseph's name that this was not really Joseph's genealogy, but referred to his wife, Mary.

Due to the missing Greek definite article before the name of Joseph, Luke 3:23 actually says, "Being (as it was thought, the son of Joseph) the son of Heli..." In other words, Jesus was really the

descendant of Heli, who was the father of Mary. The absence of Mary's name is quite in keeping with the Jewish practices on genealogies.

Also in contrast to Matthew, Luke begins his genealogy with his own time and goes back into history all the way to Adam. It comes to the family of David in verses 31-32. However, the son of David involved in this genealogy is not Solomon, but Nathan. So, like Joseph, Mary was a member of the house of David. But unlike Joseph, she came from David's son, Nathan, not Solomon. Mary was a member of the house of David apart from Jeconiah. Since Jesus was Mary's son, He too was a member of the house of David, apart from Jeconiah.

In this way Jesus fulfilled the Biblical requirement for kingship. Since Luke's genealogy did not include Jeconiah's line, he began his Gospel with the virgin birth, and only later, in describing Jesus' public ministry, recorded his genealogy.

However, Jesus was not the only member of the house of David apart from Jeconiah. There were other descendants who could equally claim a right to the throne of David, for they too did not have Jeconiah's blood in their veins. Why Jesus and not one of the others? At this point the second Biblical requirement for kingship, that of divine appointment, comes into the picture. Of all the members of the house of David apart from Jeconiah, only one received divine appointment. Luke 1:30-33 states:

And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end.'

Why Jesus?

On what grounds then could Jesus claim the throne of David? He was a member of the house of David apart from Jeconiah. And He alone received divine appointment to that throne: *"The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David."*

While Matthew's genealogy showed why Jesus could not be king if He really were Joseph's son, Luke's genealogy shows why Jesus could be king. When He returns, He will be king.

Let me note two more significant things. First, many rabbinic objections to the messiahship of Jesus are based on His genealogy. The argument goes, "Since Jesus was not a descendant of David through his father, he cannot be Messiah and King." But the Messiah was supposed to be different.

As early as Genesis 3:15, it was proposed that the Messiah would be reckoned after *"the seed of the woman,"* although this was contrary to the Biblical norm. The necessity for this exception to

the rule became apparent when Isaiah (7:14) prophesied that the Messiah would be born of a virgin: *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel.”* Whereas all others receive their humanity from both father and mother, the Messiah would receive his humanity entirely from his mother.

Whereas Jewish nationality and tribal identity were normally determined by the father, with the Messiah it would be different. Since He has no human father, His earthly nationality and tribal identity would come entirely from His mother. True, this is contrary to the norm, but so is a virgin birth. With the Messiah, things would be different. At the same time, His heavenly origin and nature did, indeed, come from His Father, for He was God in human form.

So, the Gospel writers use the genealogies to acquaint us with several wonderful ideas: the salvation that Jesus wrought for us is intended for all people—Jews and non-Jews, men and women. And it is intended for those who could not earn it for themselves—sinners. You, and everyone here, fall within the wide circle of candidacy for His grace. If only you will cease depending on yourself for righteousness, and trust Jesus, who loved you and gave Himself for you, and gives His righteousness to you.

In addition, these genealogies present a fourfold portrait of the Messiah through His four titles. In Matthew 1:1, He is called the Son of David and the Son of Abraham. In Luke 3:38, He is called the Son of Adam and the Son of God. As the Son of David, Jesus is the King. As the Son of Abraham, Jesus is the Son of Covenant (Promise). As the Son of Adam, Jesus is human. As the Son of God, Jesus is God. This fourfold portrait of the Christ presented in the genealogies is that of the Promised God-Man King. Could the Messiah be anyone less? Could you need anyone more?

Will you recognize the One who was “born a King”?

Will you fall on your knees to worship this Promised God-Man King?

Will you open to Him the treasures of your heart—your spirit, your life?

That is the way to a Christmas that never ends!