

“The Ballad of the Begats”

a sermon by

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Text: “The book of genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham”(Matthew 1:1).

I have a friend who enjoys reading mystery novels, except that he has an unusual way of reading them. He begins by reading the first chapter of the novel, making a deliberate attempt to put in place all of the characters, the setting of the book, and the crime. Then he reads the last chapter of the mystery to discover how it all ends. Having satisfied himself that he knows how it will all turn out, he returns to the beginning of the book. He says that he can enjoy the novel a good bit more if he knows how it is going to end.

That may or may not be a good way to read a mystery novel, but I am quite sure it is not a good way of reading the New Testament. There is nothing more difficult in beginning the New Testament than the genealogy that Matthew uses to begin the story of the life of Jesus.

I.

This section of Matthew’s gospel has puzzled readers for a lot of reasons. First, it is very different from the genealogy of Jesus that is found in Luke’s gospel (Luke 3: 23-38) that traces the ancestry of Jesus back to Adam. Second, it omits some of the major kings of Israel. Third, it seems strange that Matthew would go to the trouble of naming the lineage of Jesus through his father, Joseph, when Matthew goes on to assert that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, due to the miraculous conception of Jesus by the Spirit of God.

Apparently, Matthew has adopted a numerical scheme to tie together the different generations. There are three sections, each with fourteen names. The first section traces the ancestry of Jesus from Abraham to David. The second section traces the ancestry of Jesus from David to the time of the Babylonian exile. The third section traces the ancestry of Jesus from the time of the exile to Joseph, the husband of Mary.

Now, this preoccupation with the ancestry of Jesus may seem a bit esoteric and quaint to us, but we are probably not as far removed from this as we may like to think. People from the

South are particularly noted for their preoccupation with their ancestors. One of my professors at Davidson, Dr. Chalmers Davidson, could cite the lineage of almost every student at the college, and there are a number of families in this church that can easily trace their family history in this church to at least six generations.

Nor is this practice limited only to people from the South. There are a number of web sites and other organizations that for a fee will provide family information to anyone with enough interest and money.

Matthew, in his own characteristic way, is determined by this genealogy to say two distinct though somewhat contradictory things about Jesus.

II.

The first is that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the descendant of Abraham, the patriarch, and David, the great king of Israel. That theme is one that Matthew picks up again and again. Matthew commonly quotes the Old Testament as a way to note that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) provides a new law that “exceeds the righteousness of the Law of Moses” and is “taught as one having authority and not as their scribes.” Matthew commonly uses the expression, “This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.”

Matthew’s gospel is very plain in this regard. He is determined to present Jesus as the one whom the prophets foretold as the Messiah. He is the fulfillment of the promise of God to the people through the law and the prophets.

That is why Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy. He is determined to show his Jewish readers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of David, whom God has promised for the deliverance of the Jews.

III.

The second aspect of this genealogy is both subtle and inflammatory. Although the lineage of Jesus is traced through the male side, four women are mentioned in these verses: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. They are four very unlikely names. Two of them were prostitutes, one of them was an adulterer, and the fourth is Moabitess—that is a non-Jew.

Now, this, of course, has shocked readers throughout the centuries. Why would Matthew mention these four women? Why not Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, or Esther? Each of these women was held in high regard by their people. But Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba? Why in the world would Matthew mention these women, all of whom in some way have a bit of sexual irregularity in their lives? What in the world was Matthew trying to do by introducing these particular women within the lineage of Jesus?

Actually, it is pretty clear what Matthew is doing in this “Ballad of the Begats.” He is not only identifying Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, but he heralds him as the savior of the gentiles as well. Matthew tells us that when Jesus was born, not only were there heavenly choirs and bands of shepherds, he alone tells us of this miraculous star that appeared in the East and that gentile kings or “wise men” saw the star and followed it to a manger in a stable where they presented the Christ child with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

That was the startling and revolutionary aspect of the birth of Christ. Jesus was not going to be limited to one group. Throughout the gospels we read that Jesus was constantly and consistently reaching out to those who were on the fringe: tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, lepers. “The Son of man,” said Jesus, “came to save the lost.” And that is what Jesus always does.

IV.

In recent years there has been a good bit of media attention on a group of New Testament scholars called the “Jesus Seminar.” They have sought to rescue the “real Jesus” from the Jesus that they believe has been enshrouded by the church and by the creeds.

But they are not the first to try to find the real Jesus. In 1906 Albert Schweitzer published his famous book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, and for the last hundred years scholars have consistently tried to ascertain who the “real Jesus” is.

The problem with all of this is not that we cannot find Jesus, but rather that we cannot escape him. Every time we try to put him in some box or tie him down to some neat definition, he inevitably eludes us.

That is what Matthew tells us. If you decide to do what my mystery reading friend does and read the end of the book, you will find that when the women who had followed Jesus went to find him on that first Easter morning, they could not find him either. All they found was an empty tomb. He was not dead. He was risen.

So when they went to Galilee, as he had commanded them, they heard Jesus tell them what he tells us—a “Great Commission” that commands us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Harvey Cox once observed that this “Ballad of the Begats” should be sung and not read.

That is always true at Christmas. The story of the Birth of Christ is not simple prose. It is the poetry of the soul that leads us to glorify God and praise him with our hearts.

Amen!