

"Family Tree"

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¹An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. ²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, ⁸and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. ¹²And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. ¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations. (Mark 5:21, 24b-34)

This week on Twitter I stumbled upon a spirited debate over the nature of Jesus. Religious figure Paula White was quoted in the Christian Post challenging the idea that Jesus was an immigrant refugee. To make her point, she referenced the story from the early chapters of Matthew about Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt to protect Jesus from Herod's child hunters. Yes, White admitted, Jesus spent some time in Egypt, but that was not the same as more contemporary examples of immigrant refugees. It was different, she said, because Jesus was down in Egypt "legally." She suggested that if Mary and Joseph had gone to Egypt in violation of law then Jesus would be a sinner, which would disqualify him as our messiah.¹ She seemed to want to avoid the messy reality that Jesus has quite a bit in common with poor families around the world today. Her comments were quickly and roundly challenged by biblical scholars, who observed that Jesus broke laws all the time... in fact, that it was his propensity for lawbreaking that ultimately got him crucified by the governmental and religious authorities of the day.

The reason I bring this biblical debate up this morning is not to resolve it, but rather to say that the nature of this online conversation mirrors a key tension in this genealogy also found in the early portions of Matthew's gospel. On one hand, this list of Biblical greats serves as an historical defense of Jesus' identity as God's anointed one. In the same way that

¹ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/paula-white-theres-difference-between-jesus-as-refugee-those-who-enter-the-us-illegally-225900/>



the descent of Jesus and his family to Egypt fulfills the prophecy of Hosea 11:1 (in which God says “out of Egypt I called my son”), this genealogy traces and defends the lineage of Jesus. It seeks to establish his rightful, legal claim to the messianic throne by tracing his line not only through the Davidic kings, but even back to Abraham, the great original ancestor with whom God’s covenant with Israel began.

On the other hand, the list shows that the genealogical path from Abraham to Jesus is a little rocky in places. If this list represents the family tree of the Messiah, we can’t help but notice a few dodgy branches here and there. These branches are not totally rotten... they did some good things and played positive roles... but their individual stories are certainly messy at best. The ancestors of Jesus include one proven prostitute and another woman who was accused of it; at least one Gentile foreigner; and one object of a lustful royal plot, all of whom remind us that genealogy is much more than a list of “begets” and “begottens.” A family tree is a story — often a very convoluted and complex story — that reveals much about who we really are... and how we came to be that way.

Today, we investigate and cherish our own family stories for a variety of reasons. Some of you, for example, may have traced your roots as part of a bid to join a group like the Daughters of the American Revolution that requires proof of an ancestral link to the era of our nation’s independence. Others may have searched their family tree for genetic traits that may shed light on your medical history or susceptibility to certain conditions. Most of us, however, are just curious. Really curious as it turns out. As Diana Butler Bass notes in *Grounded*, an estimated 84 million people spend between \$1,000 and \$18,000 per year on genealogical research. In 2017, 12 million people spent \$60 or more on one of those new genealogy home tests.² Why are we willing to invest this much into research? Probably because we hope it will help us understand who we are by first understanding from whence — and more importantly, from whom — we have come. It reminds me of the man in the Ancestry.com add who spent most of his life thinking his roots were German but became puzzled when he couldn’t find any German ancestors in his family tree. When he finally broke down and got one of those new DNA sampling kits, he learned that most of his roots were in Scotland. So he promptly turned in his lederhosen for a brand new kilt. He found out that he had been assuming the truth of one family story for most of his life, only to find out that the true story was completely different. Somewhere along the way, someone either stopped telling the real story to his or her kids or decided to change it for some reason. As a result, their descendants lost touch with who they really were. As the author Sue Monk Kidd wrote in her wonderful book *The Secret Life of Bees*, “*Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can’t remember who we are or why we’re here.*”

And, like any story, family stories can sometimes be manipulated to establish something that we want to be true, but isn’t really true. The story of the nation of Ireland, for example, suggests that many if not most of the genealogies written throughout its history were little more than propaganda. Beginning as oral history, these lists were later written down in the late sixth century by clerical scribes in religious schools. And these scribes often had a very specific political agenda. Their goal was to place the history of the Irish people on a stronger biblical footing and dilute, or even sever, any pagan branches that may have weakened the family tree. Specifically, the clerks worked to trace the lines of Irish king back, in any way they could, to Milesius of Spain, who they believed had a direct

² <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/610233/2017-was-the-year-consumer-dna-testing-blew-up/>

genealogical link to Noah and Adam. Of course, these connections would have been completely fabricated, as Eve was not known as a meticulous note taker, and no one has been able to locate Cain's family Bible yet. But it did not stop the Irish culture from giving dominant status to those the kings who could claim to be "sons of Mil," and relegating all other family lines to be slaves and servants to those "true" kings.³

There is some evidence that this genealogy from Matthew may have been created in much the same way. While much of the family tree connects well, some of the connections do not seem to line up well with portions of the Old Testament. The claim, for example, that the genealogy breaks down into three equal phases with 14 generations each doesn't really add up. It seems to be a little too neat and tidy to have been completely true. One gets the sense that some of the factual realities of the story have been cleansed and modified in the interest of a larger religious and political narrative that was deemed more important. One theory suggests that this list could have been created by a Jewish Christian who wanted to show Jesus' descent from David through Joseph in order to make a case for James, the Lord's brother, to be named the uncontested leader of the early church. In other words, a desire to create propaganda for James may have guided the creation of this list and may explain some of the license that was taken. The original creator may have had an agenda. For this reason, I think the better way to interpret this genealogy is to embrace its power as a family story. As history, it may have some errors and omissions. But it still has much to tell us about Jesus and his roots. For one thing, it shows us that Jesus' family is a lot like ours. All of us have them in our families: that crazy aunt who people don't talk about much, the cousin who liked chemistry so much that he started cooking up some stuff in a trailer and ended up doing a little time... As someone once said, "If you think your family is normal, you are probably not a genealogist."

So it turns out that Jesus' family was pretty normal, in that some not-so-normal relatives were scattered here and there. And as it often is in our families, those not-so-normal ones tend to be the most interesting and memorable parts of the story, and they often end up being the people who had the most significant impact on future generations.

There was **Tamar**, the woman unlucky in love whose first two husbands died because of sinful mistakes, who was so desperate that she posed as a prostitute and ran out to a desert highway in order to entrap her father-in-law Judah into a third marriage. He thought about burning her at the stake but changed his mind.

Then there was **Rahab**, the known prostitute of Jericho, known in Hebrew midrash as being one of the four most beautiful women the world has ever known. Despite her checkered past, she eventually becomes a model of hospitality and mercy thanks to her pivotal role in helping the Israelites enter the Promised Land. Even so, this name is also associated with both a feared sea monster and the nation of Egypt in the Old Testament, carrying connotations of rage, insolence and sinful pride. The name was truly a mixed bag.

The list also includes **Ruth**, the foreigner who was eventually trusted and brought into the fold despite not being a Hebrew, the woman who modeled loving-kindness and loyalty and ended up being the great-grandmother of King David himself.

The genealogy also makes note of **Bathsheba**, the "wife of Uriah," the woman so beautiful that King David, overwhelmed by lustful desire, arranged to have her soldier husband killed on the front lines so David could marry her himself.

³ <https://www.historyireland.com/volume-22/irish-genealogies-useful-source-just-propaganda/>

This complex story brings us full circle to where we began, a very contemporary debate over the nature of Jesus, and how we understand this Jesus in the context of today's world. Is Jesus the blameless, rightful heir to messianic status — a pristine manifestation of God who somehow made it through the mess of humanity completely sinless, clean, and “legal”? Or is Jesus more like the rest of us — the product of a human family that is far from perfect, a person whose ancestors have struggled to be faithful with a mixture of success and failure, royalty and commonness, cleanliness and impurity? Is Jesus the king or the peasant? Is Jesus the pure-bred Jewish monarch, or the multi-ethnic immigrant on the wrong side of the fence? The only error we can make in answering these questions is to assume that he must be one or the other, because all of these narrative identities are intertwined in the grand tapestry of the story of Jesus, and no one strand is ever able to completely separate itself from the others.

Even so, it seems that more and more these days we are working hard to establish the dominance of one story, or one tribe, over another. Anger that has been simmering below the surface is now breaking forth into the open in unkind, unattractive, and unhealthy ways. We argue about which group is faithful and which are not... about who should be in our country and who should not... about who has the right to swim in our community pool and who does not. Like the Irish kings of old, we want to tell our family story in ways that bolster our own position or establish our dominance, or at least tell that story in a way that makes us feel better about ourselves, even if we have to forget certain aspects of our past or fabricate parts of our history to get there.

As people of faith, we are called to understand our own family trees, and our own origin stories, by comparing them to the family tree of Jesus. Like him, we have to be honest about those stories, even the parts that are difficult to confess. In the kingdom of God, family trees do not establish anyone as more important or more legitimate than someone else. In the kingdom of God, genealogies do not divide us into groups of those who belong and those who do not. In the kingdom of God, family trees bring us together... by reminding us that no one has a perfect claim to anything... by proving to us that the true vine of Christ is strong enough to survive a few questionable branches... and by restoring the ties that bind us together in our common need for grace, our common tendency to stumble and make mistakes, and our common longing to be loved and accepted as children of the living God. For thus is the story “of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

Amen.