

Family Secrets

Matthew 1:1-17

Every family has its secrets. For some of us there will be disappointments which we live with in the present, relationships which have broken down with no prospect of reconciliation or other indiscretions which have occurred. Alongside such stories, there will also be heroes, the larger-than-life characters who have brooded over us like patriarchs or matriarchs, people who continue to inspire others because of their personality or achievements.

Inevitably, the stories of our families can usually only be properly understood against the background of wider changes in the places where they lived. Sometimes, our forebears are impacted by major events. In 1922, my grandfather and the rest of his family had to leave County West Meath in the Republic of Ireland, fleeing north like many other Protestants who were forced from their homes during the Irish Civil War. Economic and social changes also play a significant role.

Everything which could be said about our own family histories would probably ring true for Jesus. Matthew's Gospel begins with the Apostle outlining for us the genealogy of Jesus. Tom Wright notes that, 'For many cultures ancient and modern, and certainly in the Jewish world of Matthew's day, this genealogy was the equivalent of a roll of drums, a fanfare of trumpets, and a town crier calling for attention. Any first-century Jew would find this family tree both impressive and compelling.'¹ Matthew's family tree includes references to many of the great figures of the Jewish faith, including Abraham, Isaac, David and Solomon.

And yet this list also contains names who remind us of some of the more embarrassing and scandalous moments in Jewish history. Early on, for example, the family tree tells us that Isaac was the father of Jacob (no mention is given to Esau, deceived from his inheritance by his younger brother), and in verse 6 we are reminded of the affair between David and 'Uriah's wife.' Bathsheba is not even mentioned by name.

Matthew also makes passing references to the highs and lows of Israel's history. The characters mentioned here live through triumphs like the Exodus and the taking of the Promised Land, but also through defeats and disappointments. In verse 11 we are reminded of 'the time of the exile to Babylon.'

Two other features of this list stand out. Firstly, Jewish genealogies of this time usually made no mention of women, but four are listed here: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. As Stanley Hauerwas notes, each of these women come into the story as outsiders and yet God, in his grace and wisdom, uses them as part of his wider plan of salvation. 'These women are not clearly from the people of Israel, yet they serve God's providential care by quite literally making the Davidic line

¹ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1*, 2002, 2

possible.² Could it be that, even in these opening verses of his Gospel, Matthew is reminding us of the grace of God which will draw in the likes of the centurion's servant and the Canaanite woman and which will work itself out in a final call to make disciples of all nations?

Secondly, Matthew finishes this list, in verse 17, by drawing our attention to a numerical pattern which emerges within it: '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 Messiah.' This point may seem laboured to modern readers but it would have been important for Matthew's original audience, a generation who attached huge importance to the symbolism of numbers. Many scholars have pointed out that three times fourteen is also six times seven, seven being the number of perfection in Jewish thought. Dick France suggests that this 'sequence of six sevens points to the coming of the seventh seven, the climax of history when the ongoing purpose of God for his people from the time of Abraham reaches its culmination.'³

For discussion

1. When we tell the stories of our own families, or even the story of our church, it's often tempting to gloss over difficult episodes or not to mention difficult characters. What can we learn from the presence in this list of such controversial figures as Jacob and David and Bathsheba?
2. What point do you think Matthew is making when he takes the unusual step of referring to four women in this list of names? What impact might their inclusion have had on his original readers?
3. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba... all of these women faced significant problems. Stanley Hauerwas points out that each of them, in one way or another, had to 'use their wits to force the men of Israel to claim them as members of God's promise.'⁴ Can you take some time to reflect of one or two of these women's stories?⁵ What do they teach us about who God uses and how he can be at work even in situations where people treat each other in selfish and exploitative ways?
4. Can you think of times in your own life when you found it hard to understand what God was doing? As you look back now at these incidents, can you see ways in which God was working to bring some good out of the difficulties you or other people were going through?

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*, 2006, 32

³ RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 31-32

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*, 2006, 32

⁵ You might find it helpful to reread some of the following chapters: Genesis 38 (Tamar); Joshua 2 (Rahab); Ruth 3 (Ruth); 2 Samuel 11 (Bathsheba).