

CHRISTMAS AND GENEALOGY

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Text: Gen. 16:7-8; Matthew 1:1, 17

Introduction: How many of you have ever done any genealogy work on your family? How many of you have benefited from the genealogical research of others? How many of you don't care where you came from? I suppose that my answers to the first two questions would be a little bit of both.

I got interested in my roots while in Nashville in 1995-1996. *Tell of going with Mark Thomas to Clarksville, finding the old picture of the family of Alexander Yarbrough, then beginning to find out all that I could about where I came from. My roots go back into England and Ireland on both sides of my family. Janis had already done a lot of work on her family, so together we have a pretty good genealogy for the new grandchild.*

I have done quite a bit of digging into my family on both my mother's side and my father's side. And I have borrowed a lot of information from people that I have come across who have not only done more research than I have but who also have done much better research than I have.

I have found all kinds of information about my roots. One story provided a very interesting discovery. William R. Yarbrough, the grand father of my great grandmother, Millie Yarbrough, had a large number of children with his wife, Permilia Parker. The first born was John, through who I trace my roots. The second daughter was Elizabeth Yarbrough, who married Abraham Coon from Ohio. Later I discovered that Abraham married Frances Yarbrough. This didn't seem to be unusual for the time – until I discovered that Elizabeth had died at age 95 or 96 – and that the place of her death was near Salt Lake City, Utah. I added 2 and 2 and discovered that many in my family had become Mormons and that Abraham Coon was a polygamist. Frances actually died during childbirth at a place called Winter Quarters, Nebraska, as a participant of the Mormon migration west.

I also discovered that my great, great, great grandfather George Yarbrough, Sr. (b. between 1743-1795) was my great, great, great, great grandfather when traced through my great grandmother, Millie Yarbrough, who was the spouse of my great grandfather Joseph Weldon Yarbrough and was the daughter of Joseph Weldon's cousin John, who I mentioned earlier. Not only that I discovered that George Cathey (between 1743-1760; d. abt 1840), who was from Ireland was the great, great, great grandfather of both my grandmother Watkins and my grandmother Yarbrough. All of this means that I am my own cousin on both sides of my family.

As you can tell, I find genealogical study really fascinating. In fact, in my approach to genealogy I want to know all about **those who have come before me**. And I also want to know **if that has any bearing on my future**.

With that in mind, let me draw from a **story in the Old Testament** that can be easily applied to the task of genealogy. I like **Scriptural texts that ask questions**. The story of **Hagar in Genesis 16** is a text that does this very thing, it ends with a question. Hagar was the handmaiden of Sarah. One has to understand the culture of the time to make sense of all that was going on.

There are a **couple of characteristics of this time** that are important. **First, children were very important** during these days because in an agricultural or pastoral environment many children were needed to either plant and harvest the crops or tend to the herds of domesticated animals. As such, children were both a spiritual blessing from God and an economic blessing. **Second**, it was not uncommon for a husband to bear **children both by his wife and the handmaidens of his wife**. In fact, **polygamy** was practiced regularly in the ancient world, even by the Hebrews. **Example – Jacob** had two wives, Leah and Rachel, both of who had children, plus children from their handmaidens. The children from these women formed the basis for the 12 tribes of Israel.

In the **story of Hagar, Sarah**, the wife of Abraham initially was **childless**. Hagar became like a **surrogate mother** in this case for Sarah. However, during Hagar's pregnancy **Sarah** became **jealous and drove Hagar** away from the family.

Hagar wound up rejected and confused. She found herself at a **spring near a place called the Wilderness of Shur**. There an **angel of the Lord**, we are told, confronted her. He asked Hagar a very significant question, or **two** questions that are really intertwined. He asked “Hagar, handmaiden of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?”

The **intent** of this question is to really **make Hagar aware that her past is very important to her future**. One’s past shapes and molds one’s future. **In the end** Hagar determined that in spite of the jealousy of Sarah, she **had a legitimate right to be in the family of Abraham**. **And, she concluded, that her future son, Ishmael, had a legitimate role as a son of Abraham**.

This morning I would like to **propose that the questions to Hagar may give us direction in understanding the significance of the birth of Jesus**. In my mind, at least, this is **substantiated in the fact that both Matthew and Luke contain genealogies of Jesus**.

In the **New Testament** there are **two accounts of the birth of Christ** – one is in the Gospel of **Matthew**, the other in the Gospel of **Luke**. **Both accounts** have long **genealogy lists**. One would **expect that both** would be the **same**, but that is **not the case**. Let’s **examine both lists** and see what we can glean from them, respectively. And, let’s keep in mind the question **“Why are there two genealogies?”**

Mathew immediately opens his Gospel with his genealogy, **chapter 1, verse 1**. He gives an **outline** of his list by stating that his is the **genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham**. He then fills in the blanks. He concludes with verse 17, where he states that all of the generations **from Abraham to David** are **fourteen generations**, from **David to the Babylonian deportation** fourteen generation, and from the **deportation to the time of Christ** fourteen generations.

One might ask **why** the emphasis on **fourteen generations** each, there is **no clear-cut answer**. Perhaps the reason is that it would be **easy to memorize**. Many of us use little tricks to remember information and lists, such as a set number in section, or using an acrostic. Until we come up with some other reason than this, then it may have to do.

Matthew begins with Abraham and traces Jesus through Mary rather than a direct link through Joseph.

There are a couple of important emphases in Matthew’s genealogy. **First, he begins with Abraham**. Abraham was considered the father of the Hebrew people. In fact, John the Baptist, criticized the Jews for depending too much upon their lineage back to Abraham. They believed that because they could trace their lineage to Abraham, all of God’s promises to him were theirs, especially the homeland.

Matthew is also committed to pointing out that Jesus was the Christ. He states this in chapter 1, verse one as he introduces his genealogy. And he concludes his genealogy in verses 16 and 17, where he again identifies Jesus as the Christ..

Is there any meaning in what Matthew is doing here? Yes, I think that there is. Keep in mind that the Greek word that we translate Christ is *Christos*. *Christos* is the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word for *Messiah*.

The Messiah is **God’s anointed**. The Messiah was an important part of the **prophetic tradition**. Messiah is a term that **points to royalty**, to **authority**, to **leadership**. The Messiah would lead Israel back to her greatness. The Messiah would restore Israel to a position of greatness among the nations, would usher in a period of justice, peace, hope, comfort from a nation that had known so much sorrow. **The Messiah would bring in God’s kingdom**.

David was the model for the Messiah. He had been the **greatest king** in all of Israel’s history. He brought peace, power, and prosperity to the Israelites. Although he had some personal flaws and human weaknesses, at the same time he was **praised for his dedication to God**. He was God’s man when it came to the monarchy.

When you put all of these facts together, it is obvious that Matthew is **writing to Jewish Christians**. I believe that the book was actually **written after the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman army in A.D. 70**, although many would disagree. If I am correct, then the **Jewish Christians had lost and continued to lose their leadership position in the church to the Gentile converts**. Paul’s journeys and the efforts of many others had moved the Christian mission directly into the hand of Gentile Christians.

Jerusalem was no longer the center of the church, nor was Palestine. The church was **strongly entrenched in Asia Minor and Greece**, and **Rome was assuming a leadership position**. Matthew felt

the need to **encourage the Jewish Christians** in their **identity struggle**. He pointed out how **Jesus arose out of Jewish roots**, how he was the **fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy**, how he was a **descendent of the great King David**.

Matthew emphasized that Jesus **did not come to destroy the Jewish law** but to fulfill it. His lengthy narrative of the **Sermon on the Mount** reminded the Jewish Christians that as **Moses went upon the mountain** to receive the law, so Jesus gathered his disciples on the side of a Galilean hill and proclaimed that he had come to fulfill the law.

Matthew wrote his Gospel to Jewish Christians who were struggling with their identity. His task was to remind them that Jesus was a descendent of all of the great Jewish leaders all the way back to Abraham, the Father of the Jewish people. He was answering for the Jews the question of “Where have you come from?”

Luke, interestingly, does not include his genealogy until after the baptism and beginning with the earthly ministry of Jesus. Unlike Matthew, Luke **begins his genealogy with the newborn baby, with Jesus**, and traces the lineage of Jesus through **David**, to **Abraham**, the son of Terah. But Luke **doesn't stop there, as did Matthew**. He continues all the way back through **Enosh**, through **Seth**, and through **Adam**. In fact, he goes **all of the way back to God**, when he describes Adam as the son of God.

Why does he go back to Adam? Because, Jesus is not simply the Jewish Messiah, he is the Christ. He is the **Savior of the World!** Luke is **writing his Gospel about the same time that Matthew is writing his Gospel**. But Luke has a **universal vision of Jesus and what he means to the entire world**.

Why does Luke interpret Jesus from this perspective? **One, he is a Gentile**, not a Jew. **Two**, he is the **author** of not only a **Gospel of Jesus** but also the **Book of Acts**. In **Acts** he tells of the **advance of the church from Jerusalem to Rome**. In fact, he records the command of Jesus to his disciples in Jerusalem that they are to take the Good News “**from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth.**” In terms of the recipients of the Gospel Luke is saying that the Gospel is to be preached to the very **orthodox Jews in Jerusalem**, to the **Jews throughout Judea**. To those **Samaritans** who are part Jew/part Gentile, and to the **Gentiles, in other words all non-Jews** all the way to Rome and from there throughout the world.

Luke in Acts sees **Paul** as the **champion of the Gentile mission**. In fact, **Luke apparently participated** in some of the missionary efforts. On Paul's **second missionary journey**, Luke has referred to the missionary party in the **third person** – “They” did this, they did that. But when they leave Troas to cross the Aegean Sea and travel on to Philippi, Luke changes to the **first person** – “we.” (Acts 16:10 – 40) Was he converted in Troas? Why did he join the missionaries? We don't know, but we can speculate. Did he become a member of the missionary team? Probably, he joined Paul's party at least for a short period of time.

When the party departs Philippi to head for Thessalonica, **Luke reverts back to the third person** – “they.” So, he probably remained at Philippi. Or, he may have returned to Troas. On the **third journey**, it appears that **Luke joined the party again as they traveled through Philippi and departs after they left Troas**. All of this is to say that **Luke was very much interested in the Gentile mission** and that he actually participated with Paul and his friends in some of the efforts.

So, **what does all of this mean to us?** I believe that **we can learn from the two different genealogies and the overall basic messages of Matthew and Luke that different people understand Jesus in different ways. Why four gospels, why not just one?** Because **each writer had something that he wanted to emphasize to a different audience**.

Mark – eyewitnesses to Jesus were dying off. Jesus had not returned. Mark, using the teaching and preaching of Peter, wanted to make sure that the witness to the life, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus was preserved for new followers who would not be able to listen to those who had been with Jesus. So he started with the beginning of the ministry of Jesus as connected with that of John. He was not interested in the birth narratives of Jesus in providing a genealogy. He got straight to the heart of the message. He also probably was writing for the Gentile church more than the Jewish Christians. He had served with Paul on the first journey and then later served as the secretary of Peter as they preached and

ministered and made their way to Rome. He did not neglect Jewish Christians but he saw the bigger picture.

Matthew – He was writing to Jewish Christians, as previously discussed.

Luke – He was writing to Gentile Christians, and in fact to the entire world. He was making sure that the universal dimension of the Gospel was proclaimed.

John - he wrote his Gospel near the end of the first century. He was not writing a true gospel in the historical sense. Rather he was interpreting what the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus meant in a world in which many basic Christian beliefs were being challenged. He used symbols such as the word, light, and bread in order to assist his readers in not only understanding but in applying the relevance of Jesus to each and everyone.

So, what does this mean to us in this Christmas season? I believe that we can apply this understanding to ourselves. Although a small group, **this congregation** represents a **lot of diversity**. For each of us there is **something about Jesus that appeals to us on a personal basis**. It may be our **upbringing**. If we grew up in a rural community our ideas and values may result in our seeing Jesus in a different light than someone from an **urban environment**. Someone from a more **structured background**, such as the military, may find in Jesus direction that is different from someone who may have spent a lot of time in a **state university setting**. Someone who has **experienced rejection, prejudice, and hostility** may find in **Jesus a model for courage and change**, whereas someone who grew up in a **loving, caring environment may find in Jesus warmth and acceptance**.

What I am **trying to say** is that **somehow, someway, Jesus can fill the needs of so many different kinds of people**. Every person can find in him **love, forgiveness, peace, and hope, regardless of how they interpret and understand who he is**.

This also means that each and every one of us **has something to offer the world around us as we encounter people with varying backgrounds**. Some of us can give **hope to those who seem to have no hope**. Some of us can give **comfort to those whose lives are so chaotic**. Some of us can give **peace to those who are at war with themselves or with others**. Some of us can give **encouragement to those who are depressed**. Some of us can **assist in helping others to achieve goals that sometimes seem to be unattainable**. E.g., I wanted and needed an **education**. I needed a **boost and a little support** and there were a few people who saw this and filled this need in the name of Jesus.

Conclusion: **Imagine this morning that you were writing your spiritual genealogy**. Who would be those **people who had helped you, guided you, encouraged you, understood you** as your traced your roots back to Jesus? **What was it about their understanding of Jesus that was reflected in their lives that gave you insights into Jesus**.

Imagine that you were writing a Gospel of Jesus. Where would you begin? If you included a genealogy, would you go back to Abraham or Adam? Or, someone else. What would you **emphasize about Jesus**? **What kind of people would you pick to include in the story** as you tried to tell others about Jesus? Look at all of the followers of Jesus and see how different they are – Peter (Mr. Enthusiasm), James and John (political zealots who wanted positions of authority in the kingdom), Mary and Martha (a dreamer and a doer), Mary Magdalene (a woman friend), Barnabas (the great encourager), Paul (a legalist turned liberal when it came to faith and grace), and on and on. What incidents would mean the most to you, if you had to make some choices?

Matthew and Luke used their respective genealogies to point us in the **direction of what was important to them – and their readers - about Jesus**. They wrote for specific readers about who the Messiah or the Savior was and what this meant to their readers. They **selected different emphases, different stories, and different characteristics** when they recorded their message about Jesus. **We could add Mark and John and their understanding of Jesus**. So, in this Christmas season, **what does Jesus mean to you? What does your genealogy and Gospel look like?**

Where have you come from? And, where are you going as a believer in not just the newborn child of the nativity but in the Messiah, or the Savior, or the Son of God, or the Son of Man, etc., etc., etc?