

18 December 2022

Isaiah 7:10-16
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

In recent years there seems to have been a massive increase in interest in genealogy, in the question of one's origins. The availability of online records makes searching these things out much easier than it used to be. Now one can add to the richness of information and the interesting linkages by taking a DNA test. TV programmes such as the UK's *Who Do You Think You Are?* and New Zealand's *DNA Detectives* take celebrities through the twists and turns of discovering their origins; and in *David Lomas Investigates* the investigative journalist helps people connect with relatives who have been lost to them through abandonment, formal or informal adoptions and the like.

Genealogy has become an industry, and it is all about heritage and, most significantly, identity.

The questions of ancestry and identity of Jesus lie at the heart of today's readings from Matthew and Romans. Paul summarises the issue in Romans 1 (although for him by that stage there is no *issue*, no argument): Paul says that the gospel of God is all about God's Son, "who as to his earthly life was a descendent of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."

It would all make quite a challenge for the makers of today's popular TV programmes!

Let's start with the apparently easy part, the human part. Matthew too starts here: the first line of his Gospel, which may also be its intended title, is "this is the record of origins of Jesus the Christ, the son of David and the son of Abraham."¹

The next sixteen verses present us with the genealogy of Jesus. It traces the line of descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through Boaz and Ruth, through Jesse and King David and Solomon, through the kings of Judah up until the exile, and

¹ The two word phrase in the Greek, translated above as "this is the record of origins", can be variously translated. Osborne, *Matthew*, p.61 sets out the possibilities.

descendants that followed through the periods of exile and return, until at last we read:

Matthan was the father of Jacob,
and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the
mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

Then we go on to read of the birth of this Jesus:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was
pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was
found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

And here we run into a detail that would make an interesting exploration in one of our
TV programmes: Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. And actually, if we
had been paying attention, we might have got a bit of a hint of a problem from that
genealogy – after the long list of “so-and-so was the father of someone” etc, we
come to, not “and Joseph was the father of Jesus who is called the Messiah”, but the
much less direct “Joseph was the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of
Jesus who is called the Messiah.”

What must Joseph have thought?

What details lie behind the “she was found to be pregnant”? How was the
pregnancy found out? Who found it out?

We can only imagine the turmoil of emotion that Joseph might have gone through.
Betrayed? Angry? Let down? Confused? Disappointed? Fearful?

As we think about Joseph feeling betrayed, it is important that we appreciate that the
situation is tantamount to adultery. While most of our English translations use words
like engaged, or betrothed, to explain the status of the relationship between Mary
and Joseph, the process of marriage was different in those times. There were two
steps. The first step, which we might label as betrothal, is the entry into a contract of
marriage – usually arranged by the parents of the couple. The point is it is binding,
and can only be ended by divorce or death. The second step is for the celebration
and feasting culminating in the husband taking his wife into his own home. Mary is
discovered to be pregnant in-between these two steps. If Joseph has not been with
her, then she has been unfaithful to him.

Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

In terms of the Jewish law of which Joseph was a faithful follower, he had two options: have Mary stoned (along with whoever was responsible); or divorce her. And if he divorced her, he could do it making a big scene, publicly humiliating her; or he could make the divorce a private matter.

In the next verse we are told he “considered” his course of action. “Considered” translates a word that implies more than he just had a quiet think: it suggests that he was greatly troubled, disturbed.

We are not presented with an evaluation: we are told what Joseph thought of doing, and then we are told what happened... an angel appeared to him:

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

And then a couple of verses further on, we are told what Joseph in fact did:

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

So Jesus comes into a family already marked by some turmoil; into fears, doubts, uncertainties and hurts. A thoroughly human family, in other words.

Even contained within the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew are details that would have given *Who Do You Think You Are?* or *David Lomas Investigates* plenty of interesting material to work with. Within the genealogy, which follows the male line generation after generation, there is mention of four women before we come to Mary: Tamar, treated as a prostitute by her father-in-law Judah; Rahab the prostitute from Jericho who gave birth to Boaz; Ruth, the woman from the foreign race of Moab, who became the mother of Obed (who was to be David’s grandfather); and the wife of Uriah the Hittite (Bathsheba) with whom David committed adultery resulting in the birth of Solomon.²

² Wright, *Matthew*, p.4; Bailey, *Jesus*, pp. 38-41

Matthew has set out to present Jesus as the son of David and the son of Abraham. The intention is clearly to establish Jesus' credentials, his identity as one with a legitimate claim to the throne of Israel. Herod, placed on the throne by his Roman overlords, could not even claim common descent with those he ruled – he as an Idumean, not a Jew. Jesus, son of David and son of Abraham, comes as the climax of the genealogical line: in a culture in which the number 7 implied completeness,³ Jesus comes after six groups of 7 generations and himself stands at the beginning of the seventh group.⁴

But, as the genealogy makes clear, Jesus is Son of David by *adoption*. The genealogy identified Joseph, who stands in the line of David, not as Jesus' father, but as the husband of Mary. Jesus is Son of David by adoption, and Joseph officially signals this when, at Jesus' birth, he publicly announces the child's name as the angel of the Lord has directed. And he goes on to prove that he is a worthy adoptive father.⁵

As we go on to read Matthew in the months ahead, we will find that he presents Jesus, the Son of David, as an atypical monarch, a humble king who restrains and refocuses his authority in order to make space for, and restore, the lost, blind, lame, and deaf.⁶

All this has of course pointed to the other side of the issue summarised by Paul: Jesus is also Son of God. The angel tells Matthew: "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

In relation to all this, Matthew makes an editorial comment:

³ "Seven", article in Ryken et al (Editors), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Inter-Varsity, 1998, p.

⁴ Wright, *Matthew*, p.3. Osborne notes that the Matthew 1:17 reference to three sets of *fourteen* generations emphasises Jesus' position as the Davidic Messiah, "David" totalling 14 as a gematria. Osborne, *Matthew*, p.68

⁵ Saunders, "Commentary". On "adoption" see also Osborne, *Matthew*, pp.67-68.

⁶ Quoting from Saunders, "Commentary" with some adaptation.

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

Matthew is quoting Isaiah 7. But it is here that we can get a bit hung up. The Hebrew word for “virgin” found in Isaiah 7 is often translated “young woman”. “Aha!” say some. “Isaiah prophesied, not that a *virgin* would conceive and have a son, but that a *young woman* would have a son: therefore all this virgin birth stuff about Jesus has to be nonsense.”

But it is not as simple as that. Firstly, that particular Hebrew word is rare, and all the other uses of it are at least compatible with virginity. Secondly, when the Hebrew scriptures were translated by Greek-speaking Jews into the Greek language, they chose a word that unambiguously means “virgin”. Thirdly, there are other passages in the gospels which mention the virgin birth but which make no reference at all to Isaiah’s prophecy.⁷

It certainly doesn’t look at all like Matthew knew the prophecy and cooked up this aspect of the story of Jesus’ birth so that it would appear to fit or fulfil the prophecy. Actually, the opposite looks more likely – that Matthew, faced with a deeply puzzling story about the circumstances of Jesus’ birth, found a biblical text that might shed some light on it.⁸

Others will protest however that if God the Holy Spirit is actually the biological father of Jesus, then where did the other half of Jesus’ human DNA come from, where did his Y chromosome come from? Perhaps we need to get the *DNA Detectives* onto it.

So this question comes down to what we believe of God. If we are saying that it is impossible for God to have worked in this way, then what else is impossible for God? A god who cannot enable a particular young virgin woman give birth to a person who is both truly and fully human and yet truly and fully divine is unlikely to be able to raise that person to renewed bodily life after a time of death; is unlikely to be able to

⁷ Wright, *Twelve*, pp.8-9; see also Osborne, *Matthew*, pp.78-79

⁸ Wright, *Matthew*, p.7

raise all the faithful to renewed bodily life after a time of death at the end of the age; is unlikely to have been able to create the world out of nothing in the first place (regardless of the mechanism employed and timing of the event); and is unlikely to be able to remake the world at the end of the age.

To my mind the whole scheme of Christian belief would not fall apart if there was no virgin birth: if all things are possible with God, then God could have become flesh in the person of Jesus even if a human being had fathered the child. But the biblical witness is that God chose to work in this particular way, and I see no reason then to reject that witness which is presented as pure narrative, and not as allegory or parable or the like.

A god who is incapable of the virgin birth would not be a god worth throwing my lot in with, or a god worthy of my worship and service, because that god would be incapable of fulfilling a plan to rescue humankind.

God the almighty, creator of all, chose to come into the turmoil and difficulty of human affairs, because he loves us and because through Jesus he has come to implement his rescue mission: as the angel said, “you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” – the name Jesus means “God saves”.

Who do you think you are? Matthew begins his Gospel setting out Jesus’ identity and role. The good news is that as a result of God’s work in and through Jesus, we too have an identity and role.

Jesus, Son of David, was adopted into the royal line so that he might rule. So too we are adopted into the family of God that we might be co-rulers with him.

Jesus, Son of God, was made incarnate – made in human flesh – so that he could be “God with us”, in the present age going about his ministry among the people of the 1st Century AD, and in the age to come dwelling with a redeemed humankind in a renewed creation. So too we have a role incarnating the word and work of God among humankind, representing the one who is “God with us”.

Sources

- Stanley Saunders, "Commentary on Matthew 1:18-25", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-118-25-9>
- Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible readings, Year A*, SPCK, 2001
- Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-15i*, SPCK, 2002/2004
- Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, Inter-Varsity, 2008
- Lose, "Matthew's version of the incarnation", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2961>
- Hultgren, "Matthew 1:18-25 Commentary" https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1936
- Grant R Osborne, *Matthew*, [Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament], Zondervan, 2010
- Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans – Part 1, Chapters 1-8*, SPCK 2004
- Anthea Portier-Young, "Commentary on Isaiah 7:10-16", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-isaiah-710-16-6>
- Jennifer Vija Pietz, "Commentary on Romans 1:1-7", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-romans-11-7-6>
- Matt Skinner, "Watch What Happens", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/watch-what-happens>