

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM MATTHEW 1:17 and ITS 14 GENERATIONS?

Matt 1:17 Therefore all the generations from Abraham until David were 14 generations and from David until the deportation to Babylon were 14 generations and from the deportation to Babylon until the Christ were 14 generations.

At first glance this seems to be a strange statement and one of the strangest in the whole Bible. It must have meant something to Matthew or he would not have written it, but to modern readers it is just a puzzle which adds nothing to our understanding so we simply ignore it – in fact I ignored it for over 50 years but now I will try to show you that it is actually one of the most important verses in the NT.

There have been four ways to deal with this verse. The first was used by a Jewish Christian traditionally identified as the Apostle Matthew who was writing for people who understood this device of the number 14. We no longer understand what they understood so most of us deal with the verse by the second method – we ignore it. The third approach is that followed by modern scholars fixated on trying to work out what the 14 means, but I don't know if anyone has quite succeeded in this apart from saying that 14, as 2×7 , is a twice perfect number and therefore an appropriate number to emphasise the perfection of Jesus Christ, which of course is part of Matthew's aim. The fourth way is to look beyond the number 14, integrate the verse into his whole work and see the bigger, richer, more interesting and more important picture that Matthew is painting for us.

It will help us if we can imagine going right back to the very beginning of Christianity, when no Gospel had been written and when almost nobody had any Christian writings at all. Matthew then sits down and begins with what he considers the most important thing of all – his genealogy of Jesus Christ. Now imagine that's as far as he ever got and it was all you ever had – just those 17 verses and no other Christian writing – not a single word. You will of course treasure these few lines and try to glean all you can from what little you have. What do they tell you?

This is no standard Jewish genealogy, as seen in two ways:

Firstly: It uses conventional OT records of the Davidic kings as it moves from Abraham to the forced removal to Babylon, but its overall aim is not just to show that Jesus is one of many sons of David alive in the first century Jewish population, but that he is THE son of David and THE King of Israel, the Christ, that is the anointed permanent occupant of the throne of David as promised in 2 Samuel 7.

Secondly: The inclusion of women in this genealogy is rather unusual and very

important. Today of course we know that Luke's genealogy of Jesus mentions no women at all but Matthew chooses to include five – and all of them controversial, with some kind of cloud hanging over them which would somehow offend the Jewish populace of the first century AD. Matthew is clearly and consciously doing for Jesus what he knows the OT Book of Ruth does for the rule and dynasty of King David – both books prove that the kingship is legitimate not only in spite of the women but because of the women in this family tree. Matthew and Ruth face the same facts: Tamar (and Rahab in Matthew) were immoral and Ruth herself was a non-Israelite, but Matthew must bring Ruth's story up-to-date and take it past David – so he acknowledges that Solomon's mother and father were also adulterers, at least at first, and Matthew ends with Mary the mother of Jesus who was a woman whose morals had been questioned from very early times. So Matthew is being very confrontational indeed. Right from this opening statement he is challenging the Jews of his own day and beginning to build an argument which says that Jesus is as legitimate a King of Israel as David and Solomon were. Jesus as the Davidic King of Israel is one of the strongest themes in Matthew.

Matthew's target audience is two groups locked in a bitter struggle – contemporary Jews on the one hand, and on the other Jews who believed in Jesus as the Christ. Many scholars today refer to the Judaism of this time as 'Formative Judaism' by which they mean the early formative stages of modern Judaism, and they locate it late in the first century well after the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman army under Titus in 69/70 AD. The destruction of the Temple and its system of priests and sacrifices forced surviving Judaism to undergo massive changes which are reflected in the text of Matthew, say many experts. But Matthew himself, regardless of when he wrote, places his narrative of the life of Christ much earlier, around 30 AD, and I suggest that the later Jewish opposition which Matthew was confronting head-on would have seemed to him to be not so much 'Formative Judaism' as 'Resistant Judaism,' that is a Judaism resistant to the claims of the Christ who had come among them. The best way Matthew can help the Jewish Christians is by showing the superiority of Jesus over everything that Resistant Judaism can offer through its reliance on the Law of Moses for salvation, and his genealogy of Jesus is the shattering opening salvo in this war. Yes, Moses was a good and great man as the NT writers always say, but Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God, with legitimate claims over every child of Abraham including Moses himself.

So far so good, but Matthew in 1:17 is telling us far more than this, as we can see by looking more closely at its structure. Imagine Matthew is a bus driver who tells us in advance where he will be stopping on our journey. In 1:1 we have been told there will be three stops – all of them persons – Abraham, then David, then Jesus Christ, but when the genealogy ends, with 1:17 as its summary, our bus driver has quietly added another important stop so now we have Abraham, David, Babylon, Christ.

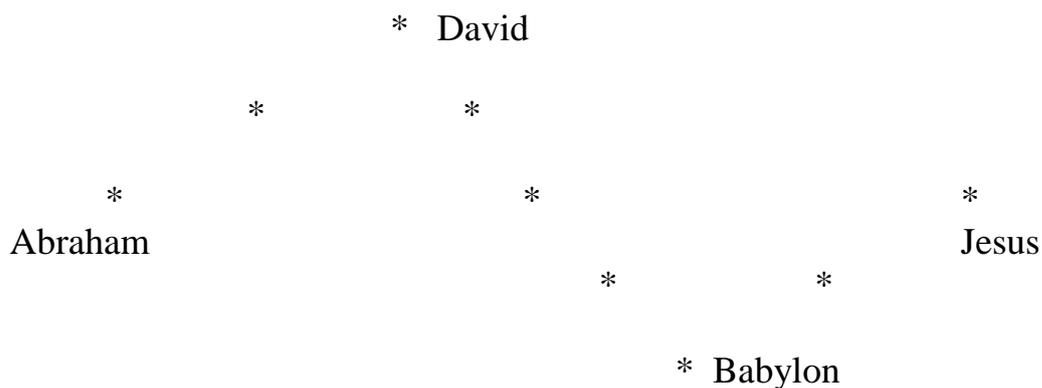
All writing of any kind involves selection and here we are challenged to find the basis

of Matthew's selection. Why does he include 'the Deportation' (Babylon) – why take us there? Again, if we imagine ourselves right back at the beginning, as Jews knowing nothing about the Christian message, how would we hear and understand what Matthew is saying? The great figures of Abraham and David select themselves – that is traditional and comfortable for us. But Babylon? Babylon is not a person but an historical place – an historical event – so what is it doing in the genealogy of one man, Jesus? Is Babylon just a convenient marker of time which helps Matthew find his 14 generations or is there something else? And if you are going to add Babylon why not add Moses and the giving of the Law which also occurred after the time of Abraham – surely that is an important landmark and worth a look on our trip? Our bus driver's selection is certainly very deliberate and intriguing.

Much will become clear if we make a map. Because I was totally lacking insight, imagination and training, I always saw this verse as a straight flat timeline:-



This does not tell us very much and certainly does not explain what Babylon is doing in there, but when we ask why our bus driver chooses to stop at David and Babylon, and why they were so important, we will see immediately that David is a national performance marker – the highest point of Israel's experience – and conversely Babylon marks the lowest point of Israel's national experience. So the graph now looks more like this:



So by including Babylon in this way Matthew has done something very remarkable. He has disclosed his own pattern of thought and shown us that the genealogy of this one man Jesus Christ can be overlaid on the whole history of Israel, beginning with its founder Abraham, moving through its highest point in David, then its lowest point in Babylon with the destruction of the Davidic kingship, but ending, as it began, with one man, Jesus. In a most emphatic way Matthew is telling us that as far as he is concerned these two things, the man and the nation, the king and his kingdom, share the same history, and even more than that, this individual man has **become** the nation – the nation of Israel reaches its climax, its conclusion, its fulfilment in the person of Jesus the Christ. According to this scheme Israel as a nation has no special place in the contemporary plans of God, rather its role has been subsumed in the person of

Jesus Christ, the anointed King, and although Matthew does not use the language of cosmic transcendence as developed by the Apostle Paul, in which Jesus Christ both (a) fulfils Israel and at the same time (b) infinitely transcends Israel, the views of both writers are complementary.

It turns out that Matt 1:17 is programmatic for the rest of Matthew's account, by which I mean that 1:17 subtly indicates Matthew's programme of focussing on Jesus – his amazing entrance into this world, the OT promises and expectations he fulfilled, the great forces ranged against him and his survival, the greatness of his vision for the Kingdom of Heaven, his relationship with the Jews of his day and his eventual triumph over all opposition including death itself. Like the introductions to most NT books, Matthew's genealogy, although so different from the other introductions, is carefully planned and skilfully deployed.

So this innocent looking verse, 1:17 of Matthew, is an opening shot in the long NT struggle against Resistant Judaism or National Judaism or Mosaic Judaism, a struggle which continues through Matthew and Acts and Paul and so on to the last verse of Revelation. In fact Matthew is so bold that some Jewish readers of Matthew have called it the most anti-Semitic book ever written. But, in a way which is consistent with the rest of the NT, Matthew does not lose sight of Israel and its ancient mission, for we see in Matt 28:19 how the risen Lord Jesus goes, as it were, to the front door, opens it and says to his Apostles (who were all Jews) “Go – Go out into all the world.” Here then, in the form of his first followers, the *'faithful remnant'* of Isaiah, we see Israel reborn, reformed and reconfigured in him and by him and sent out to be a blessing to the whole world.

Matt 1:17 and Matthew's Christ-centred Biblical Theology

A 'biblical theology' is any pattern of interpretation which we (in the better case) find already being used by a biblical writing, or which we (in the worse case) impose on what we are reading. What does Matthew give us? We can see at a glance how centred Matthew is upon the figure of Jesus whom he calls 'the Christ,' but we also hear Matthew saying to us:

I and my friends, my “school” if you like, always read the scriptures of Israel with these same four divisions in mind. Always. Everyone who starts with Abraham must end with Jesus. They MUST – they are duty bound before God to do so, but David and Babylon are our two dominant midway landmarks. The earliest parts of scripture, the books of Moses, look forward to the next horizon and that horizon is not reached until the high point, the reign of David/Solomon. That earlier outlook reflects the fact that the best is yet to be. But from Solomon to Babylon it is mostly downhill and the writings are generally pessimistic because Israel has seen the highest and best and is inexorably heading down to the lowest and worst, with the loss of both

Kingship and kingdom. After the return from Babylon we see a very limited return to normal life for Judah in particular but no national independence – it was a time of waiting for the Lord to do something and now in Jesus he has at last fulfilled his promises.

Matthew thus shows himself to be a traditionalist in his approach to the scriptures of Israel. Taking our cue from what he says in 1:17 we can say that it is highly unlikely that Matthew would move bits of Scripture around, saying that the earliest bits, supposedly written by Moses, were in fact late and written with an entirely different historical and spiritual horizon in view. Today this sort of move remains dominant in academic circles but it destroys the chance of a proper biblical theology and the chance of the Scripture having the authority among us which it should have, and clearly did have for Matthew and his companions. Matthew 1:17 remains the blueprint for Christ-centred Biblical Theology.

This essay is COPYRIGHT FREE and may the Lord bless its use.

Paul Meeth
ORANGE NSW
October 2017