

MATTHEW'S INTRODUCTION – MT 1:1-17

By Jim Seghers

Earlier this year a group of atheist depicted the Bethlehem scene on a billboard with the caption: "You know it's a myth. Celebrate reason." These comments demonstrate George Orwell's claim that some ideas are so ridiculous only self-styled intellectuals could hold them. In his book, *The Intellectuals*, Paul Johnson wrote that intellectuals as a class evolve theories and explanations that are the product of, and I suspect a defense of, their own moral disorders. I am not against intellectuals, but one should hope that the framers of this attack on Christianity might at least know a little history. The last time intellectuals celebrated reason they rolled out the guillotine and began loping off heads by the thousands during the French Revolution.

It has become politically acceptable in the US to attack Christianity. A billboard like the one mentioned above ridiculing Mohamed would be castigated from all sides, perhaps even from the White House. Pagan societies hate authentic Christianity because it places God above everything else. Then, too, there is that inflexible moral code known as the Ten Commandments. Make no mistake; the world takes its revenge on the things it hates. If at times it seems to cast an occasional approving glance at Christianity, it still takes its revenge by corrupting Christians.

Instead of celebrating reason –a laughable suggestion– Christians celebrate the birth of Christ. This great historical event is the hinge upon which all history turns and the destiny of mankind rests. So it is that men and women of faith proclaim, "Happy Birthday!" to Jesus, our Lord and Savior. The great man of faith known to us as Matthew opens his Gospel with a Jesus' family pedigree. Normally, I would readily admit that genealogies are not the most exciting texts of Scripture. However, in St. Matthew's account there is gold to be mined in these inspired words. So let's begin with the text, which I divided and highlighted certain words to aid its interpretation:

¹ The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the **son of David**, the **son of Abraham**.

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by **Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by **Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the **wife of Uriah**, ⁷ and **Solomon** the father of **Rehoboam**, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asa, ⁸ and Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of

Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹² And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of She-alti-el, and She-alti-el the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David were **fourteen** generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon **fourteen** generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ **fourteen** generations.

The opening verse highlights two important covenants. By identifying Jesus as “the son of David,” the sacred author plugs into the final Old Testament covenant that God made with David in 2 Samuel 7. Because David determined to build a temple (house) for the Lord, God said:

“Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house (dynasty). When the days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. . . And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam 7:11b-13, 16).

A **covenant** is a family or kinship bond established between two parties by an oath. The covenants God established with the human race are the great theme that weaves in every book of the Bible.

Solomon, the son of David, built a temple for the Lord, but his temple and kingdom was destroyed in 586 BC. He only fulfilled God’s promise provisionally. He became the type of *the* son of David, the Messiah, who will definitively establish God’s true temple – his body (Jn 2:19-22) – and his everlasting kingdom. Because Matthew’s Gospel so frequently stresses that Jesus is forming a kingdom, it is called the Gospel of the Kingdom or the Gospel of the Church.

The covenant God made with David looked to the fulfillment to the earlier covenant God made with Abraham after he demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac:

“By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only-begotten son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen 22:16-18).

Within David's family tree, St. Matthew does something unusual. He identified four Gentile women. The first was the Canaanite Tamar (Gen 38; 1 Chron 2:4) who dressed as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law Judah. Her twin sons from this relationship were Perez and Zerah. David's line continued through Perez. The second was Rahab, another Canaanite. She was the prostitute in Jericho (Josh 2; 6:17) who hid Joshua's two spies, let them out of a window to safety and told them to hide for three days. Next was the Hittite Bathsheba identified only as the "wife of Uriah." Because of her adulterous pregnancy, David murdered Uriah. The son of this illicit relationship died, but her second son, Solomon, succeeded David to the throne. She became the Queen Mother, the second most honored position in Solomon's kingdom (1 Kgs 2:19-20). Finally, Matthew lists the Moabite Ruth. She was David's great grandmother. The Moabites descended from the incestuous relationship between Lot and one of his daughters.

Matthew's listing of these four women is seen as a preemptive strike against those who criticized Jesus because he associated sinners and tax collectors (Mt 9:11; 11:19). As for tax collectors, the most oppressive tax gatherers were not the hated Romans but Solomon and his son Rehoboam. Indeed, it was Rehoboam's harsh taxation split the kingdom (1 Kgs 12).

The structure of Jesus' genealogy into three groups of fourteen is insightful for two reasons. First the number fourteen is the sum of David's name spelled in Hebrew. In the Hebrew language, like Latin, the letters of the alphabet have a numerical value. Matthew's Jewish audience would easily recognize the significance of the number fourteen, which emphasized that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Davidic prophecies. The Messiah is here!

David's name in Hebrew is DVD - 14

D = 4

V = 6

D = 4

Finally, the three groups of fourteen provide a summary review of the history of the Hebrew people. In this history we can also discover the story of mankind and, indeed, that of each individual. It is a tale of royalty gained, freedom lost, and glory restored. It is the depiction of man's infidelity and God's faithfulness.

Group 1 **Abraham to David** (1:2-6). Through the covenants made with Abraham and David, the Hebrew people become God's chosen people with a destiny to draw the Gentiles to the one true God.

Group 2 **David to Exile in Babylon** (1:6-11). The Hebrew people abandoned their greatness through sin and infidelity. They become like the pagan nations. As a result David's kingdom was hacked down. The final blow came when after destroying the Temple, the Babylonians slaughtered King Zedekiah's sons before his eyes, then gouged out his eyes and led him into captivity and death.

Group 3 **Exile to Jesus** (1:12-16). A remnant returned from exile to Israel, rebuilt the temple and began centuries of longing and waiting for the Messiah, who would restore their greatness in the new covenant. He is the shoot that will spring from the stump of Jesse, David's father (Is 11:1). "And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, and spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Is 11:2).

Jesus is also the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy: "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a son of man (Messiah) and he came to the Ancient of Days (the Father) and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one which shall not be destroyed" (Dan 7:13-14).

Matthew's genealogy also proclaims that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the expectations of the new covenant foreseen by the prophet Jeremiah:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant with I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, and I showed myself their master, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:31-32).

He is Emmanuel, God with us. His name is Jesus (Savior), "for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). In chapter two, St. Matthew shows that Jesus' arrival is greeted very differently. The Wise Men represent all those who eagerly seek Jesus in faith and trust and always find him. The chief priests and the scribes represent the yawning indifference of those who make no effort to find Jesus. They knew the prophecy regarding the place of the Messiah's birth, but wouldn't travel the few miles to Bethlehem to see him. Lastly, Herod represents the militant hatred of Christ that is rapidly growing in the world today, like those who paid for the anti-Christian billboard.