
Jesus' Genealogy

FOCUS TEXT—MATTHEW 1:1–17

It is the year 2033, and you find yourself in an elementary school gymnasium in French Lick, Indiana. A youth league basketball game has just ended, and you are introduced to a ten-year-old stand-out named Lorenzo Le'Gend. Although he was born and raised in French Lick, Lorenzo explains that he is of Irish descent (his mother's side). He also has a couple of famous ancestors, and his genealogical history reveals some rather intriguing patterns.

You discover that Lorenzo's great-great-great-great-grandfather is Dr. James Naismith, the man who invented the game of basketball in 1891. Naismith's sport caught on quickly, and in the decades following its introduction, semi-professional teams began to emerge in the larger metropolitan areas. Boston's first basketball club, the predecessor to the modern day Celtics team, was established 33 years after the game's creation. The city teams gradually organized into a league—the National Basketball Association—that held regularly scheduled games and year-end playoffs. Thirty-three years following the formation of Boston's club team, the Celtics won their first NBA title. This was the same season that Larry Bird, Lorenzo's great-great-uncle, was born.

Larry made NBA history when the Celtics signed him as a rookie for \$3.3 million. By the time he retired as a player, Larry had won the league's MVP Award three consecutive times and had led his franchise to three NBA Championships. Thirty-three years following Larry's departure from the game, Lorenzo was born.

Someone completely unfamiliar with basketball might find Lorenzo's background mildly interesting. It would certainly explain

the boy's own fondness for the sport. But a serious hoops fan would suspect something more. They would likely conclude that Lorenzo Le'Gend is destined to become the next Larry Bird. Why? All of the signs point to it. Lorenzo is related not only to the founder of basketball, but also to Bird. His genealogy is permeated with 33s—Bird's number throughout his professional career. Lorenzo is Irish (a true Celt) and was born in French Lick—the inconspicuous birthplace of the sharp-shooting Hall of Famer. Even his name betrays his role. Boston fans dubbed Bird “Larry Legend”—a nickname he certainly lived up to.

Of course, the link between the NBA superstar and the young boy is intentional. In fact, the details above were carefully selected and some of the information was manipulated in order to produce all the 33s. Even so, apprehending the relationship depends largely on one's familiarity with the game. The explanation given enables virtually anyone to make the connection. However, die-hard fans would hardly require that much information. A condensed form of Lorenzo's genealogy would convey the very same message:

There were 33 years from Dr. Naismith's invention to the founding of Boston's club. There were 33 years from Boston's club to the Celtics' first NBA title. There were 33 years from the Celtics' first title to Larry Bird's retirement. There were 33 years from Bird's retirement to the birth of Lorenzo Le'Gend.

The connection between Larry and Lorenzo is promoted not only by the salient features of this genealogy; for Celtics loyalists, it is also fueled by an underlying desire to return to the glory days of NBA championships. Boston has won more NBA Finals than any other team in history. However, since Bird's exit (and up until the writing of this book) the team has failed to claim even a single conference title. For years, the Celtics faithful have wondered who will be their next Larry Bird. Lorenzo's promising genealogy would certainly invigorate such expectations.

Of course, the plight of an NBA team has nothing to do with Jesus or the NT. Or does it? As it turns out, the gospel of Matthew presents Jesus' genealogy in a way that closely parallels the scenario above. The gospel opens with a very brief introduction:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matt 1:1 NAB)

It then plunges directly into Jesus' historical lineage:

Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah. (Matt 1:2–3 NAB)

This ancestral list continues on for fourteen verses, until it reaches Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her is born Jesus, who is called the Messiah (Matt 1:16). Matthew concludes that

Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations. (Matt 1:17 NAB)

The three divisions of fourteen generations are striking. It is possible, of course, that the symmetrical patterns in Jesus' family tree are coincidental. However, the external evidence suggests otherwise. For instance, the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 1–3 identifies precisely the same fourteen generations from Abraham to David, but includes eighteen ancestors between David and the exile. (Matthew has apparently omitted Ahaziah, Jehoash, Amaziah, and Jehoiachim.) Furthermore, Jesus' third set of relatives in Matthew's list (Matt 1:12–16) has been miscounted. Technically, Jesus is the thirteenth generation descending from the exile, not the fourteenth. Even so, this reckoning stands in contrast to the information in Luke—the only other gospel to include Jesus' genealogy. Whereas Matthew has thirteen generations from Shealtiel to Jesus, Luke has twenty-two (Luke 3:23–27).

Matthew evidently took some liberties in order to achieve a triad of fourteen. While this implication may raise concerns of “data tampering,” it would hardly have been construed as such back then. In the absence of modernized databases, birth records were difficult to verify. For Matthew, fourteen must have been a decisive number. But what does it stand for? The answer, which escapes present-day readers of the Bible, would have been more obvious to his original Jewish audience. They knew *gematria*.

Gematria refers to an archaic practice that blends literature with math. The Hebrew numerical system employs letters as numbers. It is similar to Roman numerals, where I = 1, V = 5, X = 10, etc. Under this system, the Hebrew letters in any given word also have a

numerical value based upon their sum. Ancient authors occasionally wove this value into their writings. For instance, the word *vanity* (*hebel*) has a numerical value of thirty-seven ($b+h+l = 5+2+30 = 37$). In the book of Ecclesiastes, *vanity* appears exactly thirty-seven times. Similarly, Genesis 46 lists the lineage of the sons of Jacob. According to the text, Jacob's seventh son, Gad ($g+d = 3+4 = 7$), bears seven sons. This system can also work in reverse, as is the case in Rev 13:18. The infamous number 666 assigned there to the beast corresponds to the sum of the Hebraic form of Emperor Caesar Nero.

Of course, *gematria* is not always an exact science, especially when one begins with a number. The larger the number is, the greater the pool of possible letter combinations. In the case of Rev 13:18, an additional clue has enabled scholars to pinpoint Nero. The Latinized form of his name yields 616—an alternative reading found in a handful of ancient manuscripts.

Matthew emphasizes the number fourteen. The individual he most likely had in mind was David. Not only does David's name add up to fourteen ($d+v+d = 4+6+4 = 14$), David also appears in the fourteenth position of Jesus' genealogy. Furthermore, of all of Jesus' descendants, only David and Abraham are singled out at both the beginning (Matt 1:1) and the end (1:17) of his list.

The prominence Matthew accords to Abraham is easily explained. Abraham is considered to be the founder of Judaism. The Jews, the progeny of Abraham's second son, Isaac, are heirs to the original covenant made between God and Abraham (Genesis 15, 17). By tracing Jesus' lineage back to Abraham (via Isaac), Matthew is able to both certify and underscore Jesus' Jewishness.

But what accounts for Matthew's interest in David? According to Jewish tradition, David was God's specially appointed king of Israel (1 Sam 16:12–13). But so was Saul (1 Sam 10:1). As king, David demonstrated tremendous zeal in his devotion and service to God (e.g., 2 Sam 6:14–23). But so did both Hezekiah (2 Chr 29:2) and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:25). God promised David that his offspring would always have a place on the throne (2 Sam 7:16). But God made this same promise to Solomon (1 Kgs 9:5). In fact, Solomon's wisdom, wealth, and power exceeded David's (1 Kgs 3:11–13). So why would Matthew want to associate Jesus with David?

The answer has more to do with the events following David's reign than during it. In the centuries after his death, Israel's political

strength began to wane. First, the kingdom was fractured by a monarchical dispute. Then, a series of weak and corrupt leaders allowed idolatry and other pagan practices to flourish. Such foreign influences threatened the nation's cultural and religious self-identity. Eventually, the very existence of the Jews was imperiled when rival Near Eastern superpowers—first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians—conquered the region.

The decline of the state was paralleled by a rise in prophetic activity. As the civil conditions deteriorated, the prophets of Yahweh encouraged the Jews with visions of a brighter future. Many of the things the prophets foresaw were renewed elements of Israel's history. According to them, God promised to bring about a new people with new hearts and spirits under a new covenant. God would re-establish a new temple and a new Jerusalem. The Almighty even pledged to raise up a new leader to guide his people. The prophets refer to this individual as the *Messiah*, or “the anointed one.” This title is in reference to the ancient practice of anointing a king's head with oil to mark his inauguration.

The expectation of a messiah raises the question of recognition. How would the people know this new leader? What would he look like? The prophetic oracles demonstrate remarkable consistency in their depictions of him. According to the prophets, the Messiah will be none other than the new David:

See, a time is coming—declares the LORD—when I will raise up a true branch of David's line. He shall reign as king and shall prosper, and he shall do what is just and right in the land. (Jer 23:5 NJPS)

[I]nstead, they shall serve the LORD their God and David, the king whom I will raise up for them. (Jer 30:9 NJPS)

Then I will appoint a single shepherd over them to tend them—My servant David. He shall tend them, he shall be a shepherd to them. I the LORD will be their God, and My servant David shall be a ruler among them—I the LORD have spoken. (Ezek 34:23–24 NJPS)

My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them. They shall follow My rules and faithfully obey My laws. Thus they shall remain in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; they and their children and

their children's children shall dwell there forever, with My servant David as their prince for all time. (Ezek 37:24–25 NJPS)

Afterward, the Israelites will turn back and will seek the LORD their God and David their king—and they will thrill over the LORD and over His bounty in the days to come. (Hos 3:5 NJPS)

As these passages demonstrate, David's persona became so inextricably tied to the notion of the Messiah that his very name became synonymous with it. Given this premise, Matthew's numerical signals become clear. By emphasizing fourteen . . . fourteen . . . fourteen, Matthew stresses to his readers: DAVID! DAVID! DAVID! In other words, Jesus is the new David. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

There are at least two other elements that enable Matthew to solidify the association between David and Jesus. The first has to do with the location of Jesus' birth. Matthew reports that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea (Matt 2:1). According to Mic 5:1, Bethlehem was about as inconspicuous a place as French Lick, Indiana. But it was also David's hometown. Ironically, its backwater status makes it an ideal link between David and Jesus. Never again would this unassuming little village languish in obscurity.

The second element has to do with Jesus' name. From the outset, Matthew refers to him as Jesus "Christ" (1:1). *Christ* comes from the Greek verb *chrío*, meaning "to anoint." It literally means "the anointed one," equivalent to the Hebrew *messiah*. In preparation for his kingship, David was anointed on three separate occasions (1 Sam 16:13; 2 Sam 2:4; 5:3). By referring to Jesus as Christ, Matthew identifies him also as the anointed one. But Jesus' anointing is not in name only. Toward the end of his ministry, following his kinglike procession into Jerusalem (David's capital city), a woman with an alabaster jar anoints Jesus' head with oil (Matt 26:7).

In summary, just as Lorenzo's name, birthplace, and numerical genealogy herald the arrival of the new Larry Bird, Matthew uses these same three components to identify Jesus as the new David. The expectation of Celtics fans in light of the team's prior success and present collapse parallels the anticipation among the Jews in light of their nation's glorious history and first-century struggles. For Matthew, therefore, the messianic promises of old finally met their fulfillment in Jesus. All of the signs point to it.

Before leaving the topic of Matthew's genealogy, there is one more peculiarity here worth mentioning. The Bible contains dozens of ancestry lists (the primary ones occur in Genesis 5; 10; 11; 25; 46; Exodus 6; Numbers 3; 26; Ruth 4; 1 Chronicles 1–9; Ezra 8; Nehemiah 11–12; and Luke 3). Women are rarely named in these records, except when it is necessary to distinguish a patriarch's offspring among multiple wives (as in Genesis 46). In light of this tendency, it becomes noteworthy that Matthew has included among Jesus' forefathers five females: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), and Mary. For those unfamiliar with these characters, their inclusion appears altogether random. However, the common traits that tie them together serve to explain Matthew's break from tradition.

Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah (the son of Jacob and stepbrother of Joseph). Tamar became a widow when her husband, Er (Judah's eldest son), died. In accordance with Jewish law (Deut 25:5–10), Tamar was given to Er's brother, Onan, so that through him she could bear children in Er's name. However, Onan refused to consummate with Tamar, so the Lord struck him down. Tamar returned to Judah for his third son, Shelah. Judah, afraid that Shelah would meet the same fate as Er and Onan, kept putting Tamar off. Years passed, but Tamar would not be dissuaded. Taking matters into her own hands, she disguised herself as a harlot and enticed Judah to sleep with her. Later, when Judah discovered that Tamar was pregnant, he threatened to have her killed. However, once Tamar produced evidence indicating that the child was his, Judah recanted. He concluded that she was more right than he, since he did not give her to Shelah (Gen 38:1–26).

Rahab was a harlot in Jericho at the time when the Hebrews were poised to enter the promised land. In preparation for their invasion, Joshua sent two spies on a reconnaissance mission into the city. The spies lodged with Rahab, but news of their presence soon reached the king. The king ordered Rahab to put the spies out. At great personal risk, she denied knowledge of their whereabouts while they hid on her roof. Rahab feared the God of the Hebrews, and asked the spies to spare her household when they conquered Jericho. Because of her loyalty, Rahab's request was honored, and she and her kin were adopted into the Israelite community (Josh 2:1–21; 6:20–25).

Ruth and Orpah were Naomi's daughters-in-law. Naomi and her sons were Israelites, but Ruth and Orpah were Moabites. Tragically, Naomi's husband and sons died, and the three widows were left destitute. Naomi encouraged Ruth and Orpah to return to their people in Moab, where the food was more plentiful. However, Ruth refused to leave Naomi, even unto death. The two traveled together to Bethlehem, where Ruth scavenged the ears of grain left behind by the harvesters of Boaz's field. Boaz, a relative of Naomi's, inquired about Ruth and learned of her remarkable fidelity to Naomi. Boaz instructed Ruth to remain in his field and ordered his servants to drop extra grain for her to glean. Following Naomi's instructions, Ruth then pursued Boaz as her husband. One evening, Ruth bathed herself, put on her best attire, and waited until Boaz had had his fill of food and drink. Ruth then stole up next to him and lay down at his feet. When Boaz discovered her in the middle of the night, he enjoined her to remain with him until morning and promised to claim her as his wife the very next day. Ruth stayed, and Boaz kept his pledge. Ruth and Naomi were thus added to his household (Ruth 1–4).

Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah, the armor-bearer of Joab (the commander of David's army). While Joab and Uriah were away on a military campaign, David spied Bathsheba bathing. Captivated by her beauty, he had her brought to his palace where he had relations with her. Shortly thereafter, Bathsheba sent word to David that she was pregnant. David had Uriah called back from the fighting, hoping to get him to sleep with his wife. However, Uriah refused to enjoy her comforts because of the solidarity he felt toward the men in his division. Not to be deterred, David sent Uriah back to the battle, with the order that he be deserted on the front lines. Joab obeyed, Uriah was killed, and Bathsheba moved into the palace. However, God punished David and Bathsheba for their crime, and Bathsheba's child was stillborn. The two repented, God forgave them, and Bathsheba bore David another son, Solomon. Bathsheba eventually intervened on behalf of Solomon. Because of her, it was Solomon—not his brother, Adonijah—who succeeded David as the next king of Israel (2 Samuel 11–12; 1 Kings 1–2).

The histories of these four women converge in a couple of areas. First, each of them engages in sexually questionable behavior. Tamar and Rahab participate in prostitution and Bathsheba in adultery.

Only Ruth could be considered “innocent,” although even her actions raise suspicions of impropriety, especially in ancient times.¹ Despite this trend, the Jewish tradition remembers each of these females as heroines.² All four of these women were willing to risk their own lives because of their unswerving devotion to the bloodline (Tamar), the God (Rahab), the people (Ruth), and the kingdom (Bathsheba) of Israel.

It is against this background that the fifth woman in Matthew’s genealogy—Mary—can be properly understood. Like her predecessors, Mary would also have been seen as sexually questionable. A virgin birth, after all, was far from commonplace! And since adultery was a capital crime (under the law, her betrothal to Joseph would have counted as marriage), her allegiance to God would jeopardize her life. By associating Mary with these particular women, Matthew appears to anticipate her role in Israelite history. Despite (or rather *because of*) her scandalous circumstances, Mary was “in line” to become the next Jewish heroine.