

## Matthew's Genealogy of Christ

By Jane Titrud

The purpose of Matthew's Gospel is to present Jesus as the ultimate King of the Jews and their long-awaited Messiah. He boldly starts out by referring to Him as "*Jesus Christ*" (Matthew 1:1 NASB) — the term "Christ" meaning "the anointed one" — and then proceeds to show that this title is warranted.

Of primary importance in Matthew's mind is the need to establish the fact that Jesus had at least a right to be king. Thus, he begins by describing Jesus' ancestral relationship to both David and Abraham. Anyone claiming to be the Messiah would have to be a descendant of both. Yet, David had many descendants who would likewise have been descendants of Abraham simply because David himself was also his descendant. What makes Jesus different is that Matthew describes Him not only as a son but as "*the son of David*" and "*the son of Abraham*" (Matthew 1:1). This goes beyond mere descent. It has to do with fulfilling some special promises God made to these two individuals. These in turn relate to the two greatest covenants in the Old Testament that pertain to Israel and would have to be fulfilled by anyone claiming to be Israel's true Messiah.

Matthew's list of ancestors begins with Abraham and works forward. Genesis records God promising to Abraham that "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Genesis 12:3). Then again, after Abraham obediently went through the motions of offering up his only son Isaac, God once again confirmed: "*Indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies, And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice*" (Genesis 22:17-18). Indeed, Isaac was a type of Christ Whom God appointed to die for the sins of the world. Thus, Jesus Christ did become a special blessing to the entire world when He died on the cross and not just to Israel. Moreover, this is right in line with the Great Commission in which Jesus instructed His followers after His resurrection to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

Matthew's list then proceeds to David the king (Matthew 1:6). David was devoted to the Lord, but he was also a warrior who had shed much blood. So, when he thought to build a house for God, God spoke through the prophet Nathan telling him that he would not be the one to build Him a house. Instead, God would make a house for him (2 Samuel 7:11). He went on to say that "*when your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever...And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever*" (2 Samuel 7:12-13; 16). This prophesy was partially fulfilled by Solomon, but it would not be completely fulfilled until the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah would be the only One capable of establishing an everlasting kingdom in that He alone would be eternal.

So far, the lineage presented in Matthew appears to show a direct line of descent from Abraham to David and then goes on to include Joseph (Matthew 1:6-16). This latter grouping shows some 14 generations from the time of David to the deportation to Babylon and then another 14 generations to the time of Christ (v. 17). Yet, there may well be some generations not recorded here for the sake of easier memorization. The generations compiled in Luke 3:23-38, for example, show some 15 more names between the time of David and the birth of Jesus. But the most important thing to realize for now is that the genealogical list in Matthew does not

reflect the blood line of Jesus. Instead, it represents the case for Jesus's *legal* right to assume the throne of David. Joseph was not the true father of Jesus for Mary was a virgin when she was found to be with child (Matthew 1:18-25). Joseph merely became His stepfather. That is the reason Matthew refers to him as *"the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ"* (1:16). However, the fact that Joseph was only His legal father would still have given Jesus the *legal* right to sit on the throne of David.

However, Jeconiah's inclusion in this line of ancestry would seem to challenge any legal claim to the throne that passed through him (Matthew 1:12). Jeconiah, also known as Jehoiachin, was an evil king who ruled over Judah shortly before its deportation to Babylon. At the time, Jeremiah prophesied over Jeconiah saying that none of his descendants would ever reign as king on the throne of David again: *"'As I live,' declares the Lord, 'even though Coniah [a shortened form of the name Jeconiah] the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah were a signet ring on My right hand, yet I would pull you off' ... Thus says the Lord, 'Write this man down childless, A man who will not prosper in his days; For no man of his descendants will prosper Sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah'"* (Jeremiah 22:24, 30). Indeed, none of his sons ever reigned as king over Judah. The king of Babylon made his uncle Zedekiah king instead, and he was the last of the Jews to rule as king in Judah (2 Kings 24:17).

Sometime after the deportation of the Jews to Babylon, Jeconiah's grandson Zerubbabel returned to Judah, served as governor over the land, and helped to rebuild the temple. He was not made king, but he was of kingly descent and allowed to serve as a leader over Judah. He was also held in high regard for his accomplishments. God even prophesied through Haggai that He would someday overthrow all the kingdoms that had come against Israel and honor Zerubbabel in the process. *"'On that day,' declares the Lord of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, my servant,' declares the Lord, 'and I will make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the Lord of hosts"* (Haggai 2:23). Yet, this does not mean that the curse against Jeconiah was thereby negated. Instead, people look to the line of descent found in Luke 3 and try to resolve the problem within the physical lineage of Jesus rather than the legal line of descent recorded in Matthew.

The genealogical record found in Luke 3:23-38 supposedly solves the problem with respect to Jeconiah by tracing Jesus' blood-line connection to David back through David's other son Nathan rather than Solomon. This is thought to involve the ancestral line of Jesus' physical mother Mary while it avoids any legal connection with Jeconiah at the same time. True, the name Jeconiah is not even mentioned here. The names Shealtiel and Zerubbabel do, however, both appear in this record (Luke 3:27) as well as in Matthew 1, and this would seem problematic.

Some believe that God's promise to make Zerubbabel like a signet ring refers to his inclusion in both lines of Jesus' descent as the lines appear to come together in the person of Zerubbabel as well as in the person of David. The convergence and divergence of ancestors around these two points seem to make a circle when the two records are viewed side by side, which supposedly generates the appearance of a signet ring. The trouble, however, is that this interpretation of the data provides no real solution to the problem with respect to the curse on Jeconiah and his descendants but rather accentuates it. For it appears to make what God intended as a blessing for Zerubbabel into something that once again ultimately disqualifies Jesus from being both king and Messiah.

It is, however, possible that the Shealtiel and Zerubbabel recorded in these two genealogical accounts are entirely different people. After all, Shealtiel is usually listed as the son of Jeconiah in the Scriptures, whereas the Shealtiel listed in Luke is called the son of Neri (Luke 3:27).

Some have suggested that Neri was merely the father-in-law of Shealtiel. Yet, the fact that a daughter of Neri married into the family line of Jeconiah would not solve the problem that the descendants of such a union would still carry on the curse of Jeconiah. One cannot ignore the genealogy of the husband in such a case. And, to throw an additional confusing detail into the mix, 1 Chronicles 3:19 lists Zerubbabel as a son of Pedaiiah instead of Shealtiel. Is this yet another man with the same name?

There are differing opinions about how to resolve this confusing situation, and we may never know the answer for certain. God's Word does not lie, nor is it in error. Yet, sometimes it contains details that we do not fully understand. The only thing that does seem to work for now is if these two genealogic lines of descent ultimately incorporate different people with the same names. Many commentaries take this position.

Something I have also come to appreciate is that most commentaries I consulted in connection with this subject do not use the genealogy of Matthew and Luke to explain the prophecy of the signet ring. Instead, they take the signet ring more as a symbol of authority and see Zerubbabel as a type of Christ. After all, signet rings were used by leaders and officials in the day to sign important documents and provide an official seal of authority. And, as for the kingdoms of the world mentioned in the prophecy, these will not be put down until the end of the age when this will finally be accomplished by the return of Christ. Therefore, Zerubbabel was likely not the one who God ultimately had in mind when it came to this prophecy. Zerubbabel was merely a type of Christ. The coming Christ is the true signet ring of God the Father. This means there is no need to equate the Zerubbabel in Luke's line of descent to the same man in Matthew's line of descent just for the sake of this prophecy.

The important things to take away from all of this are, first, that Matthew's genealogy verifies Jesus' legal right to assume the throne of David through the line of Joseph. At the same time, the fact that Joseph was not Jesus' physical father rendered Him free from the curse of Jeconiah. There is no necessary reason to believe that the physical lineage of Christ through Mary must involve this curse either. Jesus was a physical descendant of David but through the line of Nathan rather than Solomon. Moreover, the eternal nature of Jesus Christ means that He can establish David's kingdom forever, just as promised. And, finally, as *the* son of Abraham, He has a unique relationship with the people of Israel, but He has also come to be a blessing to the whole world. Amen, Lord Jesus!