

Matt. 1:1-17 – Jesus' Family Tree, Part 2

Sermon notes/follow-up

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Rich Lusk

These are some more random thoughts on the last two sermons from Matthew's genealogy.

Peter Leithart provides some interesting reflection on the phrase "biblos geneleos" in Matt. 1:1:

Dale Allison argues that Matthew's opening words, BIBLOS GENESEOS, should be translated as "Book of the Genesis," a translation ambiguous enough to capture all that Matthew intended - an allusion to the first book of the Bible, a new creation theme, an introduction to the genealogy or birth story, etc. GENESIS was, he argues, established as the title of the first book of the Bible by Matthew's time. He suggests that Matthew 1:1 is a title: "Book of the New Genesis of Jesus Christ..."

He and WD Davies also note (in their jointly authored ICC volume) how the phrase is used in the LXX of Genesis 2:4 and 5:1. There, the phrase does not, as in Matthew 1:1, introduce a genealogy; rather, BIBLOS GENESEOS in Genesis 5:1 introduces a list of *descendants* and in 2:4 does not (on their reading) introduce any sort of ancestry or genealogy at all. Let's assume, though, that Matthew meant to draw a very direct link between his use of the phrase and that of Genesis 2:4 and 5:1. What would that mean?

First, I think it likely that the phrase in Genesis 2:4 does in fact introduce a series of "generations." This is the use of the similar phrases throughout Genesis. 10:1, for instance, introduces the "generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth," and then goes on to list those who are born from them, and the events generated by those generations. In 2:4, the "heavens and earth" are the "parents" who generate (though God's work) plants, mist, a garden, a man, etc. Adam's mother is the earth, as his father is the God of heaven; he is taken from the dust, and his Father breathes life into Him from heaven. Genesis 5:1 definitely introduces a list of those "generated" by Adam. Thus, in both places where Genesis uses the same phrase as Matthew, the text goes on to describe those things that come from the one named.

If this is correct, and if Matthew is using the phrase in the same sense, then Jesus is being presented not only as the descendant of those named (though he is that, 1:16) but also as the progenitor of those listed. Israel's history is initiated by Jesus, even as it also climaxes in Jesus. He is the Alpha and the Omega of this genealogy, the first Man and the Last Man, the beginning Israelite and the final Israelite. This is neatly captured by the chiasmic structure of Matthew's genealogy - moving from Jesus-David-Abraham [v. 1] and then through Abraham [v. 2]-David [v. 6]-Jesus [v. 16]. Jesus is the heavens-and-earth that generates a new world, a new Adamic race, a new Bride; Jesus is the Adam who gives birth to a race of true Sethites.

Leithart also calls attention to the inclusion of "brothers" in the genealogy:

Twice in his genealogy, Matthew refers to "brothers." Jacob was the father of "Judah and his brothers," and at the time of the deportation to Babylon "Jeconiah and his brothers" were born to Josiah.

This initiates a theme in Matthew's gospel, the theme of the church as a brotherhood. Alongside Judah and his brothers and Jeconiah and his brothers, Matthew talks about Jesus and His brothers.

At the heart of this is a redefinition of what counts as family. When Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are waiting to see Him, He says that His mother and brothers are those who do the will of the heavenly Father (12:50). Later, Jesus says that no one should be called Rabbi because "you are all brothers" (23:8). Family is not blood-based. It's faith-based, and obedience-based.

Throughout the gospel, Jesus teaches us how we are to behave toward brothers. In the Sermon on the Mount, He prohibits anger against a brother (5:22-24), and tells us to remove the logs from our own eyes before we try to pick out the speck in our brother's eye (7:3-5).

Jesus gives us a procedure for dealing with our brother's sins – first rebuking him alone, then taking witnesses, and finally taking it to the church. He warns that the Father will not forgive us if we don't forgive our brothers from the heart (18:35).

This is not a peripheral issue for Matthew. We are all brothers toward one another because we are all brothers to Jesus and sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father. One key test of our discipleship is how we treat our brothers.

On the structure, see Davies and Allison's commentary, p. 149. The passage as a whole is structured as a chiasm (as you might expect!).

Here is the N. T. Wright quote that I used, in its wider context:

[T]he story the evangelists tell is not 'about' something else. It *is* the thing 'about' which everything else revolves. This, they are saying is the center of world history...It is not an example of an abstract doctrine (the love of god, for instance), as though that were the 'real' thing...

...therefore, the fact that the evangelists believed themselves to be bringing the story of Israel to its great climax, the turning point-point from which at last the long history of the world would change course, means inescapably that they believed themselves to be writing (what we call) history, the history of Jesus. This was not something they might conceivably have been doing, as it were, on the side, while doing something else as their 'real' concern. History was where Israel's god must act to redeem his people. The whole Jewish creational monotheistic tradition revolts against the idea that when the decisive event happens it should be a non-event, or that the 'significance' should consist not in events in the external world but in 'principles' or other timeless things that can be deduced from them....

If someone in, say AD 75 were to tell a Jew a fiction (in the same sense) and to claim that in this very story the long hope of Israel had finally been fulfilled, the response would have been not just that he was a liar, but that he had not understood what the Jewish worldview was all about... (*The New Testament and the People of God*, 397f).

See also *The New Testament and the People of God*, 384ff for an excellent intro and overview of Matthew, including the genealogy.

I barely scratched the surface of the whole “gospel as myth made fact” theme.

John Granger explains the Harry Potter craze

(<http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=21-10-028-f>):

In an *Esquire* article entitled “Death by Harry Potter,” Chuck Klosterman, a “talking head” or authority on popular culture, admits that he knows almost nothing about Harry Potter because he has chosen not to read the books or see the movies. He also admits that this choice is hastening the end of his career as a pundit.

An entire generation (or two) of readers has read this 4,100-page story again and again and seen the blockbuster movies repeatedly. The coming decades promise, consequently, to be all about Harry, as his story shapes public conversation. As Klosterman writes (emphasis his):

I find it astounding that the unifying cultural currency for modern teenagers are *five-hundred-page literary works about a wizard*. We are all collectively underestimating how unusual this is. Right now, there is no rock guitarist or film starlet as popular as J. K. Rowling. Over time, these novels (and whatever ideas lie within them) will come to represent the mainstream ethos of our future popular culture. Harry Potter will be the only triviality that most of that coming culture will unilaterally share.

And I have no interest in any of it.

And I wonder how much of a problem this is going to become.

The bookish kids reading Harry Potter novels may not go on to control the world, but they will almost certainly go on to control the mass media. In fifteen years, they will be publishing books and directing films and writing broad jokes for unfunny situation comedies that will undoubtedly be downloaded directly into our brains. And like all generations of artists, they will traffic in their own nostalgia. They will use their shared knowledge and experiences as the foundation for discourse. So I wonder: Because I don’t understand Harry Potter, am I doomed to misunderstand everything else?

Yes, Chuck, you are.

Granger’s other works, especially *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, explores the mythic-theological nature of the series. Granger summarizes: “Harry Potter is a great because it is an echo of the Great Story of God becoming man, the real-world Story that saves us...all great stories echo the Great Story of God” (p.

192f). See also and especially Granger's essay on the Christian content of Harry Potter in his fabulous *The Deathly Hallows Lectures*, ch. 3. As Rowling herself has admitted, if the church rejects the Harry Potter saga, she misses a great opportunity. The books are yet another literary pointer to the gospel.

Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" is a crucial work in looking at the relationship of the gospel to various cultural myths. This fascinating article has spawned a huge amount of literature including *From Achilles to Christ* by Louis Markos (see especially 247ff). Here is how Lewis put it:

...now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all; again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself... I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was that in the Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meaning beyond my grasp even though I could not say in cold prose what it meant. Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God's myth where the others are men's myths: i. e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call real things. Therefore it is true, not in the sense of being a description of God (that no finite mind can take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties. The doctrines we get out of the true myth are of course less true: they are translations into our concepts and ideas of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Does this amount to a belief in Christianity? At any rate I am now certain a) That this Christian story is to be approached, in a sense, as I approach the other myths. b) That is the most important and full of meaning. I am also nearly certain that it really happened...

Now as myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens - at a particular date, in

a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle...Those who do not know that this great myth became Fact when the Virgin conceived are, indeed, to be pitied. But Christians also need to be...reminded that what became Fact was a Myth, that it carries with it into the world of Fact all the properties of a myth. God is more than a god, not less; Christ is more than Balder, not less. We must not be ashamed of the mythical radiance resting in our theology.

In another place, Lewis writes:

I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste. And yet the very matter which they set down in their artless, historical fashion — those narrow, unattractive Jews, too blind to the mystical wealth of the Pagan world around them — was precisely the matter of great myths. If ever a myth had become a fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this. And nothing else in all literature was just like this. Myths were like it in one way. Histories were like it in another, but nothing was simply alike. And no person was like the Person it depicted; as real, as recognizable, through all that depth of time... yet also so luminous, lit by a light from beyond the world, a god. But if a god — we are no longer polytheists — then not a god, but God. Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not "a religion," nor "a philosophy." It is the summing up and actuality of them all.

I would disagree with Lewis' suggestion that the gospels are artless — in fact, I think they are literary art of the highest order. But Lewis still makes his point: there is something different about the gospels compared to the ancient pagan myths. They have an unmistakable historical quality to them.

It is interesting to me that most commentators admit that the women included in the genealogy must not be there simply to show that Jesus came for sinners (e.g., David Garland, *Reading Matthew*). The commentators know that the Jews gave or more less positive assessment of each of the women in the genealogy. However, preachers cannot almost never resist the temptation to trash these women in

order to show how gracious God is in including them in the family tree of the Messiah. These women are portrayed as scandalous sinners. This is one of those cases where preachers really need to restrain themselves, and get the text right, even if it takes away a good preaching point, and requires more patience to present the right exegesis. Davies and Allison give a nice summary on p. 170ff, 188.