

Beyond the Begats  
1 Chronicles 4:1-23  
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Years ago, when I was a Campus Chaplain just out of Seminary, I started a Bible Study for college students that I called “Beyond the Begats” because what I had experienced in my own life as a young person reading the Bible, and what I was perceiving of the students under my charge was that our involvement with the Bible was pretty shallow. And the reason that it was so shallow is that we had begun to read the Bible from its beginning, and did so faithfully until we arrived at the fifth chapter of Genesis, when we were confronted with the “begats”: “And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, and after his image; and called his name Seth. And the days of Adam after he had begotten Seth were eight hundred years: and he begat sons and daughters. And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died. And Seth lived an hundred and five years, and begat Enos”, and so on for what seemed like a dozen pages, even if it was really only a dozen generations, and who knew what “begat” meant? It sounded like spat! And so as a child I thought that children were spat out by their parents, and that the Bible was just an endless list of people I had no reason to care about. And so my approach in that Bible study was to get students over that hump to the stuff in the Bible that really meant something. But upon further reflection through the years, I have realized that the hump actually has

some value, that it isn't placed there to discourage me to read further, but in fact precisely the opposite, to encourage me to go on reading, to see how the rest of the story turns out, to use the language of our young people, to see how my peeps are doing.

There are many such genealogies in the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, and they serve different purposes, both for the original hearers of the Biblical story, and for contemporary readers. I chose tonight's reading from 1 Chronicles more as a representative sample, and because it is one that doesn't get heard too often in church. I also picked it in part because it does what genealogies do best: to separate the Bible reading wheat, from the Bible snoozing chaff. You see, those who persevere in reading the genealogies get some of the Bible's most indulgent goodies, tasty tidbits like the Prayer of Jabez, which comes completely unexpectedly as a pause in the reading of the genealogy of the clan of Judah: "Jabez was honoured more than his brothers; and his mother named him Jabez, saying, 'Because I bore him in pain.' Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!' And God granted what he asked." Maybe you remember a few years ago that bestselling book by Bruce Wilkinson, called "the Prayer of Jabez," that used this verse from First Chronicles as a guide to a life of prayer in which God's blessings might be more abundantly bestowed. And all because he carefully read his genealogies. The fact that the now

famous Jabez is not even really a part of the genealogy of the house of Judah is just an added bit of Bible fun and trivia. There are other such gems found in the genealogies, even ones toward the end of our passage tonight, in which we learn which were the families of the artisans and the linen makers and the potters. And of course the other great virtue of the genealogies is that they are useful for church worship committees to audition would-be lay readers. Anyone who can make it through a reading like tonight's stumbling over fewer than five names is in!

But more seriously, why are the genealogies in our Bibles? Let me first offer one reason why they are not. If you were to Google the term "biblical genealogy," you would find a significant number of pages devoted to using them to debate the merits of the ideas of both creationism and evolution, since the dating of the creation of the universe at around 6000 years ago is principally based on using the genealogies to calculate a date. And so both sides try to argue that any gaps or discrepancies in the genealogies are either relevant or irrelevant, and even among those who agree in the creationist argument, the genealogies are used to support their own cases for a more precise dating, whether the earth is younger or older than others believe. I am not interested in weighing in on this topic except to say that I do not think this is one of the original intended purposes for including the genealogies, and in fact obscures their real value in our day-to-day faith. There is nothing wrong with it, per se, but there are more profitable ways to read the genealogies.

At the most basic level, the genealogies help us in the actual reading of the Bible. They help us connect the dots in a story that is not laid out strictly chronologically. In both the Old and the New Testaments, the arrangement of the books isn't linear, but theological, and so it can be a little confusing to keep a timeline which makes the story make more sense. And so, the genealogies orient us across generations, and help us to see God's continuous relationship with us throughout our human history. When we see genealogies that include both the Patriarchs from way back in Genesis, and those people who returned from exile in Babylon as we do in the genealogy tonight from First Chronicles, a span of thousands of years, we can see the promises God has made along the way have been kept, a sign of assurance that God's promises are still to be trusted. And it was on the basis of those kept promises that both Luke and Matthew include genealogies that assured the early church that Jesus was indeed descended from the Royal line of David, both biologically, and royally, a vital point for them.

Those who study Biblical genealogies for a living have observed a few trends about these lists that are worth keeping in mind, in part because they will help us avoid the frustration of reading the genealogies and becoming either preoccupied or disillusioned by their real or perceived inconsistencies. One useful thing to know is that in most cases, these genealogies were never intended to serve as a historical record in the same way we think of family trees today. For us today, our primary interest in developing the genealogy of our families is its accuracy,

that we have included everyone, and that we have all the right dates and that it can all be verified in a historical society somewhere. As one researcher has observed in summary, “Although we have seen no anthropological evidence indicating that genealogies are created for the purpose of making a historical record, genealogies may nevertheless be considered historically accurate in the sense that they frequently express actual domestic, political, and religious relationships.” In other words, if there is history to be preserved, it is a history that matters for the time in which the genealogy was produced, and sometimes what mattered was who got what family property, who was included in the spoils of the war, who was really the right Levite for the job, and, in the case of First Chronicles, who really belongs with whom when we all return home, and what is their relationship to King David and his clan, which was the most important organizing principle in the mind of whoever wrote Chronicles. These chapters from Chronicles weren’t written so you or I could be assured that a certain Meonothai’s father was really Othniel, but so that Meonothai’s family would know where they stood when they got back to Jerusalem. And it turns out that Meonothai’s people were artisans. And since these artisans could trace themselves back to Meonothai, and therefore to Judah, who was also the father of Perez, from whom David did derive, they were going to be ok under the new regime.

What researchers have also noted is that whether we like it or not, there really are gaps in these genealogies, and that these gaps also speak to the function

of the genealogies themselves. You see, it wasn't really so important to remember every single person in a lineage, so much as to remember the most important, maybe the most recognizable people, and so those who weren't really necessary would frequently be left out. Getting from Person A to Person Z was more important than including the saints of the whole alphabet. They might also be left out if they happened to have the misfortune of not forming a numerically important set of generations. Such was the case with one of poor king David's brothers. Turns out there were eight sons of Jesse, with David being the youngest, which we can learn from 1 Samuel 16, but when it came to put that in a genealogical form, only seven made the cut in 1 Chronicles 2, because seven is a very powerful number in Hebrew thought, a number symbolizing perfection and completeness, attributes of David deemed supremely important to the one who wrote Chronicles. In the end, since the descendants of even the six included brothers of David are not recorded, the name of the final one couldn't have been too important either.

And one more final tip to reading these genealogies is to know that in Hebrew there is no distinct word for grandfather, or great grandfather. There is only the word Av, which can be applied to one person about any number of generations. And so, if you are reading a genealogy that doesn't quite jive with another one, one possible reason is that again, someone got left out, and so the third generation then reads like the second generation, a grandson reads like a son. When this happens, a genealogy is said to be telescoped, and again it may be

because a minimum number of people was required to do the job. So, despite the elaborate web of relationships in our chapter tonight about Judah's family, later on in chapter seven, the sum total of the descendants of Judah's brother Naphtali are four people, just enough to do the job in the return from exile.

All of this is to say in the end, the Bible is more important to us as a theologically influential document than one that is historically accurate according to our modern criteria. For the Chronicler's people, there was no doubt about its historical veracity, even if modern researchers might disagree. What mattered back then was that their uprooted society was put back together again, that they could do it right in God's eyes this time, that they could worship in the right place at the right time and with the right people leading the liturgy, decorating the temple, helping the priests, and playing the right music. And what established all that was the genealogy. I doubt anyone was worried about the descendants of David's unmentioned brother, because they knew they were included somewhere else, under someone else they could call father, and that they did just fine in the end.

If it is true then that Biblical genealogies each served a purpose, each helped a generation or two of people to locate themselves, or organize themselves, or overcome a trauma in their collective lives, then maybe our own genealogies could also be of service to us when we might have a need. You see, each of us is preceded in our faith by a multitude of other people. None of us spring from the pages of the Bible untouched by the experiences of generations of other Christians.

And if you think about it, you can trace it, you can write it down. If I had to give you a quick spiritual lineage of myself, it would go something like this, working from oldest to most recent: Jesus, the father of Paul, the father of Augustine, the father of John Calvin, the father of John Knox, the father of John Witherspoon, the father of Charles Briggs and Martin Luther King, Jr., who was the father of Henry Anderson, Timothy Beal, and Ken White, each of whom were the fathers of Stacey Steck. Now, of course, none of these people is related to any other person biologically, but there is a theme, there are characteristics and relationships, a legacy passed down through each one of them, a lineage with which I can identify, and which others may be able to identify in me. If you look at mine, you'll find plenty of gaps and inconsistencies, both chronologically, geographically, denominationally, and even somewhat theologically, but it all holds together for its purpose, which is to help me trace the faith roots of who I am in Christ right now.

In your own genealogy, unlike mine, you may find that there are members of generations of your biological family, that it might be more diverse in gender or age or perspective or experience than the one I traced for myself. You might find that you could write several different ones according to your needs: one that has given you your basic understanding of the Christian faith, another that traces your journey to claiming Christ as your savior, another how you came to be a missionary, another that recalls how you overcame addiction, or the loss of someone important to you. And they would all be true and historically accurate.

Why are the genealogies in the Bible? The short answer is that way back then, just as now, we human beings trace our experience with God through our relationships with other people. Then, as now, credibility sometimes matters. Then, as now, we become dislocated, disoriented, dispirited, and need to find our way. Then, as now, we become curious about our past, and the mistakes or the successes our forbearers in the faith once made. Then, as now, we long to know we belong to something greater than ourselves, to a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, and when we hear the name of our ancestor in the list of God's faithful people, it reminds us that we too can carry on their heritage of faith, and then claim the title of Av, father, or Ama, mother, to someone who follows after us, who is also the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ. Amen.