

The family of Jesus, and its sexual history

from Matthew Chapter 1 (v1-17)

Jesus the Man

Jesus was a real man. Okay, it's an obvious statement. Yet we also know that he had always existed in some form or other in Heaven. If we are truly to understand Jesus, then we need to accept that whilst he was the Son of God, by the time he was born on earth he had laid down his divine powers. He was a **man** that needed fellowship through prayer with his Father in Heaven, and needed the Holy Spirit in his life for guidance, and power etc. He didn't bring it down with him!

The New Testament tells us very little about Jesus physically. We are not told know his height, his hair colour or if he had a long nose, but one thing the bible does tell us is that he had a penis. It recalls his circumcision 8 days after he was born (Luke 2v21). He was definitely a real man, who we can see from the Gospel narratives, spent a lot of time around real women! He cannot have lived in a spiritual bubble, which our minds sometimes place him in. Surely Jesus faced all the same challenges and temptations, of any first century Jewish male including sexual temptation.

This real man was raised in a real first century family. For the communities he lived in and visited, the social status and expectations on Jesus, were defined both by his own behaviours but also by the status of the family that he was raised in.

So what did the actual family that Jesus was adopted into, look like? What was the history of that family, and what is the future of the Jesus family line?

Identifying Jesus

For identity amongst first century Jews, individuals were always considered as part of a community. So the norm was to stereotype people into groups or types, i.e. He is 'out of Nazareth', or 'from Jerusalem' or 'a Galilean', or a 'fisherman' or a 'Pharisee'. That was generally sufficient information for you to know all that you needed to know about some-one!

However family trees or genealogies were also very important to the Jews, but not just as a source of general interest like it is today. So I know one of my ancestors only ate bread and cheese and always kept a large barrel of cider in his front room, whilst one of my wife's ancestors kept cows in the square mile of central London. However Jewish family history helped define their social status, was evidence of their ethnicity and gave proof if you were from a priestly or kingly line. It gave evidence for a man's rights in a community, and helped determine who he should and shouldn't marry.

Without knowing some-ones family tree though, their way of generalised thinking meant that they might assume some-ones background and family tree, without knowing it, just by the way they behaved. Conversely if you knew their family tree, you could work out how you expected that person to behave.

So some-ones ability and behaviour was linked to their social standing which was linked to their family tree. So if you were intelligent and able, then you would be well thought of in your community, and no doubt have an honourable family tree to match. The reverse was true. An idiot would have a poor reputation, a lowly place in the community, and would have been thought to have had plenty of dubious ancestors. Now, If you did something for 'all mankind' then it would be evidence that you had divine roots, and similarly if you were ascribed divine roots, then you would be expected to do something for 'all mankind'. So the family tree of Jesus was of great importance to understand his social status and expected behaviour.

Their ancestry was **always** traced through the Father's line. The bible says that it was the Spirit of God that made Mary pregnant, so Jesus was quite literally the son of God. The only human blood-line he had was that of his mother Mary, so isn't it her ancestry that should matter? No. Marys blood-line would interest us today, but anything we say about her family history nowadays is very

speculative, and it held no interest at all to first century Jews. It just wasn't relevant. The social status of Jesus needed to come through his Fathers ancestry not his mothers. Jesus is adopted into the family of Joseph and takes on board his social standing, his family honour and his family shame, regardless of Jesus' actual blood-line.

The Family History of Jesus

So how do the Gospel writers trace the family history of Jesus? Mark introduces Jesus as the Son of God and then gets straight on with the action. John also dispenses with family trees but starts his Gospel by emphasising the divine roots of Jesus, placing his origins as part of the Godly set-up right back before the world was even created. Matthew and Luke however do both give family trees for Joseph. Luke is writing more for the non-Jews and traces the ancestry back to King David, and Abraham, but then further back to Noah, and to Adam the first son of God, again emphasising divine roots. But we are going to look more closely at Matthews writing, which were more aimed at a Jewish readership, and he introduces his gospel, by saying..

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. [v1]

Son of Abraham, was the general term for any Jew. Matthew is reminding us that Jesus was a Jew and that he was from the line of David. For first century Jews, having Abraham, and David in your Genealogy were essential pre-requisites for being the Jewish Messiah. Why? Because Abraham was told by God that he would be a blessing to all nations (Gen 12v3) and King David was told by God that the promised Messiah would be his descendant, (2 Samuel 7v11-16) and that his throne would be established forever.

Then Matthew gives us a list of selected names from the family tree of Joseph and hence of Jesus, which most people avoid reading. However there are important and deliberate inclusions in this list of names. It was not normal to include the women in the family tree, and none of the important Jewish matriarchs are there, such as Sarah the wife of Abraham, or Rebekah the mother of Jacob and Esau, and yet Matthew adds in to the mix some women which are not only non-Jews but are controversial characters !

So Matthew starts this family tree from Abraham and works forward in time towards Jesus. This was the Jewish way, actually opposite to the Greeks, which is why Greek Dr. Luke works backwards from Jesus in his gospel.

Matthews gives the family tree as follows.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. [v2-3a]

Oh, Tamar, I could tell you something scandalous about her. Joseph of technical coat fame, had an older brother Judah who had three sons. Tamar married the eldest Er who God killed before they had kids because he was so wicked. As was tradition she married the next eldest son Onan, but he didn't want her babies, so prevented them using the withdrawal method, then he died. Judahs youngest son Shelah was too young to marry, and Judah told Tamar to wait until Shelah was old enough. But even then didn't fulfil his obligation and let her marry him. Then Judah's own wife died and he became a widower. Tamar, with no husband and no children and not a virgin saw her prospects of marriage elsewhere being very remote, and without children, there was a high chance of her being rejected by the Hebrew community. She had a cunning plan, dressed herself up as a prostitute, sat veiled at the crossroads and gave her Father-in-law Judah the come-on when he passed. He succumbed to having sex, and left some personal possessions with her which he would redeem later for payment of services rendered, but then after that could no longer find this prostitute and no-one knew of her. Later he heard a rumour that his daughter-

in-law had been playing the whore, and ordered she be burnt at the stake. As she was taken to her place of execution she said that she was pregnant and the father of her child could be identified by some personal possessions of his that she had. Judah of course recognised these, stopped the execution, realised why she had done it, and then to retain his honour he married Tamar, and she gave birth to twins, babies Perez and Zerah. (Genesis 38)

The family tree continues. *Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. [v3b-5a]*

Oh, Rahab. I could tell you something scandalous about her too. She was a prostitute in Jericho, which was one of the Canaanite cities that the Israelites needed to conquer to gain the promised land. Joshua had sent two men to spy out the city and they visited her brothel ! When local officials came looking for the spies, she helped them and hid them in her roof. She then lied to the officials, and helped the spies escape from her window. This was on condition that her and her family would be saved when the Israelites invaded, which they were. [Joshua 2] So the lying prostitute joined the invaders and married into the Jewish community, where she had baby Boaz.

It continues. *Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth (v5)*

Oh no stop. Let me tell you about Ruth as well. She was lovely, and she was another foreigner. When her husband died, along with her husbands Father and brother, she was left living with her mother-in-law Naomi, and she showed such devotion to her. Then to secure Ruth's future, Naomi got her to cleverly seduce an old Jewish man who was a distant relative and a wealthy landowner called Boaz. He had already shown Ruth some kindness by letting her pick up corn in his fields at harvest time. When he had eaten and drunk well, he was kipping down under a blanket by a pile of corn. Ruth sneaked up to him, got under his covers and led at his feet. When he woke up in a happy mood and discovered her led there, she worked her charms on him. The plan succeeded beautifully and Boaz made the arrangements that he needed to do, in order to marry Ruth. She later gave birth to baby Obed.

It continues. *Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife.*

Oh, that was Bathsheba, and that was scandalous too. She was having an outdoor bath which was clearly visible from the palace rooftops where King David was taking a walk and he could see her naked body and how beautiful she was. He wanted her, so took her and slept with her. You can't refuse the King ! Trouble is she was married to his faithful soldier Uriah, who incidentally was a Hittite not a Jew. Bathsheba became pregnant and David tried to cover his tracks. He could not persuade Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba whilst his army was on battle duty, so David could then pretend the baby belonged to Uriah, so instead he devised a plan to get her husband killed in battle. This worked and David then married Bathsheba, though later he had to face the consequences when his wily old prophet Nathan outed him, and the death of the baby. However Bathsheba did soon give birth to another baby, a healthy little boy which they called Solomon.

Let me continue more quickly. *Solomon was the father of Rehoboam, then down his line Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amon, Josiah, Jeconiah, Shealtiel, Zerubbabel, Abihud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Akim, Elihud, Eleazar, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.*

Oh, let me tell you about Mary. She was so cool ! In a culture that was based on shame and honour, Mary risked everything by agreeing to have Gods baby, even though it could have had dire consequences on her family and that of Joseph's family who she was betrothed to. In theory, she could have even been stoned. She then probably lived most of her life under the shadow cast by suspicion and malicious rumours in her village that she had committed adultery when she hadn't. But she counted the cost, and agreed to do Gods will anyway.

The inclusion by Matthew in the family tree, of foreign women with dubious sex-lives is fascinating. Four non-Jews who all married into the Hebrew communities, are the only 4 women listed in the family tree. Why did Matthew want to specifically connect Jesus, the Lord and Messiah with such women. Why are their stories including in the Bible anyway? Surely God wanted the recorded genealogy of Jesus to include these women, so that he did not have a flawless list of ancestors. Then the elite and upright of society could not point at it and say "I come from a good family line, just like Jesus did, so I am much more like Jesus than that person who is descended from all sorts of reprobates!".

In first century Jewish culture many would view Jewish women as beneath Jewish men, dogs beneath Jewish women, and foreigners beneath dogs. In that way of thinking, the value placed on foreign women was very low. However Jesus came for all people. He was born into a largely peasant society under military occupation, with a high level of infant mortality and difficult social issues. He came to relate to all people including gentile women, which put him at odds with the religious leaders, who mostly looked down on the lower classes.

Jesus was a man who had love, compassion and time for male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, the healthy and the sick, even those with leprosy. He was there for both the well behaved and for those that couldn't care less about social norms and the honour culture, such as the tax collectors and the prostitutes.

Sexual temptation for Jesus

So Matthew made sure that sexual exploits featured prominently in the genealogy of Jesus. But what about his own life. What was the sexual experience of Jesus himself?

He was born in controversial circumstances with the virgin birth certainly being a talking point. But, despite some teaching to the contrary, Mary did not stay a virgin. Why should Gods 'highly favoured lady' be denied the blessing and social status that came from having children? The bible recalls 4 brothers, James, Joses, Simon and Judas, adding 'and **all** his sisters', (Mark 6v3) implying that there are at least 3 of them. So though Mary had lost her husband by the time Jesus was a rabbi at 30 years old, we can assume he grew up with both parents, in a sizable family unit of 10 or more.

The bond in Jewish life of mother and son, is the only one stronger than that between brother and sister. So Jesus would have matured into puberty and manhood looking out for his sisters, and would of no doubt had their female friends around him. Then as he stepped out into ministry, we see the attraction that he held to women, as he broke with social norms, and reached out with care, love and compassion to them. Even to the Gentiles such as the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4v1-42). He stopped men stoning a young lady who had been caught having improper sex (John 8v2-11). He blessed and healed a lady who touched his cloak despite her having a perpetual menstruation problem which made everyone she touched ritually unclean (Mark 5v25-34). He then went into the bedroom of Jairus' daughter against all protocol and raised her from the dead (Mark 5v35-42).

The Gospels also point to Jesus having female companions on the road as well as his male disciples. Luke tell us - *Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ²and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them, out of their own means.* (Luke 8 v1-3).

The culture of the day would **allow** women to travel with men, but they must **then** spend the evening with relatives and not stay out with the men. But here it is implied that they **are** spending night after night in strange towns and villages. Not only that but the women, from their own family incomes, are supporting the financial cost of this travelling ministry that Jesus has. Surely there was no other man in that era, that respected and empowered women more than Jesus did, flying in the face of the cultural laws and expectations that held them down.

The Gospel even records times when women get intimate with him. For a lady to let her hair down in public was seen as a very sensuous act, and as disgraceful as if a lady today in our Western culture exposed her breasts whilst out at a public meal ! As Jesus is reclining and eating in the home of a Pharisee, a woman with a bad reputation comes out from amongst those stood around watching. She kneels and weeps over the feet of Jesus. She then shocks the room by letting her long hair cascade down, and uses her locks to wipe the dirt from his damp feet. She then kisses his feet repeatedly before pouring expensive perfume over them (Luke 7v36-50). The law allowed a man to divorce his wife for letting her hair down in public, as it was viewed as so alluring. Other men in the room would definitely have been aroused by just watching this passionate display shown towards Jesus. But was Jesus sexually aroused himself by this woman, or by any of the many others around him as he grew up and ministered.

There are many teenage boys who would have sat watching television with their parents, when a scene comes on involving sex and nudity, and they find themselves embarrassingly aroused and wanting to leave the room before this is noticed. In any situation, it is not the temptation or sexual arousal that determines if you sin, it is what you do, or even think about doing, **next** !

The bible tells us that *Jesus (Christ) was tempted in every way we are tempted, but did not sin* (Hebrew 4v15). If that was the case, then how could Jesus be fully man, tempted in every way that we were, if he was not also sexually aroused and tempted. It is not something that Christians like to discuss or allow themselves to think about, but what other man could grow up with young ladies around, have a ministry with close female supporters, and have many women wanting a touch or a blessing from him, without ever getting that rush of blood down below! Jesus was fully man, so surely must have been in this respect also.

On the other hand, the secular media have no problem discussing the sexuality of Jesus, and making great presumptions ! Books and films speculate on Jesus having had a family with Mary Magdalene, such as Dan Brown's 'Da Vinci Code'. One quoted documented, in distribution during the early church years, but not accepted later into the Bible, was the Gospel of Philip. Its manuscript has a verse that mentions Mary of Magdala and says of Jesus 'He kissed her often on the...' [Philip 63] Whilst the next word is assumed to be mouth or lips, this word is missing from the manuscript, so we don't actually know where he kissed her !

We can only assume that if Jesus **was** tempted in every way that he was also tempted sexually. However we know that he died for us on the cross as the sinless lamb of God, meaning that he

never gave into any of these temptations, including doing anything inappropriate with any of the ladies. So sorry Dan Brown and other story tellers, it just didn't happen.

If Jesus had produced off-spring then I suspect that we would spend far too much time trying to find those who were born in the blood-line of Jesus, than familiarising with the important teaching he left behind for us. Then perhaps those proven to be in his blood-line would be given some type of super-spiritual importance over others, rather than all of us sharing the same importance in the eyes of Jesus. At the end of the day, he died for each one of us. The price-tag he put on every individual is the same, which is the ridiculously high price of Jesus dying on the cross to free us from our sins.

Adopted into his family

Just because Jesus did not have any children by one of his female admirers, does not mean that his family tree ended with him. There was an occasion when there was family members of Jesus who were trying to get to talk to him. *He was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." But he replied, "My mother and brother are those who hear the word of God and carry it out."* (Luke 8v20-21). In other words those who become his disciples, his followers, will become part of his adopted family.

Matthew starts his book by adopting the family tree of Joseph for Jesus, connecting him to both men and women, to both Jew and Non-Jew alike, and both those who lived honourable lives, and those who lived shameful lives.

He ends his gospel with the command and commission to his disciples to go to **all peoples** everywhere and make them his disciples (Mt 28v19). Jesus is sending his closest followers out to bring us all in to his new adopted family. This includes men and women, of any tribe and colour, of any sexual orientation, of any honourable or dubious past. There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from this love of God, this love of Jesus (Romans 8v39).

He takes in the raw material of us real men and real women, no matter what faults, fears, addictions, or shameful past we have had, and moulds us in his image, to be more like him. That is true though, only **if** we let him adopt us into his spiritual family, by accepting Jesus as our Lord and captain over our lives. We need to turn away from the mess he called us out of, and ask him to renew our hearts and minds, and fill us with his Holy Spirit. Then we belong to him, and we are heirs to all the riches of the kingdom of heaven.

When Jesus was born, there was no proof of who his Father was, and he would have grown up with that stigma of illegitimacy. This why the Gospel genealogies were so important to the early Gospel readers as it gives Jesus the status and honour that he deserved. The blood-line through Mary was irrelevant, what was important was the family that he was adopted into, with its divine roots, and its messianic links to Abraham and King David. This gives him the status. However those listed in his family tree, also indicate who he came for. This is not a saviour just for the good and the elite, this is a saviour for everyone.

What is important today is not your blood-line and what your ancestors did, or even your personal history and the mistakes you have made in your own life. What is important is being adopted into Gods family, just like Jesus was adopted into Josephs family. Then you inherit that status of being a child of God, and the shame and guilt of your past is wiped clean.

This is great news today for sex workers today like Rahab, it is great news for the devious like Tamar, it is great news for murderers like King David, and it is great news for everyone else too. Nothing you have previously done in your life, has separated you from the love of God. You can have your slate wiped clean, and become a new person, a new creation. His love, patience, kindness, mercy and forgiveness is waiting for you, and wanting to transform you by giving you his Holy Spirit to live in you, to help you, and empower you.

This was always what was meant to be. He has always wanted you and me to be part of his family tree. Even if we follow Johns origins of Jesus and take him right back to before earth was created, even **then** he still wanted us in his family. It says this clearly in Pauls letter to the Ephesians.

Even before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his, through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him. Because of his love God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would make us his children—this was his pleasure and purpose. (Ephesians 1v4-7)

Yes Jesus was the Son of God, and is seated with God in heaven now, but when he walked this earth, he was a real man, calling real men and women, to start a new life, and be adopted into his family tree.

It is just the same today. He is still inviting us to be part of that family. We are called to put our past behind us, and pick up our future in Him. If we accept this call, we can become confident sons and daughters of the King of Kings. We become his new princes and princesses, facing the world with bravery and determination in his strength, to do the good things that he has prepared in advance for us and called us to do.

It is good news for us that Jesus was a real man dependent upon the Holy Spirit, because he has shown us, the real men and women that follow him, what **we** can too achieve, when we are adopted into his family and empowered, like Him, by the Holy Spirit.

Come on family. We can do this. Let's go for it!

Amen.