

Chapter 3 Backstory

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Matthew's Good News Chapter 1, verses 12-17

What were we waiting for?

(Matthew divides the story of God's people into three time periods of fourteen generations each. The third period includes the fourteen generations from the Babylonian captivity to the coming of Jesus.)

After the captives were taken away to live in Babylon, Jechoniah fathered Shealtiel. Shealtiel fathered Zerubbabel. In Zerubbabel's generation the Persians conquered Babylon and gave the Hebrews permission to return to their home. Zerubbabel was among those who led the people along the path that Abraham had walked long before. They returned to Judea (the southern part of Israel). It seems that they were finally free of the brutal paganism of their ancestors. At the least, exile had accomplished that much.

But they were also a small, vulnerable group of refugees. They began rebuilding Jerusalem, even though they were threatened by neighbors who did not want to see Jerusalem rebuilt. But rebuilt it was, including the Temple that represented the presence of the only true God.

Though Zerubbabel was of royal blood, the monarchy had ended with the captivity in Babylon. None of the generations from Babylon to Joseph was known as the king of Judea. And yet the people remembered God's promise: a son of David's family would be the Messiah, the Savior and eternal King.

They waited for the Savior King to come. (They did not always wait peacefully.) And they kept records of their ancestry: Zerubbabel, Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Sadoc, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan, Jacob, Joseph. Fourteen generations after Babylon, they were still expecting the eternal King.

Nine of those generations are silent to us: their stories are not included in the Bible. Yet their mention by Matthew tells us that the people knew their connection to the past, and they remembered their hope for a future Savior. Matthew recognized the fulfillment of that hope in Jesus. Jacob fathered Joseph, the husband of Mary, out of whom was born Jesus, who is the Christ, the God-anointed Savior King.

Matthew points to three divisions in the story: Fourteen generations from Abraham to David tell the story of a God unlike any known in the pagan world. This is a God known not by his demand for child sacrifice, not by sex rituals, not by someone's ability to enslave others, not by the arrogance of brutal conquerors, not by fear-mongering. This

God is known by the way he calls humble people away from that kind of power, the way he raises up the downcast, the way he gives people grace and a place in his story.

The fourteen generations from David to the captivity in Babylon are largely the story of people forgetting this gracious God and running back to the brutality and oppression of the graceless world around them. The captivity in Babylon shows us where we end up when we turn our backs on the grace of God. And we see this not once or twice, but repeatedly. Without the grace of the living God we *always* end up oppressed.

The fourteen generations from Babylon to Jesus tell of people waiting for a Savior, a God-anointed King who will rule with goodness, not with oppression. Matthew gives us a glimpse of the history to which Jesus was THE Turning Point.

Jesus didn't come out of nowhere. Jesus came into a story in which no one had lived up to the goodness we desperately need. No one had fulfilled the promise of which God had repeatedly spoken. What was so different about Jesus? That is what the four Gospels tell us.