

The fourteen generations in matthew's genealogy (matt. 1:1-17)

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ABSTRACT

Matthew's genealogy has unique features not common to other biblical genealogies. It is built around a numerical structuring greatly influenced by the number fourteen, and broken into three sets, each made up of fourteen generations. But the counting of Matthew does not agree with his clear assertion in verse 17. Overtime scholars have struggled in search for a solution to this problem. Using the historical critical method of research, the paper seeks to show that dividing history into patterns was a reflection of an apocalyptic numerical scheme common in Jewish culture. By dividing the genealogy into three sets, with each having fourteen generations, the evangelist wanted to attribute perfection to his genealogy, he sought to emphasise the idea that the time was right, and Messiah long awaited who is son of Abraham and David has come.

Keywords: *Matthew's Genealogy, Fourteen Generation, Apocalyptic, Gematria*

Introduction

Matthew's Gospel is unique because of its unusual opening, it begins with a list of the forebears of Jesus. His genealogy has unique and distinctive features which are not found in other genealogies, especially in Luke. Prominent among these are: his listing is in a descending order from Abraham to Jesus; the inclusion of the names of five women among his long list of forty-one men; and Matthew in v.17 clearly structures the generations into three sections, each having fourteen names. His genealogy exhibit an array of significant numerical properties patterned around the number 14, unfolds in blocks of 14 generations, and reaches its initial climax with the rise of its 14th member (David), whose name has a gematrial value of 14 (Bejon, 2024). *Therefore all generations from Abraham to David fourteen generations and from David to the Babylonian captivity fourteen generations and from the Babylonian captivity to the Christ fourteen generations* (Matt. 1:17).

If what is stated in V. 17 is taken as it is, and the three sets of generations are treated as distinct, then we have three sets of fourteen, or forty-two generations, but what is available in vv. 2-16 is a list of forty-one male names from Abraham to Jesus.

Why 3 Set of Fourteen

Efforts to unravel Matthew's fourteen generations and get a clearer understanding of his count has been the bane of scholars throughout history. From the second century, exegetes have battled with it, Jerome raised it, Chrysostom struggled with it, and Augustine tried to explain it. Chrysostom in a sermon on Matt. 1:17 raised the question of the division into three. He opines that the Jews had in these periods successively three different forms of government, aristocracy, monarchy, and oligarchy, and were as bad under the last as under the first; the captivity

itself has failed to work amendments. It was every way necessary that Christ should come (Moore 1921).

Genealogies serve different purposes in the gospels. They were suited for apologetic purposes which were accomplished by *Midrashic exegesis*. Johnson (1969) sees Matthew's genealogy as "an integral part of the gospel", which was composed by a converted Jewish scribe who agrees with the teachings of Pharisaic Judaism that the Messiah will descend from David, and reject the possibility of a levitical Messiah. It is composed in a numerical scheme, one which overtime has had different attempts at an explanation. Thus, "By structuring history into epochs, the priestly genealogies served as a means of imbuing history with meaning and thus served to present the conviction of a divine purpose with and within Israelite history" (Johnson, 1969). This structuring he argues is a deliberate composition of Matthew. It was done to reinforce the idea that the time was right, and the Messiah has come.

It has been suggested that the figure is determined by the aggregate of names from Abraham in the OT genealogies (Zhan, 1905). Since there are only fourteen, Matthew adopted it as the basic pattern for each subsequent division. Furthermore, it is believed that by breaking his genealogy into 3 set of 14 the evangelist wanted to attribute the aspect of perfection to his genealogy when he observes in verse 17 that there were three sets of generations, each formed by number 14, summing up forty-two generations. This numerical workshop would leave the impression that the regal lineage, the chronology, and the Jewish history had been determined on a perfect, occult divine plan (Valdez, 2009). Jansen (1576) avers

It was to indicate that at the time of Jesus' birth, fourteen generations after the beginning of the exile, a great change, a new order of things, was imminent, such as had happened at the end of each preceding period of fourteen generations – the establishment of the kingdom fourteen generations after Abraham, its fall fourteen generations after David. This next great change, according to common Jewish expectations, was the coming of the Messiah; and precisely at this critical moment in history was born, as the title of our genealogy emphasises, "Jesus Christ (the Messiah), the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). To this verse 17 returns: "from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

There is a popular view among scholars that the figure fourteen was arrived through *Gematria*, as contain in the three consonants of Hebrew name for David. The Hebrew name *dwd*, has the numerical value $\aleph\delta\aleph$ ($4+6+4 = 14$) (Filson, 1971). This view was first proposed by Gfrörer and accepted by G.L. Box, (1905); J. Jeremias, (1961); R.T. Hoods, (1961); A.W. Argyle (1963) and others.

Moore (1921) holds that the division of the genealogy into three sections of fourteen generations reflect the influence of an apocalyptic numerical schema. It is seen in Daniel's interpretation of the seventy years of Jeremiah and Enoch's vision of the seventy shepherds. Daniel took the seventy years of Jeremiah (25:12ff; 29:10ff) as seventy weeks of years (70×7), operates with a cycle of four hundred and ninety years, dividing the history into three unequal period ($7+62+1$), upon the last of which the golden age was to follow. In Enoch we see the same cycle in the vision of the seventy shepherds (89:50 – 90:25), symmetrically divided ($12+23, 23+12$). Both ended with the golden age which preceded the coming of the Messiah. These calculations intends to prove that the end of the evil time in which the apocalypses were written was close at hand – the widespread apostasy, the cessation of sacrifices and desecration of the temple, the persecution for religion's sake (Moore, 1921). For Christians, he argued the interest was "to prove that their Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, came precisely at the time fixed in prophecy for the beginning of a new era. The attempt to demonstrate this from the seventy weeks of Daniel occupies a large space in the history of Christian apologetic".

Matthew's fourteen generations as seen in his genealogy is not an expression of the evangelist interest in numerology, but, an attempt to associate Jesus with a specific shape – that of the moon. "Insofar as Matthews's genealogy moves forward in groups of 14, it resembles the course of the moon. It waxes for 14 days and wanes for 14 days. And its wax and wane mirrors the ebb and flow of Israel's history" (Bejon, 2024). Thus the "fourteen days is half of the cycle of the moon. If the genealogy from Abraham to David can be seen as the waxing of the moon, that from Solomon to the Exile can be seen as its waning, and the genealogy from Exile to Jesus as a second waxing reaching a full moon with the coming of Christ" (Nolland, 2005). It begins with YHWH's promise to Abraham, reaches it fulfilment in King David. From Uriah's wife and Rehoboam Israel begins a decline leading to the division of the kingdom, and a line of 14 godless kings who led Israel into exile. They remain in exile until the time of Shealtiel which ushered a new period of Israel history. The nature of the events and the way they went are very similar to the situation of Jesus. It seems he too was to follow the route of Israel.

Like 'Judah and his brothers', Jesus will soon be relocated to Egypt (2:13). Like David, Jesus will win the acclaim

and acknowledged as God's anointed son. Soon afterwards, like Rehoboam, Jesus will be rejected by many of his kinsmen and his people will decline in number. At the climax of his ministry, like 'Jehoiachin and brothers', Jesus will be carried away into exile – in Jesus' case, an exile of death. Yet, like Jehoiachin, who is "lifted up" from prison (2 Kings. 25), Jesus will be lifted up from the grave and delivered from "the bars of Sheol" (Jon 2). And, like Shealtiel, Jesus will hence breathe new life into his people's future (Bejon, 2024).

This flow of history makes Matthew's genealogy not a literary abstraction. Through it Matthew claims to have uncovered a significant pattern in the ebbs and flow of Israel's history which will be mirrored in the career of Jesus.

Matthew makes periodicity/rhythm a critical ingredient in his composition. He used both to show how "Israel story unfold in blocks of 14, each of which reached either a zenith or a nadir in its 14th generation, the third of which is the birth of Israel's Messiah. As such, Jesus arrives right on time. Just as Israel traverses the wilderness in 42 discrete phases (Num.33), so she traverses the long era between Abraham and the fulfilment of his promise in 42 generations" (Bejon, 2024). But the use of a particular rhythm in a genealogy is not a Matthean creation, it has precedent in the OT. Genesis, introduced Noah as the 10th generation from Adam, and Abraham as the 10th generation of Shem. Ruth portrays David as the 10th generation of Perez. Consequently, Matthew's use of a sequence of fourteen is not a new invention. It is a continuation of an exegetical pattern which was already in use in the very early books of scripture. For "Just as the OT portrays David as the denouement of three tenfold lineages, so Matthew portrays Jesus as the denouement of threefold lineages" (Bejon, 2024).

The idea that the list of ancestral names of a famous man, beginning with Abraham, could be divided sequentially into equal numerical parts would not have been foreign to the Jewish mind (Brown 1993). In 1 Chronicles 5:27-41 (RSV 6:1-15), we find the list of priestly names from Aaron to the exile divided into equal parts using a time indicator attached to Azariah "who served as a priest in the temple which Solomon built in Jerusalem" (5:36 – 6:10 (RSV)). In later Judaist Midrash Rabbah XV 26 on Exodus 12:2, we find the period from Abraham to Solomon divided into fifteen generations (with same male names as Matthew), from Solomon to Zedekiah divided into 15 generations too. The coming of the Messianic age was also formulated in numerical patterns. Jer. 25:11-12 fixed the time of Babylonian captivity to be seventy years; Dan. 9:24-27 expanded the number to seventy weeks of years (490) to describe the period from the beginning of Exile in Babylon to the coming of God's kingdom. In Enoch 93:1-10; 91:12-17 we clearly see world history divided into ten weeks of years, with the first three being pre-Israelite, thus from Jacob to the end there are seven weeks of years. We also find 11 Baruch 53-74 dividing world history from Adam to the Messiah into twelve periods, with the Messianic period as the last. While "none of these enumerations is deliberate as Matthew's but they share with Matthew an eschatological outlook, so that the coming of the Messiah marks the end of God's carefully delineated plan" (Brown, 1993).

Matthew's Count

The counting in Matthew's genealogy is unique and comes with some apparent difficulties. Scholars have overtime struggled proffer solutions to Matthew's count. If all the three sets of generations have fourteen names as proposed by the evangelist, there should ordinarily be forty-two generations, but vv. 2-16 has forty-one male names. Debate over a possible solution has been narrowed to three possibilities: a missing generation; Matthew miscounted; or he double counted a generation. The first set of fourteen generations began from Abraham and ended with David, and both were counted. This list agrees with genealogies in the Old Testament, as seen in 1 Chronicles 1-3 and as G. F. Moore observed the list "... are enumerated in precisely the same way in Jewish list which count fifteen to Solomon" (98). It is an inclusive count which is not unusual in biblical times. The second set of fourteen generations from Solomon to Jechoniah put forth the list of the kings of the Davidic line who reigned in Jerusalem. This monarchical section concludes with Jechoniah who, despite the Babylonian exile, begot an heir and kept the Davidic line alive. This section has visible difficulties, "the names of three kings listed in the LXX text of 1 Chr. 3:10-16, which appears to be the source of Matt. 1:7-11, have been omitted" (Waetjen, 1976). It is important to note that the three kings omitted – Joash, Amaziah, and Azariah (Uzziah) are prominent figures in the history of Judah (2 Kgs 11:15), who "according to chronology of the book, occupied the throne for 121 years (40+29+52)" (Moore 1921). But scholars argue that, "At any rate the omission was necessary for the general structuring of the genealogy, since without the omission there would be seventeen, not fourteen kings from Solomon through Jeconiah" (Johnson, 1921). Different explanations have been given in attempt to solve the problem, why these three kings and not others has drawn lot of speculations. It has been suggested that the three

Kings were omitted from the ancestral list of the Messiah because they were wicked, or because they were assassinated. A further refinement of this theory is that the three omitted kings were regarded as accursed. “A more plausible explanation is that the omission was accidental caused by the similarity between the Greek forms of the names Uziah (Azariah) and Ahaziah, so that “Joram was the father of Uziah’ is a mistake for ‘Joram was the father of Ahaziah’” (Brown, 1993).

At the end one notice a calculated conflation of Jehoiakim and Jechoniah. The evangelist intentionally considered Joachim to be Jechonias, who in truth was his son and successor, thus causing this Joachim – Jechonias to become Salathiel’s father. This some ascribe to a confusion of the two names especially in Greek OT manuscripts. He also eliminated the principal descendants after Zorobabel: Hananiah, Meshulam, Shechaniah, Neariah, and Elioenai. He suppressed at least nine characters with the obvious intention of making his genealogy conform to the number 14 principal (Valdez, 2009). All in a conscious effort to make the period of the monarchy fourteen generations as the previous one. Whatever the reason, Jechoniah or Jehoiachin was the only royalty at that time that could serve as a figure of transition, as 1:17 requires, for he lived on into the exile and eventually enjoyed favoured treatment under the Babylonian king (2 Kgs. 25:27-30 & Jer. Evidence in the OT shows clearly that there were omission of names by Matthew in the Pre-monarchical and Monarchical periods of the genealogy, and according to Raymond Brown (1993) this not new the Jewish mind, but ‘such omissions in a genealogy are a problem to the western mind with its quest for biological accuracy and completeness, but are well attested in both ancient and modern tribal genealogies’. But as Moore (1921) observe,

Mere love of symmetry can hardly have been the sole motive for so violent a curtailment of the history; it is more likely that the number fourteen had an intrinsic significance for the author and a decisive importance for his purpose in compiling the genealogy.

The third set of fourteen generations from Jechoniah to Christ appears to be incomplete with only thirteen names listed. Here too like the preceding set different ancestor most likely may have been omitted. This section connects the end of the monarchy with the appearance of the final anointed king, the Messiah (Christ) Jesus, and fits within the bounds of what was transmitted orally. In his survey of contemporary genealogical practices among Arab tribes in the Near East, Wilson (1977) observes that, “normally the maximal lineage genealogy does not exceed a depth of ten to fourteen generations, with the average maximum depth, being twelve generations”. Different reasons have been given to explain the presence of thirteen names against the very clear assertion in 1:17 that there are fourteen generations from the Babylonian captivity to Christ. Some see this as a reflection of the inaccuracy of the Evangelist work or the inexactness of his sources. This view is shared by Jeremias (1961) and Lohmeyer (1956). Others try to solve the problem by counting Jechoniah twice; at the beginning of the third division as well as at the end of the second, R. T. Hood and W, B, Tatum belong here. In the 5th century, Augustine had observed: “But he (Matthew) did not reckon them all up in one sum, counting them one by one and saying that thus they make up forty-two generations” (Cons. ev. 2.4.10). Consequently we may not have to find forty-two generations, just try to identify what generations are in each of the three sets of fourteen. Augustine then opines that Matthew double-counted Jechoniah. Meaning that for him Matt. 1:17 has the first set from Abraham to David, the second set has Solomon to Jechoniah, and the last set from Jechoniah to Jesus. But as Carlson observed, “Augustine’s interpretation of the text of Matt. 1:17 is still too far from the actual text. Verse 17 does not name Jechoniah twice. In fact, it does not name Jechoniah at all. Rather, v. 17 refers to an event, using the Babylonian deportation to separate the second series from the third.

Not willing to accept that Matthew cannot count accurately, Stendahl (1960) suggest that Jesus and Christ were counted separately as the thirteenth and the fourteen generations (Waetjen, 1976). But such a differentiation Waetjen argues though base on the discontinuity effected by death, is not in tandem with the gospel’s presentation of Jesus as the Christ during his life on earth (2:24; 16:16). 1:17 clearly stated that there are fourteen generation from the Babylonian captivity “to the Christ”. If Jesus is the Christ from the time of his birth, as 2:2, 4 shows, is it possible that the evangelist considers Jesus the Christ – in contrast to all the other names in the genealogy to be the representative of two generations, both the thirteenth and the fourteenth, at the same time?

The struggle in search for a generally acceptable solution for Matthew’s count continues. Some think that either the Evangelist did not notice or did not care that the sum of the generations are not as he had clearly stated. Nevertheless “Discrepancies between stated totals and actual totals are not uncommon in biblical and extra biblical literature; instances can be found in 1 Chr. 3:22; Ezra 1:9-11; 2:2-64; Neh. 7:7-66; 1 Esd 5:9-41; Cowley [Aramiac Papyri] 23; LAB 5:8; 10:1” (Davis & Allison, 1988). 1 Chr. 3:22 contains list of the sons of Shecaniah but only

one son was mentioned. In this case textual corruption seem to be the culprit. “The singular and plural of son differ by a single dot and a scribe could well have unintentionally assimilated this statement to similar ones in the plural in the immediate context” (Carlson, 2014). Ezra 1:9-11 captures the vessels in the temple, but the total does not add up. There is the tendency of large numbers prone to corruption by scribes, errors in counting or both. In LAB 10:1 it is clearly stated that God afflicted Egypt during the Exodus with ten plagues but only nine are listed. The plague of boils is not recorded. It is possible that while the original material in Exodus has the correct number, in the process of copying one of the plagues was mistakenly dropped.

Another scenario is also possible, one where “Matthew may have just been aware of the error” (Davis & Allison, 1988). Allison holds that if Matthew’s source only had thirteen names for the last period, “the Evangelist may have been content to suffer the lack of one [name]; for although he may have felt the freedom to omit names he may not have felt freedom to make them up and add them”. Ostmeyer (2000) shares the view that the mathematical inaccuracy was intentional. He see Matthew attempting to bring together two distinct numerical patterns in his genealogy. The number fourteen is the first, and the three set of fourteen for him corresponds to lines of patriarchs, kings, and priests, accordingly. The second pattern is based on the number forty. This will make Jesus the fortieth generation after Abraham, bringing to the fore a major component of the Abrahamic covenant, that he will become the father of many nations. To achieve this Ostmeyer holds, that Matthew had to let go a generation from his three-by-fourteen schema in order to keep Jesus as the fortieth generation after Abraham. But Carlson (2014) argues that “while it is clear that the number forty may resonate within ancient Jewish and Christian circles, it is not clear at all why Matthew would sacrifice his explicit fourteen-generation system in favour of an implicit forty-generation scheme”.

Conclusion

Discerning clearly what Matthew intended in v. 17 has remain a riddle for scholars. Still more complex are his numbers and counting. It is possible Matthew had access to more materials and information than we know. But whatever other factors that influence the way he composed his genealogy, and whatever meaning the number had for him, “the genealogy reflects a deterministic view of history common in traditional apocalyptic thought” (Tatum, 1977). The structure of Matthew’s composition makes it an “artificial” rather than a strictly “historical” genealogy, Brown (1993) avers, what I mean by “artificial” “is that even God did not arrange things so nicely that exactly Fourteen biological generations separated such crucial moment in salvation history as the call of Abraham, the accession of David, the Babylonian Exile, and the coming of the Messiah. The spans of time covered by the three sections of the genealogy are too great to have contained only fourteen generations each”. The numerical arrangement of the genealogy is in agreement with Matthew’s methodology of ordering materials into numerical group. To achieve his aim, Matthew tolerated a slight adjustment from symmetrical perfection, and in agreement with a pattern found in Israel’s history, he present Jesus a descendant of David as the Messiah in fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham.

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