

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I love much of the Bible, but I have a real problem seeing any value or relevance in the lists of names (so-and-so begat so-and-so). Can you tell me why those boring things are in the Bible?

We may find genealogies boring, but they must have been important and of interest to the people who included them in the biblical books or they wouldn't have wasted ink on them (and remember, the books were copied by hand). What might the value and importance of genealogies have been for the biblical writers? Probably what it means to people today: your family gives you a sense of belonging and identity. True, the people in the Bible are very distant relatives, but they are our ancestors in the faith nonetheless. They are family. And knowing they are our kin gives us a sense of connectedness to a whole tradition of worshipers of the one, true God that is thousands of years long.

Not everyone today is interested in doing the research to learn their family's history. Usually there is just one person in a family (if that) who takes the time to do the genealogical research for the whole family. But for those who care about such things, knowing the family history gives a sense of connectedness with previous generations, a sense of continuity down the years that enriches their sense of who they are.

We know that often those who were adopted have great interest in knowing about their biological parents and grand-

parents. Even if they love their adoptive parents and are grateful for the lives they have given them, there is still a curiosity, even a deep longing to know where they came from. They feel that something is missing—somehow they are not complete and cannot be at peace within themselves until they know not only their adoptive family and its history but their genetic ancestry as well.

Some people whose ancestors were brought to the Western Hemisphere in the slave trade say they feel a similar sense of something being missing because they cannot say where they came from.

We all perhaps have met people who will proudly tell you that their ancestors came over on the Mayflower or that they are descended from Robert E. Lee or George Washington, or some other illustrious person. It is clear that they take great pride in their heritage and their sense of who they are is informed by who their ancestors were.

Surely the genealogies in the Old Testament also served to give a sense of identity to the people. In biblical times, especially before the Babylonian Exile, people knew what tribe they belonged to and tribal membership was very important. Most people lived not in cities but

on the ancestral land of their tribe with other members of their tribe, much like the clans of the Scottish Highlands lived together on their clan's land and protected it from encroachment by other clans. In such a setting, stories of one's illustrious (or outrageous) ancestors would be told and retold with great delight and those genealogical lists would be memorized and recited with pride.

The stories that more than one tribe shared (stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for instance) also served to unite the various tribes, for they had a common ancestry and a common identity as the people Israel in covenant with the LORD.

Priestly families had a special interest in genealogy because legitimacy (the right to offer sacrifices, especially in the Jerusalem Temple) was dependent on one's genealogy. In the latter part of the Old Testament period, only men of the tribe of Levi who could trace their family tree back to Aaron were allowed to function as priests.

Even if we are not Jewish by birth and the names of most of the people in the genealogies of the Bible are foreign to us and hard to pronounce, they are our ancestors in the faith. I suggest that when reading or listening to a genealogical

passage, you try to keep that in mind and not allow the strangeness of the names to "put you off" and create distance. If we are to reclaim our heritage, we will have to make the effort to make the connection with our past.

The genealogies of the Bible remind us that we are not alone. We may struggle together today to determine what God wants us to do and how to do it. The problems we face may be new (or maybe they are not so new), but we are not the first people to try to live a life in the service of God. Countless others have preceded us. We have a long history and a rich heritage.

If one's identity comes at least partly from knowing one's family tree, then our identity as Christians is informed and enriched by our knowing our Christian and Jewish ancestors. "Rootlessness" and "historical amnesia" should not be problems we have.

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects.

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