



O Radix Jesse: O Root of Jesse

Introduction

To many of us modern folks, *O Radix Jesse*, or “O Root of Jesse,” seems perhaps out of place among the other antiphons in the [O Antiphon](#) sequence. Poetic, sure. “Biblical,” of course. But the rest of the O Antiphons appear to emphasize key—sometimes eternal—attributes of who God is (God-with-us, Sun of Righteousness, All-wise, etc.). “Radix Jesse,” on the other hand, feels more like a minor historical detail about Jesus’ human lineage.

Traditional Antiphon

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples; before you, kings will shut their mouths, to you the nations will make their prayer: Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan’s tyranny;
from depths of hell Thy people save,
and give them victory o’er the grave.

This antiphon is important in the grand prophetic scheme. However, as to why it’s listed alongside the others, we might struggle to understand.

It’s worth noting—and perhaps even more interesting—to realize that the Antiphons align with scripture in this focus on Jesus as the heir of David and the Branch from the stump of Jesse. For example, what does Paul mean when he talks about “my gospel for which I suffer even to the point of being chained like a criminal” ([2 Tim. 2:9](#))? He sums it up as: “Jesus Christ raised from the dead, descended from David” (v.8, emphasis added). This third O Antiphon, like the New Testament witness, treats Jesus’ tribal and clannish origins as on par with his divine qualities—attributes worthy of worship and allegiance. Why?

The Root of the Problem: Modern Nonchalance about History

Contemporary society lives in a perpetual state of nonchalance about history in general and about genealogy in particular. We were begotten to a cultural myth that has labeled us “modern.” We have arrived, we have progressed, and we live “at the end of history,” to repurpose a phrase from Francis Fukuyama.

Moderns and post-moderns may enjoy seeing the results of their 23andMe tests or going antiquing. However, we find history hard to see as anything more than a ‘pilot episode’ or ‘opening credits’ to the ongoing ‘now-ness’ we’re absorbed in. This is clear when we react to significant social change as if it were “The End of the World.” When recent features that define ‘the modern’ (democracy, oil, liberation, consumerism, industrialization) are threatened, the alarm rings: “Apocalypse!” We care little for history and can’t see ourselves as part of it.

But this is not how the Bible views history. God always acts in the fullness of time ([Gal. 4:4](#)). The Eternal One is “not the god of the dead but of the living” ([Lk. 20:38](#)). Though he is beyond all things, God surpasses everything. Nothing about God is “abstract.” He is Reality itself. He is *the* I AM.

God the Spirit speaks in the Living Word, which he authored “in, with, and under” the historical circumstances he superintended as director and in which he participated as actor. For this I AM God is Lord of History.

We become bored with the genealogies in the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles of Israel to the point that we see them as inert and lifeless. For the Living God, however, things like genealogies are an essential part of *his story*. History teachers often talk about “making history come to life” for their students. But they usually mean this in a vague way. For the Lord of Creation, however, we can genuinely say that history is alive.

Therefore, the Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy—a kind of distilled history (100 proof, well-aged, made for slow sipping). This is because, as my friend Alastair Roberts explains, “The gospel does not begin in a historical vacuum, but as the climax of a long history of God’s dealings with Abraham and his descendants.”

God Has a Family

So, when we call Jesus the “Root of Jesse,” we are hailing him in the first place as the God of History. God has worked in real events, with real people. You can place his saving deeds and his mighty acts on a timeline. This is precisely the theme that, for example, [Psalm 118](#) emphasizes. “His love endures forever” is neither an aspirational nor a mystical claim.

We worship the God who has done great things.

One of the ways God has involved himself is by connecting his story, at significant risk to himself, with the story of a human family. Jacob, inspired by the Holy Spirit, prophesied that a king would come from the tribe of Judah ([Gen. 49:8-10](#)). Moses described the Torah-centered life that this future king would live ([Deut. 17:14-20](#)).

When that king finally arrives, Jesse's son David, he does so after the downfall of the first king, Saul. Samuel is called to anoint Jesse's son David as king after Saul ([1 Sam. 16:1](#)). Jonathan recognizes that David is God's chosen king and pledges his loyalty to his father's armor bearer ([1 Sam. 20:12-23](#)). Later, after David becomes king, God intensifies this promise:

"When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son."

[2 Sam 7:12-14a](#), NIV

God unites his household with David's —come what may, for better or for worse. One can easily conceive of how David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, can fill the Psalter with songs like [Ps. 110](#) "The Lord says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand...'" (v.1). Even if David did not have the complete picture of the shape of things to come, he did delight in the wonder of the God who promised a future king who would be both Jesse's heir and his Lord.

The Tree of Jesse: Well-planted Promise or Empty Pipe-Dream?

These promises face serious challenges when, after David's son Solomon, the house of Israel splits into two kingdoms ([1 Kings 12:1-24](#)). There is a deep sadness during Rehoboam's reign and a lingering question: what will happen to the promise God made to David about an heir of Jesse ruling on a future throne of Israel? This sadness and the weight of these questions grow heavier as Israel's story unfolds: although some good kings arise, things seem to take a tragic direction. Israel loses its status as a regional power and increasingly falls under the influence of neighboring states. During this crisis, Isaiah declares that a time of judgment is coming to the House of Israel (e.g., [Is. 8:1-22](#)), affecting both king and people. Exile is coming (e.g., [Is. 39:6-7](#)). The house of David will be ruled by kings other than David's children.

God is the Gardener, and Israel is his beloved vineyard ([Is. 5](#)). But now, the time has come to uproot, cut down, and chop off (v5-6). God plans to cut down Jesse's royal tree to the roots. Wait, what!? A natural question for Isaiah might be, "But how, if all these things happen, will God remain faithful to his promises to unify his family with David?" And,

implicitly, “If God can’t be faithful to David’s household, how can he be faithful to the larger, more complicated human family?”

Amid these questions, Isaiah declares, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit” (Is. 11:1). The Gardener of Israel is not just capable of creating or bringing new life after death. Yes, he can do both. But the image of a stumped, lifeless root sprouting a new branch makes an additional claim: God can bring new life from the very place where death once reigned. Such a thing stands as “a sign among the nations” (Is. 11:10). What a wager! Here would be a long-suffering faithfulness indeed!

- To promise ahead of the coming calamity that his promise would remain through it.
- To promise, in the face of exile, death, centuries, the collapse of kingdoms, and through intervals of empires, that Jesse’s Son would sit on David’s throne.
- That throughout Israel’s waywardness, injustice, and sin, he would not avail himself of the many opportunities to be released from the problems posed by the covenant he made with David.

Signs tell us about the sign-giver. Here is a sign that proclaims, in the sight of all peoples, that the God who rules in the Heavens is faithful to the very end. The lineage of Jesse may be a small historical circumstance, but it is one the Eternal Lord has remembered and to which he has shown his steadfast love.

Before this God let all the political-promise-making rulers shut their mouths (Is. 52:15), let them kiss the Son who reigns in Zion ([Ps. 2:12](#)), and let them bring gifts from the ends of the earth ([Ps. 72:10](#)).

Worshipping Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of Jesse

In Jesus, the House of the Lord and the House of David were truly united. On that first Christmas, a small branch sprouted from the stump of Jesse, as a descendant of David’s fallen house was born beneath the poverty line to a virgin in Roman-occupied Judea. The shepherds gather around the Shepherd of Israel ([Ps. 23:1](#), [80:1](#); [John 10:11](#)) and gaze in wonder ([Lk. 2:16-17](#)). Later, rulers from the East will come to pay homage to the toddler-king of Judah ([Matt. 2:1](#)).

As a boy, he will ask his troubled parents why they did not think he would be in his father’s house ([Lk. 2:49](#)). This is the twofold claim of the Seed of Jesse: It is his genealogical father’s house because great Davidic kings like David, Solomon, or Josiah were the ones who built or restored (as the case may be) the Lord’s house, the Tabernacle or Temple. And it is his Heavenly Father’s house because he is the eternal Son who was in the beginning with God because he was God ([Jn. 1:1](#)).

On that first Good Friday, Jesus, the Root of Jesse, is enthroned upon the Cross. As the heir of the house of Judah, he offers his life for others, like his father Judah before him ([Gen. 44:33-34](#); cf. [Jn. 18:8](#); and [Heb. 2:10](#)). He is diademed with a crown made of the thorns of Adam's curse ([Matt. 27:29](#); cf. [Gen 3:18](#)). Like the first child begotten by David upon Bathsheba, Jesus—son of David—dies for the sins of his ancestors ([2 Sam 12:18](#); [Is. 53:4](#)). Like Absalom, an earlier son of David, Christ hangs from a tree, forsaken and mocked ([2 Sam 18:9-15](#); [Lk. 22:33-36](#)). Like his father, David, and all his forebears before him, Jesus dies.

Above him a placard proclaims the evangel composed by a Roman governor: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews ([Jn. 19:19](#)). A Roman centurion renders the verdict over the Dead Man: “truly this was the son of God” ([Matt. 27:54](#); [Mk. 15:39](#); [Lk. 23:47](#)). God's House and David's House have truly become one.

Then, on that first Easter, an heir of David's lineage rose from the dead. A Root from Jesse put on a spiritual body, never to die again (cf. [Matt. 28:6](#); [Rom. 6:10](#)).

Upon ascending to the heavens, this Davidic King took his seat at the right hand of God ([Acts 1:1-11](#)). In the councils of the Godhead sits a living descendant of Jesse.

Jesus' Faithfulness to the Stump of Jesse

As we count down the days to [Christmas](#), we hail Christ as the God who has yoked his story with ours, who has united us to his household, and who keeps the promises he makes to us amidst all the vicissitudes of history.

Central to God's identity is his unwavering faithfulness. This is majestically displayed in his faithfulness to the stump of Jesse. Let the nations be glad! If God can be faithful to that story, he can be faithful to our little stories as well. This is one reason why Paul sees a connection between the gospel of Jesus, the Son of David, and God's remaining faithful even if we are faithless: “for he cannot deny himself” ([2 Tim. 2:13](#)).