

# THE GENEALOGIES IN MATTHEW AND LUKE

(Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23b-38)

From **THE NIV HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS**  
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**ESSAY 9**

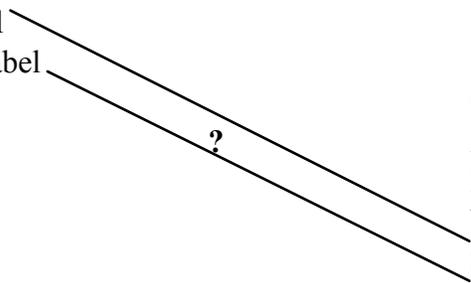
Both Matthew and Luke give a genealogical list for the descent of Jesus. When these are compared, differences and difficulties appear immediately. The most obvious difference is that Matthew's list begins with Abraham and descends to Jesus, whereas Luke's list begins with Jesus and ascends to Adam, the son of God. This in itself presents no difficulty; but when one of the lists is put in inverse order for convenience in comparing, it is quite another matter. Of course only Luke gives the generations from Adam to Abraham, and the lists of progenitors between Abraham and David as given by Matthew and Luke are nearly identical. No problem comes until we compare the two versions of the succession from David to Jesus:

**Matthew's list**

- David
- Solomon
- Rehoboam
- Abijah
- Asa
- Jehoshaphat
- Jehoram
- Uzziah
- Jotham
- Ahaz
- Hezekiah
- Manasseh
- Amon
- Josiah
- Jeconiah
- Shealtiel
- Zerubbabel
- Abiud
- Eliakim
- Azor
- Zadok
- Akim
- Eliud
- Eleazar
- Matthan
- Jacob
- Joseph (husband of Mary)

**Luke's list (in inverse order)**

- David
- Nathan
- Mattatha
- Menna
- Melea
- Eliakim
- Jonam
- Joseph
- Judah
- Simeon
- Levi
- Matthat
- Jorim
- Eliezer
- Joshua
- Er
- Elmadam
- Cosam
- Addi
- Melki
- Neri
- Shealtiel
- Zerubbabel
- Rhesa
- Joanan
- Joda
- Josech
- Semein



Mattathias  
Maath  
Naggai  
Esli  
Nahum  
Amos  
Mattathias  
Joseph  
Jannai  
Melki  
Levi  
Matthat  
Heli  
Joseph  
Jesus (“the son, so it was thought, of Joseph”)

For students of a harmony of the gospels the above comparison presents two problems: the difference in the number of generations and the dissimilarity of names. How can the two genealogies be harmonized without sacrificing the historical integrity of either?

Recent critical studies have generally regarded past attempts at harmonization as just so much frustrated effort. Both H. C. Waetjen and M. D. Johnson summarily dismiss past efforts to preserve full historical authenticity as unconvincing, strained, and beside the point. In any event, it is said, historicity will not affect significantly the reader's existential response or understanding of New Testament theology. Instead, each genealogy must be understood individually and theologically in relation to the gospel in which it appears and the thought of the evangelist that it is intended to express. The content and structure of each supposedly is arbitrary to suit the evangelist's purpose. What those specific purposes were need not occupy our attention here, for the analyses of scholars such as Waetjen and Johnson follow the assumptions and methodology of much recent New Testament critical scholarship. Their analyses will be no better than their assumptions and methodology. And the fundamental question of the historical reliability of the genealogies cannot be bypassed in so cavalier a fashion. Consequently we turn our attention to the problems of harmonizing the two lists of Jesus' ancestral descent.

The first problem, the difference in the number of generations, is the easier to resolve. Although it is true that Matthew lists twenty-six progenitors between David and Jesus, compared with Luke's forty, two factors must be kept in mind. First, it is not uncommon for the generations in one line of descent to increase more rapidly than in another. Second, and more important, in Jewish thinking son might mean "grandson," or, even more generally, "descendant" (as "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham," Matthew 1:1). Similarly, begat (rendered by the pattern “ ‘X’ [was] the father of ‘Y’ ” in the New International Version, Matthew 1:2-16) does not necessarily mean "was the actual (that is, immediate) father of" but instead may simply indicate real descent. Just the fact that Matthew casts his list in the form of three groups of fourteen generations suggests this was a convenient though arbitrary arrangement from which some generations may have been omitted. In fact, it can be shown that Matthew's list has omissions (cf. 2 Kings 8:24; 1 Chronicles 3:11; 2 Chronicles 22:1, 11; 24:27; 2 Kings 23:34; 24:6). Omission of generations in biblical genealogies is not unique to this case, and Jews are known to have done this freely. The purpose of a genealogy was not to account for every

generation, but to establish the fact of an undoubted succession, including especially the more prominent ancestors.

The second problem is more difficult to resolve. In the two lists of succession, between David and Joseph all the names are different except Shealtiel and Zerubbabel (connected in the list by dotted lines). How is this to be accounted for? Some exegetes unnecessarily despair of finding an adequate solution or even suggest the lists are in error. Others see them as redactional devices by which the writers sought to fulfill their theological purposes in writing (see essay 5). But among the attempts to harmonize the genealogies with each other, four proposals deserve consideration.

1. Julius Africanus (d. AD 240) suggested that Matthew gives the genealogy of Joseph through his actual father, Jacob, but Luke gives Joseph's genealogy through his legal father, Heli. In this view, Heli died childless. His half-brother, Jacob, who had the same mother but a different father, married Heli's widow and by her had Joseph. Known as levirate marriage, this action meant that physically Joseph was the son of Jacob and legally the son of Heli. Jacob was the descendant of David through David's son Solomon, and Heli was the descendant of David through David's son Nathan. Thus, by both legal and physical lineage Joseph had a rightful claim to the Davidic throne and so would his legal (but not physical) son Jesus. Matthew gives Joseph's physical lineage, Luke his legal lineage.

2. In his classic work, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, J. Gresham Machen argued for the view that Matthew gives the legal descent of Joseph whereas for the most part (he does allow for levirate marriage or transfer of lineage to a collateral line in Joseph's physical line), Luke gives the physical descent. Although the physical and legal lines are reversed, the purpose is still to establish Joseph's rightful claim to the Davidic throne. This view holds that Solomon's line failed in Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) (Jeremiah 22:30). But when the kingly line through Solomon became extinct, the living member of the collateral line of: Nathan (Shealtiel, Matthew 1:12, cf. Luke 3:27) inherited the title to the throne. Thus, Machen asserts, Matthew is tracing the legal heirship to the throne from David, through Solomon, through Jeconiah, with transfer to a collateral line at that point. Luke traces the physical descent (with a possibility of jumps to a collateral line or levirate marriages) to David through Nathan. Matthew starts with the question, Who is the heir to David's throne? Luke starts with the question, Who is Joseph's father?

A large number of scholars have preferred some form of this view, including A. Hervey, Theodor Zahn, Vincent Taylor, and Brooke F. Westcott.

3. A third view suggests that the apparent conflict between the two genealogies of Joseph results from mistakenly assuming Luke is intending to give Joseph's genealogy. Instead it should be understood as Mary's genealogy. Joseph's name stands in for Mary's by virtue of the fact that he had become son or heir of Heli (Mary's father) by his marriage to her. This view holds that Heli died with no sons, and that Mary became his heiress (Num. 27:1-11; 36:1-12). The first of these passages seems to provide for the preservation of the name of the man who dies with daughters but no sons. In the case of Heli and his daughter, Mary, this could have been accomplished by Joseph's becoming identified with Mary's family. Joseph would be included in the family genealogy, although the genealogy is really Mary's. Thus the genealogies of Matthew and Luke diverge from David on because Matthew traces the Davidic descent of Joseph, and Luke the Davidic descent of Mary (with Joseph's name standing in).

Each of the three proposals discussed thus far would resolve the apparent conflict between the genealogies in Matthew and Luke. Each also appears to be within the realm of reasonable possibility. It must be pointed out that all three, however, rely upon conjecture that is possible but far from certain. In the first two views one must appeal to levirate marriages or collateral lines to resolve difficulties. The third view rests on the conjecture that Joseph takes Mary's place in the genealogy. In addition, the first must explain why Luke rather than Matthew is interested in the legal lineage of Joseph. Both the first and second views must explain why Luke, in light of his apparent interest in and close association with Mary, would be concerned with Joseph's genealogy at all. Interested as he was in Jesus' humanity, birth, and childhood, why would Luke give the genealogy of the man who was Jesus' legal but not physical father? These questions are not unanswerable, but they do leave the field open for a view less dependent on conjecture, one that does not raise these questions.

4. There is such a view. Like the third proposed solution, this fourth view understands the genealogy in Luke really to be Mary's, but for different reasons. Here Heli is understood to be the progenitor of Mary, not of Joseph. Joseph is not properly part of the genealogy, and is mentioned only parenthetically. Luke 3:23 should then read, "Jesus . . . was the son (so it was thought, of Joseph) of Heli." The support for this view is impressive.

a. Placing the phrase "so it was thought, of Joseph" in parentheses, and thus in effect removing it from the genealogy, is grammatically justified. In the Greek text Joseph's name occurs, without the Greek definite article prefixed; every other name in the series has the article. By this device Joseph's name is shown to be not properly a part of the genealogy. Jesus was only thought to be his son. This would make Jesus the son (that is, grandson or descendant) of Heli, Mary's progenitor, and is consistent with Luke's account of Jesus' conception, which makes clear that Joseph was not his physical father (Luke 1:26-38).

b. This view allows the most natural meaning of begot to stand. In other words, begat refers to actual physical descent rather than to jumps to collateral lines.

c. Matthew's interest in Jesus' relation to the Old Testament and the Messianic kingdom makes it appropriate that he give Joseph's real descent from David through Solomon – a descent that is also Jesus' legal descent – and thus gives him legal claim to the Davidic throne.

d. Because Luke emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, his solidarity with the human race, and the universality of salvation, it is fitting that Luke show his humanity by recording his human descent through his human parent, Mary. His pedigree is then traced back to Adam.

e. The objection that Mary's name is not in Luke's version needs only the reply that women were rarely included in Jewish genealogies; though giving her descent, Luke conforms to custom by not mentioning her by name. The objection that Jews never gave the genealogy of women is met by the answer that this is a unique case; Luke is talking about a virgin birth. How else could the physical descent of one who had no human father be traced? Furthermore, Luke has already shown a creative departure from customary genealogical lists by starting with Jesus and ascending up the list of ancestors rather than starting at some point in the past and descending to Jesus.

f. This view allows easy resolution of the difficulties surrounding Jeconiah (Matthew 1:11), Joseph's ancestor and David's descendant through Solomon. In 2 Sam. 7:12-17 the perpetuity of the Davidic kingdom through Solomon (vv. 12-13) is unconditionally promised. Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) later was the royal representative of that line of descent for which eternal perpetuity had been promised. Yet for his gross sin (2 Chronicles 24:8-9), Jeconiah was to be recorded as if childless, and no descendant of his would prosper on the Davidic throne (Jeremiah 22:30). This poses a dilemma. It is Jeconiah through whom the Solomonic descent and legal right to the throne properly should be traced. Solomon's throne had already been unconditionally promised eternal perpetuity. Yet Jeconiah will have no physical descendants who will prosper on that throne. How may both the divine promise and the curse be fulfilled?

First, notice that Jeremiah's account neither indicates Jeconiah would have no seed, nor does it say Jeconiah's line has had its legal claim to the throne removed by his sin. The legal claim to the throne remains with Jeconiah's line, and Matthew records that descent down to Joseph. In 1:16, Matthew preserves the virgin birth of Jesus

and at the same time makes clear that Jesus does not come under the curse upon Jeconiah. He breaks the pattern and carefully avoids saying that Joseph (a descendant of Jeconiah) begat Jesus. Instead he refers to "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus." In the English translation the antecedent of "whom" is ambiguous., But in the Greek text, "whom" is feminine singular in form and can refer only to Mary who was not a descendant of Jeconiah. As to human parentage, Jesus was born of Mary alone, though Joseph was his legal father. As Jesus' legal father, Joseph's legal claim passed to Jesus. But because Jesus was not actually Jeconiah's seed, although of actual Davidic descent through Mary, descendant of Nathan, Jesus escaped the curse on Jeconiah's seed pronounced in Jeremiah 22:30. Thus the problem is resolved.

What we have then are two different genealogies of two people. Probably even the Shealtiel and Zerubbabel of Matthew and Luke are different persons. This view does not depend on conjecture, rests on evidence within the texts themselves, fits the purposes of the evangelists, and easily resolves the problem surrounding Jeconiah. Of this view L. M. Sweet appropriately wrote, "Its simplicity and felicitous adjustment to the whole complex situation is precisely its recommendation."

Although it is not, strictly speaking, a harmonistic problem, one other difficulty of lesser significance found in Matthew's record of Joseph's genealogy needs discussion here. In 1:17, Matthew divides the generations from Abraham to Christ into three groups of fourteen generations: from Abraham to David, from David to the deportation to Babylon, and from the deportation to Christ. In part, this was likely a device used by Matthew to aid memory; it does not imply that he mentioned every progenitor. At least five names are omitted: Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah, Jehoiakim, and Eliakim. As previously stated, this procedure was not unusual and presents no real problem.

With three groups of fourteen generations, however, one does expect to find forty-two different names. But there are only forty-one. Although one set has only thirteen different names, the problem is only apparent. Matthew does not speak of forty-two different names but of three groups of fourteen generations, which he divides for himself. David's name concludes the first set and stands first in the second set (cf. 1:17). In other words, David is counted twice and is thus given special prominence in the genealogy that shows Jesus' Davidic throne rights through his legal father, Joseph. Another means used for increasing the focus on David is the title assigned to him in Matthew 1:6. He is called King David, and is the only person in the genealogy to whom a title is given. Possibly the Davidic emphasis is even further enhanced by the number *14*. The sum of the numerical value of the Hebrew letters in the name David is *14*. To the modern reader this might seem overly subtle, but it was not necessarily so in ancient Semitic thought. The numerical value of David's name, however, is not necessary to the resolution of this problem. Again, alleged discrepancies between and in the genealogical lists of Matthew and Luke are shown to be more apparent than real. Reasonable solutions to the problems exist and even throw further light on the text.

### **Selected Reading List**

Johnson, Marshall D. *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: With Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969. Pp. 139-256.

Machen, J. Gresham. *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. New York: Harper, 1930.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. "The Genealogy of Jesus Christ," by L. M. Sweet.

Waetjen, Herman C. "The Genealogy as the Key to the Gospel according to Matthew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 205-30.