Supplementary Lesson

3

The Genealogy of Jesus

The genealogy listed in Matthew 1:1-17 and the genealogy listed in Luke 3:23-38 are starkly different, fueling criticism from skeptics. To a great degree, the credibility of both accounts rests on the ability to reconcile their genealogies. For this reason, we will now take a focused look at this.

Matthew's Genealogy

Matthew places Christ's geneology in the very opening of his Gospel account, for his purpose is to prove that Jesus is indeed heir to the throne of David. By placing his genealogy at the beginning of his account, Matthew also provides a direct link between the Old Testament and the New, showing a continuity that might otherwise be missed.

Luke's Genealogy

Unlike Matthew, Luke lists Christ's geneology well after the birth and childhood narratives, and his purpose is to show Jesus as the perfect man, the obedient counterpart to the disobedient Adam. For this reason, he starts his genealogy only after the divine declaration: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

These two very different purposes are also reflected in how the genealogies are constructed.

➲ Matthew's genealogy starts with Abraham and descends down through David's line toward Jesus. The Matthean genealogy is arranged symmetrically into groups of fourteen,* showing the origin, ascendancy and desolation of the house of David.

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* Matthew deliberately truncates his genealogies into three sets of 14 (with David and Jeconiah each counted twice, since they both ended and started a new era). The number 14 was significant the first century Jews in two ways. Firstly, it is connected with Passover (which was on the 14th of 1st month). And it was also connected with David, for the name "David" in Hebrew numerology adds up to 14. How could Matthew justify condensing his genealogy in this way? The answer is simple. Just because someone is called "the son of" somebody doesn't actually mean that he was the immediate son of that man. He may have been a grandson, or even a more distant descendant (note **Matthew 1:1**). Thus on several occasions, Matthew purposely skips a generation or two in order to create a genealogy that is both asthetically balanced and biblically accurate.

 ➲ Luke's genealogy starts with Jesus and is listed in reverse order, moving backwards toward Adam. The focus of the Lukan genealogy is more on the humanity of Christ.

But what about the differences between the two accounts? So blatant are their points of divergence, how could they possibly be reconciled?

Reconciling the Genealogies

Read Matthew 1:1-17
Read Luke 3:23-38

Apart from the way the two writers handle Christ's genealogy, a closer look reveals some very real discrepencies. Matthew records Joseph's father as "Jacob" and Luke records Joseph's father as "Heli," their genealogies are very different all the way back to David, at which point they merge and can be reconciled without trouble.

Why the two genealogies would differ so radically has puzzled scholars for centuries. If the Gospel accounts are indeed part of the divinely inspired Word of God, how can they be reconciled?

There are two workable theories:

The Twin Line Theory

The discrepencies between the two genealogies can be explained if Matthew's lists Joseph's genealogy while Luke lists Mary's genealogy. This theory is reasonable, especially if Luke leans heavily upon Mary's eyewitness testimony, as many scholars believe.*

This theory is supported strongly from with the text. While Matthew is primarily concerned with Christ's descent from David through "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ" (**Matthew 1:16**), Luke approaches the genealogy from a different vantage. In **Luke 3:23**, Luke starts off his genealogy in this way:

"[Jesus] was the son, *so it was thought*, of Joseph..."

The reasoning behind the Twin Line Theory goes like this.

 ➲ **Matthew** traces the *legal* descent of Jesus through Joseph. Even though Joseph wasn't Jesus' biological father, he was Jesus' legal father, and thus Christ could trace his genealogy back to David through Joseph. The clue to the Matthean genealogy is the phrase, "Joseph, the husband of Mary," which emphasizes Joseph's legal (although not biological) paternity.

 ➲ **Luke** traces the *biological* descent of Jesus through Mary. The clue to the Lukan genealogy is the phrase, "He was the son, *so it was thought*, of

*   Scholars have also pointed out that, as a physician, Luke may have been able to speak with Mary on more personal terms than she would otherwise have shared with others, hence Luke's unique Gospel perspective.

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Joseph…" If this is true, then Heli wasn't actually the father of Joseph, but was in fact the father of Mary. In other words, we should read Luke's genealogy as follows: "[Jesus] was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the [son-in-law] of Heli."

This theory is workable, but there is a remaining problem. The genealogies don't have one such discrepancy, but in fact *two*. In the Matthean genealogy we read: "… the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of *Neri*…" In the Lukan genealogy we read: "…*Jeconiah* was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel…" Thus we see that both the Matthean and the Lukan genealogies converge at Shealtiel and Zerubbabel (at the time of the exile) then diverge again, tracing the Davidic descent through two lines again – **Matthew** through David's son, Solomon and **Luke** through David's son, Nathan. The problem is this. How can Shealtiel have two fathers – Jeconiah (according to **Matthew**) and Neri (according to **Luke**)? This leads us to another theory.

The Levirate Theory

Under Old Covenant Law, if a married man died childless, a brother or uncle was obligated to marry the widow (see **Deuteronomy 25:5-10**). Any son produced by this marriage would then be counted as the heir of the dead man. This "levirate" tradition is the basis of the story of Ruth (note **Ruth 2:20; 3:2,9-13; 4:1-11**), and was also used by the Sadducees in an attempt to disprove the possibility of resurrection from the dead (**Matthew 22:23-33**).

Any first century Jew's genealogical record would include numerous levirate heirs. Jesus' genealogy would be no different. Zerubbabel, for example, is called "the son of Shealtiel" (**Luke 3:27**), a fact supported by **Ezra 3:2, Nehemiah 12:1** and **Haggai 1:12**. Yet **1 Chronicles 3:17-19** tells us that Pedaiah, not Shealtiel,* was the father of Zerubbabel. Shealtiel was actually the brother of Pedaiah, and thus the uncle of Zerubbabel. So why is Zerubbabel called "the son of Shealtiel"? It is probable that Shealtiel had died without a son, and so Pedaiah had taken on his levirate obligation and married Shealtiel's widow. Although Zerubbabel's *biological* father was Pedaiah, his *legal* father was Shealtiel.

This can also explain how both Jeconiah† and Neri can be the father of Shealtiel. Since Jeconiah was childless (see the text box "Jeconiah's Curse" on the next page), he may have adopted Shealtiel as his son and legal heir. In such a situation, Shealtiel would have Jeconiah as his legal father and Neri as his biological father.

We've shown that two theories – the Twin Line Theory and the Levirate Theory – can adequately explain the differences between the genealogies in **Matthew**

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*   There are some variations in the spelling and pronunciation of names in Old Testament genealogies and their New Testament counterparts. This is simply the product of the translation from Hebrew to English (in the case of the Old Testament) and from Hebrew to Greek to English (in the case of the New Testament). Thus Shealtiel in the New Testament is the equivalent of Salathiel in the Old Testament. There are numerous other examples of these variant spellings in the genealogical records of Christ.

†   Jeconiah was also called Coniah (an abbreviation) and Jehoiachin. All three names are variants of the same basic Hebrew name, which means, "Yahweh establishes."

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and **Luke**. Which is correct? Probably both are. The fact that Joseph is recorded as having two fathers – Jacob and Heli – cannot be properly explained by a levi-rate marriage. For if Heli was closely related to Jacob (as would be the case in a levirate arrangement), then the two genealogies would not diverge as they do.

For this reason, it is likely that Jacob was Joseph's father and Heli was Mary's father. This is also supported by a statement in the Jewish Talmud which records Mary's father as Heli.[1] A long-standing Christian tradition also states that Mary's father was called Joachim, of which Heliachim is a variant. According to this evidence, Heli may have been the abbreviated name of Mary's father, not Joseph's.

Further support for this possibility is found in the Greek grammar used by Luke, which indicates that Heli, not Joseph, is the starting point of his genealogical record. From Luke's perspective, Joseph is merely the foster-father of Jesus. Heli (Mary's father) is where Jesus' ancestry begins.

What is the underlying reason for the differences in the two genealogies? It is found in the purposes of the two Gospel compilers. Matthew's purpose was to establish Jesus' royal descent from David and his right to the title Messiah. Luke's purpose was to establish an ancestral connection to all humanity. This is why Matthew starts with Abraham and descends through the generations toward Christ (the traditional format of a Jewish genealogy), whereas Luke works backwards toward the Adam, the father of the human race.

For Matthew, the royal descent of the Messiah is all-important. But what is important for Luke is Jesus as the focus and climax of human history. This is why Matthew shows the legal descent from David via Solomon, while Luke is content with the biological descent from David via Nathan. Matthew establishes Christ's legal right to Messiahship (through Joseph). Luke establishes Christ's biological connection to the human race (through Mary). As the *Holman Bible Dictionary* explains, "both Mary and Joseph were numbered among th royal descendants to the throne of David. Jesus sat upon the throne of David by dynastic of legal right through Joseph, by physical descent through Mary, and by divine appointment of the living God."[2]

Jeconiah's Curse

Read Jeremiah 22:24,30

Because of Jeconiah's blatant rebellion against God, the Lord pronounces a curse upon him. History tells us that Jeconiah had seven sons, but none of them had children of their own. According to a clay tablet unearthed at the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, all seven sons of Jeconiah were made eunuchs, thus fulfilling God's prophetic curse: "Record this man as if childless."

But what about the rest of the curse. God declares:

> "...none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah."

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How then can Jesus claim his right to the throne if, according to **Matthew 1:12**, he traces his lineage to David through Jeconiah?

Matthew's genealogy also raises another question. If Jeconiah was without descendants, how can it be true that "Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel"? The answer is not difficult. It appears that without children of his own, Jeconiah adopted Shealtiel, the son of Neri, as his legal heir. Even Shealtiel died childless, for as we have seen, Pedaiah sired Zerubbabel on Shealtiel's behalf.

But what about the curse against Jeconiah? Wouldn't that have disqualified Jesus as heir to David's throne? No, on two counts:

> ➲ It appears that God revoked his curse over Zerubbabel's life (read **Haggai 2:23**). It is no coincidence that God uses the same analogy (the signet ring) for both Jeconiah and his legal grandson, Zerubbabel. According to **Exodus 34:7**, God sometimes visits judgment for the sins of the fathers upon the third and fourth generation. In Zerubbabel's case, God stopped the curse at the third generation, for the prophecy had been completely fulfilled. Jeconiah now had no natural offspring. Zerubbabel was Jeconiah's descendant twice removed – through adoption and through levirate marriage. At God's command, the curse of **Jeremiah 22:30** stopped at Zerubbabel.

> ➲ Even though Jesus claimed his *legal* right to David's throne through Jeconiah, *biologically* his pedigree bypassed Jeconiah and through Mary's line reached back to David through Nathan, as Luke shows. In legal descent, Jesus was of the line of Jeconiah, but in natural descent, he was not of Jeconiah's offspring. The legal right applied to him, but not the curse. Furthermore, since this same logic could be applied even to Zerubbabel, the curse, no matter how you look at it, simply does not apply to Jesus.

Conclusion

Where did Matthew and Luke get their genealogical records from? The Temple in Jerusalem kept extensive genealogies, since records of royal and priestly descent had to be kept meticulously (note **Nehemiah 7:4-5,63-65; 12:22-23**). When Jesus was circumcised and presented at the Temple (**Luke 2:22**), his birth records would probably have been entered at that time into the registry at the Temple.

There is strong historical evidence for the existence of such genealogical records. Josephus makes many references to public records that contained genealogical information.[3] It is even possible that there were lending libraries for genealogical records in schools and synagogues within Palestine.[4] And Eusebius tells us that during the reigns of Vespasian, Domitian and Trajan, Rome persecuted those of royal Davidic lineage in order to curtail messianic activity among the Jews. Even the grandsons of Jesus' brothers were arrested, indicating that their genealogical records were current and showed Davidic descent.

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[1] *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

[2] *Holman Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

[3] *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

[4] *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

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