

The Genealogies of Jesus

1.0 The Problem: Different Genealogies of Jesus

1.1 Jesus' Origins in the Gospels

Mark begins his Gospel immediately by identifying Jesus with Isaiah's prophecy: "Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, as it was written in the Prophet Isaiah..."

John begins with Jesus's pre-existence and deity, linking Jesus with Genesis's account of all creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Only **Matthew** and **Luke** record Jesus' genealogy, but they do so at **different points** in their Gospels and include **different names** in their genealogies.

1.2 Matthew

Matthew **opens** his Gospel with Jesus' genealogy, beginning with the words: "The book of the genesis of Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham."

Matthew's genealogy **ascends** from Abraham to Jesus, and is followed by Jesus' birth narrative:

- The story of Jesus' immaculate conception as announced by an angel to **Joseph**
- The story of the wise men following a **star** to **worship** (toddler?) Jesus
- The angel's warning to **Joseph** to flee to Egypt
- Herod's massacre of male children
- **Joseph's** dream to return from Egypt to Israel

1.3 Luke

By contrast, Luke's genealogy doesn't occur until Luke chapter chapter four, *after*:

- The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth
- The story of Jesus' immaculate conception as announced by an angel to **Mary**
- Mary's visit to pregnant Elizabeth
- The birth of John the Baptist
- The birth of Jesus
- A host of angels directing shepherds (not wise men) to visit the infant (not toddler) Jesus
- Jesus' presentation at the Temple at 8-days' old, with Simeon's and Anna's prophecies
- Jesus as a boy in the temple
- The ministry of John the Baptist
- Jesus' own baptism

Further differences between the genealogies include that:

- Luke's genealogy *starts* with Jesus and *descends* to "the son of Adam, the Son of God," whereas Matthew's genealogy *starts* with Abraham and *ascends* to Jesus.
- Matthew lists 42 names; Luke lists 56 names
- Matthew and Luke record different spellings of the same (or similar names), different names from each other and from OT genealogies, and Matthew includes 5 **women**
- Matthew and Luke track *roughly* up until David; after David they take different paths (including Luke tracing Jesus' ancestry through David's son *Nathan* and Matthew through David's son *Solomon*)

2.0 Proposed Solutions

Naturally, these differences have perplexed readers of the Gospels for centuries. Many solutions have been proposed, though none, ultimately, is without problems.

2.1 Historical Solutions

Ancient (and modern) solutions include:

- From the 2nd century (e.g., Julius Africanus) – Both Matthew and Luke give Jesus’ descent through Joseph:
 - Matthew gives Joseph’s **natural** lineage and Luke gives Jesus’ **legal** lineage
 - (Some modern scholars agree, but reverse it)
- ⊗ This means we don’t see a blood relationship between Jacob and Joseph, which is an unnatural reading.
- In the 3rd-4th centuries (e.g., Tertullian):
 - Matthew gives Mary’s genealogy
 - Luke gives Joseph’s genealogy
- ⊗ Both Matthew and Luke identify **Joseph**, and this doesn’t make any sense of Matthew’s “begat” formula throughout his genealogy.
- Luther popularized the medieval view that:
 - Matthew gives Joseph’s ancestry
 - Luke gives Mary’s ancestry
- ⊗ Both identify Joseph, and Luke is not shy elsewhere to show Mary’s prominence – why be shy here?

2.2 Ancient Genealogies

Probably most important to note is the real function of ancient genealogies:

Biblical genealogies are different from modern ones. Unlike modern genealogies that attempt a precise and scientific categorization of a person’s lineage, in the ancient world “genealogies serve different purposes and...an individual can be accorded two or more different genealogies according to the purpose for which they were drawn up. Only rather rarely and to a limited depth do ancient Semitic genealogies afford us a list of strictly biological ancestry – a factor that does not necessarily make them inaccurate since the intention of those who preserved them was not strictly biological.”¹

Ancient genealogies served several (sometimes overlapping) purposes:

- Structure history (e.g., into epochs)
- Preserve tribal homogeneity or cohesion
- Interrelate diverse traditions
- Acknowledge marriage contracts between extended families
- Demonstrate credentials for power and property
- Maintain ethnic identity
- Encode social information about a person’s status (honour), office or rank (e.g., priest; king)
- Indicate a person’s character

Only rarely do ancient Semitic genealogies preserve strict biological information, and they commonly omit names from genealogical tables.

Most genealogies from the ancient Near Eastern agrarian period are **patrilineal** (follow the father), testifying to the male’s status in a given community. (Note the emphasis on **fatherhood** in Matthew’s genealogy and on **sonship** in Luke’s.)

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (NY: Image Books, 1979), 65

3.0 Paying Attention to Each Gospel Writer's Distinct Emphases

The more **relevant** question is to ask, “what role does each genealogy play in its respective Gospel?”

3.1 Matthew

- Begins with (a *title*?) “The Genesis of Jesus”
- Traces Jesus’ ancestry **through** David to **Abraham**
- Matthew 1.17 points out an inherent structure of 3 groups of 14, with **David** at the centre.

Matthew seems to use a Jewish literary technique called “gematria,” where each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is assigned a number, so that words or phrases can relate to a particular numerical value.

In Hebrew, the number “14” spells “David”: ($\tau = 4$) + ($\daleth = 6$) + ($\tau = 4$) = 14.

To achieve this symmetry, Matthew has to omit 5 Davidic kings from the biblical record – significantly, all of them *cursed* kings.

Also interesting is that Matthew’s third group has only 13 names, unless Mary is a generation all her own – a testimony to the virgin birth?

- Davidic focus lends to Matthew’s early identification of Jesus as a “king” (e.g., the magi give Jesus kingly homage; Jesus’ birth threatens Herod’s power)
- Significant for Matthew is his inclusion of five **women** in Jesus’ genealogy:
 - Tamar (1.3)
 - Rahab (1.5)
 - Ruth (1.5)
 - [Bathsheba] – not named, but given as “the wife of Uriah the Hittite”
 - Mary

These women share in common that they are perceived to be “sexually suspect,” not unlike Mary.

3.2 Luke

- Like Matthew’s genealogy, Luke’s reinforces Jesus’ Davidic heritage.
- Luke identifies Jesus’ approximate age (30), coincidentally when David began to reign.
 - Note that life expectancy in the ancient world was **short**:²
 - 33% of **live births** died before **age 6**;
 - 60% of people died by their **mid-teens**;
 - 75% of people died by their **mid-twenties**;
 - 90% of people died by their **mid-forties**;
 - Perhaps 3% of people lived into their **sixties**;
 - **Few low-status peoples lived beyond their thirties**
- Luke’s conclusion “son of Adam, son of God” communicates Luke’s purposes:
 - Adam – Jesus is linked to humanity generally, not just Israel (Abraham) specifically, reinforcing Luke’s emphasis on universal salvation.
 - Son of God – establishes Jesus’ identity, a point already made leading up to this proclamation: Luke 1.34-35; 2.41-52; 3.22, 23.
- Luke’s genealogy reinforces God’s sovereign control of history from the beginning of creation.

4.0 Conclusion

Although we like our historical “facts” about the Bible, we gain more by paying attention to each Gospel writer’s individual purposes than by trying to smooth out perceived rough edges.

² Statistics from Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Fortress, 1993), 305.