

Why the Genealogies?

Scripture: Luke 3

Code: BQ122712

When He began His ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age, being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph, the son of Eli, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melchi, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Hesli, the son of Naggai, the son of Maath, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josech, the son of Joda, the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, the son of Melchi, the son of Addi, the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Salmon, the son of Nahshon, the son of Amminadab, the son of Admin, the son of Ram, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Heber, the son of Shelah, the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalaleel, the son of Cainan, the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God. (Luke 3:23–38)

Genealogies play a significant role in Scripture by rooting the biblical account in history. Because of their importance, the Jews kept very careful genealogical records, which survived until the Romans sacked Jerusalem and burned the temple in A.D. 70. In fact, the genealogies recorded by both Matthew and Luke are likely based on those public records, which were still in existence when they wrote. In addition to the official public records, many families undoubtedly kept private genealogical records. The Old Testament contains numerous genealogies (e.g., Gen. 4; 5; 10; 11; 1 Chron. 1–9). The New Testament also alludes to the availability of genealogical records. For example, Anna is identified as a member of the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36), Barnabas as a member of the tribe of Levi (Acts 4:36 [cf. Luke 10:32]), and Paul as a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5). Also, as noted above, Joseph knew that he had to go to Bethlehem for the census “because he was of the house and family of David” (Luke 2:4).

Because of the significance of genealogies in the ancient world, Luke’s readers would have understood why he included the genealogy of Jesus Christ. It was an essential credential for one claiming to be the Messiah to be a descendant of David. Luke has already given several credentials

that establish irrefutably that Jesus is the Messiah. The account of John the Baptist's miraculous birth to an elderly, barren couple introduced His prophesied forerunner (Luke 1:17; cf. Isa. 40:3-4; Mal. 3:1). Then the angel Gabriel announced to a young virgin named Mary that she was to be the mother of the Messiah (Luke 1:31-33). When Mary visited her older relative Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me?'" (vv. 41-43). Her husband, Zacharias, also filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 67), prophesied that John the Baptist would be Jesus' forerunner. The angels who announced His birth to the shepherds (2:8-11) testified that Jesus was Savior, Messiah, and Lord (v. 11). Two righteous and godly individuals, Simeon and Anna, also added their testimony that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who would bring salvation to Israel (2:25-38). In 3:1-18, Luke recorded John the Baptist's testimony to Jesus (see especially vv. 15-17). Then at His baptism, the Holy Spirit and God the Father gave the ultimate affirmation that Jesus is the Son of God, and thus the Messiah and the Savior of the world.

The genealogies of Jesus recorded by Matthew and Luke prove that He was not a self-appointed Messiah; a misguided reformer caught up in popular acclaim who began to have delusions of grandeur. Nor was He merely a good teacher of morality and ethics, or a revolutionary out to overthrow Rome's rule. His genealogies, tracing His ancestry back through David and Abraham to Adam and ultimately to God Himself, show that Jesus was Israel's rightful king.

A comparison of the genealogies in Matthew and Luke reveals marked differences. Some reflect the writers' different purposes. Matthew placed his genealogy at the beginning of his gospel where it fits chronologically into the life of Christ. Luke, however, inserted Christ's genealogy later in the context of His messianic credentials (see the discussion above). There are no women in Luke's genealogy, while Matthew includes five (counting Mary). Luke's genealogy goes from the present to the past; Matthew's from the past to the present. Thus Matthew's genealogy begins with Abraham and moves forward in time, while Luke's begins with Jesus and moves backward in time to Adam. Matthew's genealogy begins with Abraham, while the first name (chronologically) in Luke's is Adam. The different starting points in their genealogies reflect the different purposes of the two Gospel writers. Matthew wrote primarily to the Jewish people, so it was natural for him to begin with Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. Luke's approach was more universal. He was concerned to present Jesus as the Son of Man, and demonstrate His solidarity with the entire human race. Therefore, he took Christ's genealogy all the way back to Adam. Matthew's emphasis on Joseph (Matt. 1:16, 18, 19, 20, 24; 2:13, 14, 19-21) and Luke's on Mary (Luke 1:27, 30-56; 2:5, 16, 19, 34) in the early chapters of their gospels also reflects their complementary strategies.

Luke's genealogy, therefore, was longer than Matthew's, containing seventy-seven names as opposed to forty-two names in Matthew's genealogy. Neither genealogy was intended to be exhaustive, but rather both are compressed or abridged. Matthew's genealogy contains three

groups of fourteen names, which was evidently done to make it easier to memorize. (It should be noted that the term “father” in Matthew’s genealogy does not necessarily denote a father-son relationship; it can be used in the more general sense of “ancestor.” See for example Matthew 1:5; several generations must have elapsed between Salmon, the husband of Rahab, who lived during the Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua, and Boaz, who lived much later during the period of the judges. Note also verse 1 where Jesus is referred to as the son [i.e., descendant] of David and Abraham.) Luke’s genealogy also skips generations. The repeated term **son** does not appear in the Greek text; in each pair of names the first named individual is merely said to be a descendant in some sense of the second one (cf. also v. 38; Adam obviously was not the son of God in a physical sense).

Other differences are more significant. Luke identifies Jesus’ grandfather as **Eli**, while Matthew calls him Jacob. Luke traces Jesus’ ancestry through David’s son **Nathan**, while Matthew traces it through his son Solomon. Finally, while the names from Abraham to David are identical in both genealogies (except that Matthew skips Admin), all but two of the names from David to Joseph are different. Two possible explanations for those differences have been proposed.

The genealogies in Matthew and Luke establish beyond doubt that Jesus was a descendant of David. Not even His bitter enemies among the Jewish leaders denied that. They surely would have rejected His messianic claims out of hand had He not been, and silenced the crowds who enthusiastically cried out at the triumphal entry, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matt. 21:9). But the genealogical records, which they undoubtedly carefully checked, provided irrefutable proof of Jesus’ Davidic descent.

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