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Two Genealogies, One Jesus

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One common objection to the inerrancy of the Bible is the fact that the New Testament presents two distinct genealogies of Jesus' human heritage and that these two genealogies do not agree with each other. The Gospel of Matthew traces Jesus' royal genealogy from Abraham through Solomon, the son of King David, on down to Joseph. The genealogy in the Gospel of Luke begins with Joseph and goes back through Nathan, the son of King David, and ultimately back to Adam. Harmonizing these two genealogies is essential to defending the inerrancy of the New Testament, and instructive to our understanding of Jesus' humanity.

Characteristics of Matthew's Genealogy

Matthew 1:1-17 describes Jesus as a descendant of Abraham and King David. Matthew's intention is clear. He is declaring that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Abraham and the legitimate heir to the throne of David. Jesus is Israel's rightful King. In order to make this legal claim, Matthew presents Jesus' human genealogy. Matthew's genealogy begins with Abraham and moves forward in time to Jesus. It is divided into three segments of fourteen generations each (verse 17), and omits several names in order to fit this apparent mnemonic pattern. After listing Jehoram (Matthew 1:8), Matthew omits Ahaziah (2 Kings 8:24), Joash (2 Kings 11:2, 12), and Amaziah (2 Kings 12:21). After Josiah

(Matthew 1:10), Matthew omits Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:34). These omissions are no threat to biblical inerrancy since Matthew does not claim to present an exhaustive genealogy.

It's also interesting to note that Matthew includes within his genealogical record five significant women—Tamar (1:2), Rahab (1:4), Ruth (1:5), Bathsheba (1:6), and Mary (1:16). To include women in a legal genealogy was unusual in ancient times.

Most significant to the current study is the fact that Matthew links Jesus with King David through David's son Solomon. Luke traces Jesus' genealogy through a different son of David.

Characteristics of Luke's Genealogy

In contrast to Matthew's approach, Luke 3:23-38 begins with Jesus and moves backward in time to King David, Abraham, and ultimately Adam. Like Matthew, Luke is identifying Jesus as a rightful heir to David's throne and as the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. In addition, because Luke goes back to Adam, he is describing Jesus in His miraculous birth as being related to the entire human race. Jesus came to be the Savior of all humankind.

Unlike Matthew, Luke doesn't appear to leave significant gaps in the genealogical record, but adheres to the genealogical records of the Old Testament. Furthermore, although Luke often highlights the role of women during Jesus' earthly ministry, he includes no women in Jesus' genealogy.

While Luke links Jesus with King David, in contrast to Matthew he doesn't trace Jesus' line through Solomon. Instead, he follows Jesus' line through a different son of David by the name of Nathan.

There have been two different approaches to harmonizing the two genealogies of Jesus. The first approach takes both genealogies to be that of Joseph, while the second approach identifies one genealogy as that of Joseph and the other that of Mary.

Two Different Lines of Joseph

Some writers have attempted to show that both Matthew and Luke were presenting genealogies of Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus. Matthew 1:16 says that Jacob was the father of Joseph, while Luke

3:23 says that Heli was Joseph's father. In order for both genealogies to belong to Joseph, we must lean on the concept of a levirate marriage. According to Deuteronomy 25:5-6, if a man died without a child, that man's brother was to marry the widow and produce a child in his brother's name. "This hypothesis has various forms. The oldest goes back to Julius Africanus (c. A.D. 225; cf. Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 1.7), who argued that Matthew provides the natural genealogy and Luke the royal—the reverse of the modern theory."¹ Jacob and Heli would have been brothers, one being the legal father of Joseph who died prior to Joseph's conception and the other being the physical father of Joseph. The modern theory takes Luke to describe Joseph's physical father as Heli and Matthew to describe Joseph's legal father—his father based on a levirate marriage—as Jacob.

This approach has merit, but it also presents some problems. For example, if Jacob and Heli were brothers, they would have the same father. But according to Matthew, Jacob's father was Matthan and according to Luke, Heli's father was Matthat. Some have resolved this problem by seeing these two individuals with similar names as being the same individual, but this simply pushes the problem back one generation. It is possible that there were other levirate marriages at some stage in the genealogy that would account for these difficulties.

Two Distinct Lines of Joseph and Mary

Based on the complexities involved in identifying the two genealogies of Jesus as belonging to Joseph alone, it becomes more appealing to view these two genealogies as belonging to two different people—Joseph and Mary. "Another attempted explanation involves the view that the two different genealogies trace the family of Jesus' two different 'parents': the genealogy in Matthew is that of Joseph, and the one in Luke is that of Mary."²

The way in which Matthew phrases the relationship between Joseph and Jesus lends weight to this theory.

Note carefully the wording of v. 16: "And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ" (NASB). This stands in contrast to the format

followed in the preceding verses of the succession of Joseph's ancestors: "Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob, etc." Joseph is not said to have begotten Jesus; rather he is referred to as 'the husband of Mary, of whom [feminine genitive] Jesus was born.'³

Therefore, Matthew is presenting Jesus as the legal heir of Joseph by adoption but not the physical descendant of Joseph.

Luke also presents the genealogical connection between Jesus and Joseph with an indication of a unique relationship. Luke 3:23 says, "He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli." Clearly, Jesus wasn't the physical son of Joseph. But was Joseph the physical son of Heli, or was Heli Mary's physical father? Since Luke so clearly indicates that Jesus was not Joseph's physical descendant, it makes sense to assume that Luke is presenting Mary's genealogy. Mary is not mentioned by name because Luke omits women from his genealogical record. Based on this assumption, Luke presents the physical line of Jesus through Mary. This approach resolves any potential conflict between Matthew and Luke.

It should not be surprising that any writer would find it difficult to record a genealogy when a virgin birth is involved. Jesus' situation is unique in this way, and therefore the recording of His genealogy will of necessity be unusual. Also, "To all this it must be added that we possess not a poverty but a plethora of possibilities. Therefore the lack of certainty due to incomplete information need not imply error in either genealogy."⁴

¹ Carson, D. A. "Matthew" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, p. 64.

² Stein, Robert H. *Jesus the Messiah*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 70.

³ Liefeld, Walter L. "Luke" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, pp. 861-862.