

Source: [Does the Bible contain contradicting genealogies of Jesus? | Voice \(christianpost.com\)](#)
Accessed: 6/6/2022

Does the Bible contain contradicting genealogies of Jesus?

By [Gregory R. Lanier](#), Op-ed contributor | Monday, June 06, 2022



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Several times the New Testament declares Jesus to be the heir of King David and, thus, the descendant of Abraham (e.g., [John 7:42](#); [Rom. 1:3](#); [2 Tim. 2:8](#); [Rev. 5:5](#)). But only twice do we get a lengthy genealogy tracing the steps down to Jesus: [Matthew 1:1–17](#) and [Luke 3:23–38](#).

Without [ancestry.com](#) and [23andme.com](#), it is not surprising that these two genealogies differ. Some differences are mere spelling variations. But sometimes they involve whole sections of names. It may be surprising to learn that the genealogies in Matthew and Luke align for only approximately seventeen names out of one hundred. But do such differences mean that the genealogies contradict each other? Are there errors, or can the genealogies be reconciled?

Skeptics have attacked Scripture on this point since the AD 200s (e.g., Porphyry and Julian the Apostate), and theologians have responded with various solutions (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, Julius Africanus, Ambrose, and Augustine). No comprehensive solution has won the day, but that does not

mean there is none. It just means we must keep working at it. To that end, keep in mind four things when navigating the genealogies.

Intention of the authors

A genealogy is a compact narrative. The names bring with them the stories. If so, then both Matthew and Luke have authorial freedom in how to tell the genealogical story:

- Matthew uses descending order ending with Jesus (A “begat” B), while Luke uses ascending order starting from Jesus (B “son of” A).
- Matthew selects Abraham as the starting point, while Luke starts back at Adam.
- Matthew places his genealogy at the beginning ([Matt. 1](#)), while Luke places it after Jesus’ baptism ([Luke 3](#)).
- Matthew organizes the names in a 14/14/14 scheme ([Matt. 1:17](#)), while Luke may be adopting a subtle 11x7 scheme.

These choices are not contradictions. They simply reflect how the two evangelists have different goals. Matthew, for instance, stresses the Abraham–David–Jesus linkage ([Matt. 1:1](#)), while Luke stresses Jesus as “son of God” via Adam ([Luke 3:38](#)).

Lineal principle: Royal or blood line

A major choice when compiling a genealogy in antiquity is whether to offer the legal/royal lineage or the actual birth/blood lineage. The two are not the same: the legal heir may not reflect physical birth order (illustrated by Julius Caesar’s notoriously complex genealogy).

The most common theory is that Matthew on the whole offers the royal lineage, while Luke may largely trace actual birth descent. A telltale sign is this:

- [Matthew 1:6–12](#) David → Solomon → . . . Shealtiel
- [Luke 3:27–31](#) David → Nathan → . . . Shealtiel

Nathan was the third son of David ([2 Sam. 5:14](#)) and older brother of Solomon, but the throne passed to the latter. Jesus, then, would have blood ties to David via Nathan and legal ties via Solomon. Adding further complexity,

birth descent could be traced through the father or mother, though the former was more common.

Adoption practices

Extending the prior point, it was not uncommon, [even among Jews], for a father to adopt someone who was not his birth son to be legal heir. Such fusing of lineages via adoption may help explain other complexities:

- [Matthew 1:12](#) Jeconiah → Shealtiel → Zerubbabel
- [Luke 3:27](#) Neri → Shealtiel → Zerubbabel

God's curse of Jeconiah involved Jeconiah's offspring not receiving the throne ([Jer. 22:30](#)). Perhaps Neri was the biological father of Shealtiel, who was then — via adoption — grafted into the royal line of Jeconiah.

Compression

Lastly, the compiler of a genealogy may choose to skip generations, just as one could summarize, "Prince William is heir of Elizabeth I," omitting several steps in between.

[Matthew 1:8](#) compresses the genealogy from Joram to Uzziah (skipping Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah). Compression may also help explain why the genealogy of [Matthew 1:12–16](#) from Zerubbabel to Jesus is so much shorter (nine names) than [Luke 3:23–27](#) (nineteen names).

Putting it together

Let's apply some of these principles to a final difference in the genealogies:

- [Matthew 1:15–16](#) Matthan → Jacob → Joseph → Jesus
- [Luke 3:23–24](#) Matthat → Heli → Joseph → Jesus

From a human perspective, who was Jesus' grandfather?

One option is that Matthan/t (if the same person) had two sons, Jacob and Heli. One of them had Joseph as a son, but the other adopted him upon his birth father's death.

Another option is that Jacob was Joseph's father, but Heli was Mary's father (implying that Matthan and Matthat are not the same person). Heli is listed by

Luke as the closest physical male ancestor of Jesus and/or the adoptive father of Joseph (if, say, Heli had no male offspring).

There are other options, but these two illustrate the possibilities.

So what?

It can be intimidating to try to wrap our heads around the genealogies of Matthew and Luke. We should not ignore the differences. But we also should avoid the trap of automatically assuming that such differences are unsolvable contradictions or errors. With various tools or principles in place, plausible explanations are out there.

But amid the effort of reconciling the genealogies, let us not lose sight of what they both teach: Jesus Christ is the miraculously conceived son of a virgin yet is also — through Israel's winding history — heir of the kingdom of David and the promises of Abraham.

This article was first published in [Tabletalk](#), the Bible study magazine of [Ligonier Ministries](#). Find out more at [TabletalkMagazine.com](#) or subscribe today at [GetTabletalk.com](#).

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