

The Genius of Jesus' Genealogies

Genealogy is somewhat important to us today, but it was far more important to the ancient Jews. They kept strict genealogical records, and many of the Jews could trace back their lineage through many generations.

We find two lists of Jesus' genealogies, one in Matthew and one in Luke. If we are reading through the Gospel accounts, I imagine that most of us would admit that we usually skim over this material or skip it altogether. Reading genealogical lists is not terribly exciting or relevant for us today.

But it was very important information to the ancient Jews. Hidden within those genealogical lists are some rather surprising details. Two of the Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, thought the genealogical record of Jesus was important enough to include in their accounts. These accounts are located right next to the accounts of Jesus' birth. So the genealogies say something important about Jesus.

Christmas is a celebration of Jesus' birth. But that birth was the culmination of a long list of people who lived and events that happened before Jesus was born. Today I want to take a look at some of the interesting information locked away in Jesus' genealogy. These accounts should give us even greater confidence in the Bible and in Jesus' claims to be the Son of God.

I. The importance of genealogies to the Jews

Genealogical records were far more important to the ancient Jews than they are to us. Basically, your genealogical record told you who you were and where you stood in society. Society was organized around kinship patterns, so every family needed lists that described its ancestral pedigree.¹ The record gives you legitimacy or, in some cases, might prevent someone from obtaining position or status. Many things in life were connected to the family that you came from, so proving your position in the family was a very important thing.

¹ "The Joy-Driven Life," *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International, 2009), 56.

Quote: [In Jesus' culture,] genealogies served the crucial function of determining membership in a given kinship group. Genealogies serve as indicators of (inherited) status; ... in them resides remarkable social power.²

There were four major reasons that the Jews kept accurate and complete genealogies.³

- A. First, ancestry determined one's claim on land. When the Israelites first settled in Canaan, God divided the land into parcels for each tribe to occupy (Num. 26:52–56). So if a person made a claim to own a certain parcel of land, he should be able to prove that his family had a right to that property. The genealogical records could prove who owned the land.
- B. Second, ancestry determined claims to the right of inheritance. If a person claimed he had a right to property, servants, an estate, crops, or other material possessions, the validity of such claims was determined by the genealogies of those involved. The genealogical records could verify or deny a claim to an inheritance.
- C. Third, your lineage established the basis of taxation. When Mary and Joseph went to be taxed/enrolled in the census in Luke 2, they traveled to Bethlehem because that was the hometown of David, and they were both of the house and lineage of David.

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 188–189.

³ Most of this material in this message is directly from John F. MacArthur Jr., *God in the Manger: The Miraculous Birth of Christ* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2001).

- D. Last, and most important, ancestry verified any claim to the priesthood or royalty. In Ezra 2:61–63, for example, a number of men were excluded from the priesthood when the records did not verify their claims. Likewise, anyone claiming to be king (and ultimately, Messiah) would have to prove his direct lineage from the great king David himself.

Therefore, for the Jews living in Israel, ancestral records were very critical. That's why they kept careful, accurate genealogical records.

The Gospel writers had access to public records for Mary and Joseph. These records may have been kept in the temple or in local synagogues. Jesus' genealogy makes a crucial contribution to His credentials as Messiah. If He is to be verified as the King, He must have Davidic lineage. And his genealogy shows without doubt that he was in David's line.

We may not appreciate the genealogies in the Bible, but they serve a very important function, and it's a good thing that we have them.

II. The Two Genealogies of Jesus

The New Testament contains two lists that outline for us the genealogy of Jesus. We find these lists in Matthew 1:1–17 and in Luke 3:23–38.

- A. Anyone who reads these lists will notice differences between them. Let's consider the differences in the lists.
1. Matthew grouped his names into three groups of 14 names each, whereas Luke simply listed 78 ancestors.⁴ Also, scholars believe Matthew's list is partial. It's arranged in a certain way and does not include some individuals. Luke's list seems to be complete, including every generation in the family lineage.

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Lk 3:22.

2. Matthew's list starts with Abraham and extends *forward* to Jesus. Matthew's goal in his list was to satisfy the Jews' concern about Messiah's legality. Abraham was the father of the nation of Israel. Therefore, Jesus had to trace His line from Abraham, through David, right down to himself.
3. Luke's list starts with Jesus and extends *backwards* all the way back to God. Luke apparently wants to show that Jesus is more than just another Jew. He wants to display Jesus' connection all the way back to God himself.
4. Matthew traces Jesus' line back to King David through Solomon. Luke traces Jesus' line back to King David through his son Nathan (3rd son born to Bathsheba). The royal line goes through Solomon, and the list shows that Joseph is part of that line.
5. Another unique feature of Matthew's account is the presence of four women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Each had a scandalous aspect of her life, thus paving the way for Mary as an unwed mother.⁵
6. Matthew traces Jesus through his grandfather Jacob, while Luke traces the line back through Jesus' grandfather Heli.
 - a) Luke says "Joseph, the son of Heli..." (Luke 3:23). But notice that "son of" are in italics. They were added by the translators.
 - b) The text literally says "Joseph of Heli." That means that Joseph could be "of Heli" in a different way than strict sonship.

⁵ "The Joy-Driven Life," *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International, 2009), 56.

- c) The word “son” for the Jews could indicate a variety of relationships, including son-in-law (cf. 1 Sam 24:16). The husband would often be counted as the son of his wife’s father. It appears that Joseph is the son of Jacob and son-in-law of Heli.⁶ I.e., Heli is *Mary’s* father and Joseph’s father-in-law.
7. Why do we have differences in the lists?
- a) There is a good bit of scholarly debate about this, and various scholars have put forth different theories. I read one writer who believed both lists were for Joseph.
- b) My understanding is that Matthew is tracing Jesus’ line through Joseph, his earthly, legal father, while Luke is tracing the line back through Mary’s side of the family. Matthew’s line is *paternal*; Luke’s line is *maternal*.
8. It just so happens, in the providence of God, that both Mary and Joseph come from King David’s family. But they come from different branches of that family. From David forward in time, they are different, but from David backwards, they are the same.
- B. The value of the lists
1. Both lists verify that Jesus has the legal right to the throne of David. Normally speaking, the legal right to occupy the throne would come down through the father’s line. Of course, Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus; he was Jesus’ adoptive father. But Joseph was still the legal father of Jesus, and that gave Jesus the legal right to sit on David’s throne.
2. The fact that Mary is also in David’s line gives further legitimacy to Jesus’ claim on David’s throne. Jesus has connections back to David from both his mother and his adoptive father.

⁶ William H. Bates, “A Study in the Genealogy of Jesus,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 74, no. 294 (1917): 328–329.

Quote: Two genealogies are absolutely necessary to trace the lineage of [Jesus], the royal and legal, and the natural and literal. We find the legal and royal genealogy in Matthew's gospel, ...; the natural and literal in Luke's,⁷ His scriptural credentials are thorough, clear, and irrefutable.⁸

That fact would be very important to the Jews. In order for a Jewish person to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, he had to be persuaded that Jesus stands in the line of King David. And these records prove that very point.

III. Highlights of Jesus' genealogy (from Luke)

- A. Lk 3:23 Jesus is not the physical/natural son of Joseph -- "being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph." This is a way of affirming the virgin birth. People "supposed" that Joseph was Jesus' father, but in reality he was not. People supposed a lot of things about Jesus that were not true.
- B. Also interesting in Luke's list is that many of the names are unknown to us. They don't appear anywhere else in the Bible. Only from David back do we find names that we easily recognize. The source of all this information must have been Mary's family. You can just about imagine Luke searching through Mary's family's genealogical records to compile this information.
- C. The genealogy provides certain important credentials for Jesus.
 - 1. He was a son of Abraham.

When God made a promise to Abraham, it was to a Seed:

Gal. 3:16 *Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ.*

⁷ R. A. Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible: Alleged Errors and Contradictions* (Willow Grove: Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, 1998).

⁸ John F. MacArthur Jr., *God in the Manger: The Miraculous Birth of Christ* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2001), 21.

Jesus is the promised Seed who will bring about all the Abrahamic blessings. He was a Jew, a descendant of Abraham.

2. He was a son of David. The Messiah must be from David's family. The Messiah will be a Davidic king who will usher in the glory of all the Davidic promises.

Isa 9:7 Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. ...

Also cf. 2 Samuel 7:12–19; Psalm 89:3–4, 34–37; 132:11; Acts 2:30; 13:22–23; Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8.

Quote: [God] promised David a perpetual throne, dynasty (house), and kingdom. This complex of promises would be fulfilled only when a descendant of David permanently established David's dynasty by forever occupying the throne of the kingdom of Israel.⁹

The genealogies show that Jesus descended from David through Solomon (on Joseph's side) and through Nathan (on Mary's side).

3. He was a son of Adam.

Through the incarnation, Jesus took upon himself a fully human nature. And as a human, He was tempted, troubled, persecuted, hated, and subjected to all the normal difficulties of life (Heb. 4:15). He was every bit of what Adam was—fully human, a genuine Son of Man.

Had this not been true, Jesus could not have served as the final sacrifice for sin.

⁹ Kevin Bauder, "Why the Virgin Birth?" *In the Nick of Time*, Dec 04, 2020.

Heb 2:17 *Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

4. He was a son of God.

Adam was the original son of God by creation. Jesus is the Son of God in a different sense. For Jesus to be called the Son of God, it implied equality with God.

As God said in Luke 3:22, ““You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.””

So Jesus' genealogy is important in that it proves his credentials; he has the legitimate right to claim to be the Messiah. If he were not in Abraham's family, from the line of David, and fully human, he could not make a claim to be the Son of God. But his genealogy proves that he has the right to make such claims.

D. Another genealogical detail that we ought to consider revolves around a notorious king named Jeconiah/Jehoiachin/Coniah.

1. Way back in Jer 22:29-30, we find the Lord cursing a wicked king of Judah named Coniah. He was the last king of Judah before the Babylonian Exile. He was so ungodly that the prophet Jeremiah pronounced a curse on him, prohibiting any child of his from assuming the throne of David. Coniah's descendants were in the Davidic line, but they were barred from David's throne.
2. Guess who is a descendant of Coniah? Joseph, the husband of Mary, descends from him (cf. Mt 1:11-12). Joseph is in the royal line, but he could not occupy the throne because of the curse of Coniah. You might say that he has the *legal* right to David's throne, but that right has been suspended because of the curse of Coniah.
3. As I mentioned earlier, Luke's genealogy traces Mary's line back to David's son Nathan, not through Solomon, thus avoiding the curse of Coniah.

Quote: Jesus acquired the right to the throne of David through Joseph and is eligible to sit on it as David's son through Mary.¹⁰

4. Without the virgin birth—i.e., if Joseph were Jesus' biological father—Jesus could not be the Messiah. Joseph's connection to Coniah would have disqualified Jesus from that position. The virgin birth solves that problem.

Quote: Jesus stood legally in Solomon's dynasty and inherited the right to the throne and the kingdom, yet He was not barred from these privileges by the curse on Coniah. Jesus received both the legal and the biological right to the throne of Israel—but because of the virgin birth, He does not fall under the disqualification of Coniah's curse. Only the virgin birth allows Jesus to inherit from Joseph the legal right to rule and from Mary the biological qualification to rule.¹¹

These details in the genealogical record are really important.

If we were not familiar with the lineage of Jesus, we would not be aware of these amazing truths. So we should pay attention to the genealogies.

In a certain sense, we celebrate Christmas because of Jesus' genealogical record. The main characters in the record and even the obscure ones are important. We find small details that entitle Jesus to be the Savior of the world. It's another evidence of God's hand at work providentially in history.

Genealogical lists are not normally the popular, inspiring parts of the Bible. Most people either skim over them or skip them altogether. But when we stop to consider the information within these lists, we find some amazing facts.

¹⁰ William H. Bates, "A Study in the Genealogy of Jesus," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 74, no. 294 (1917): 329.

¹¹ Bauder.

At Christmastime, we celebrate Jesus' birth, and rightly so. We should recognize that Jesus' birth was the culmination of a long line of people and events that had to unfold in a certain way. In part, it's these genealogical lists that give us confidence that Jesus is whom he claimed to be—not only the son of Mary and the adopted son of Joseph, but the son of David, the son of Abraham and, most significantly, the eternal Son of God.