

Getting to Know Your Bible

Are Matthew's and Luke's Genealogies Contradictory?

Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 3:21-27

That Matthew and Luke's genealogies of Jesus differ after David has caused many to think the Gospel accounts as contradictory and thus unreliable. Furthermore, that Matthew's genealogy is shorter than Luke's from David onward has caused the same doubts. However, there is plenty of good reason to believe that the accounts are not contradictory. Two things can be noted:

First, Matthew's use of the Greek word translated "the father of" (NIV) can also be understood "the ancestor of"; the term does not necessarily refer to a direct father. Thus, generations can be skipped and the genealogy can still be understood as accurate; to skip generations and drop names was not uncommon in genealogical record keeping. In fact, it is very likely that Matthew intentionally skipped names in order to have his fourteen-name lists (see 1:17. Matthew most likely wanted to have fourteen names in each list to highlight Jesus' Davidic descent. In biblical Hebrew, each letter was assigned a number. For David's name- spelled *D, V, D*- the numbers associated with the letters were 4-6-4, respectively. Adding these numbers together one would get 14). Thus, the difference in length between Matthew and Luke is not contradictory nor any reason to doubt the accuracy or integrity of the account.

Second, in regard to the divergence of names from David to Joseph in both lists, it would be hard to think that such a blatant error would exist and Christianity still have such success, especially in the early stages. Most likely, the differences in the lists have to do with Jesus' legal lineage and his blood lineage. While they may differ in some of the intricate details, many scholars seem to propose that a levirate marriage (or a similar event where legal and natural lineage are different; a modern example would be adoption) could have occurred right before Joseph: Heli (or Jacob) might have been unable to bear children or perhaps passed away, and so his brother/relative Jacob (or Heli) took the responsibility of bearing a child for the childless/deceased relative. Thus, Jesus was legally related to David through one and naturally related through the other. The idea of levirate marriage was not uncommon for the day and culture. While it may be impossible to prove this theory to be true, the fact of the matter is there is no solid ground to say the accounts are contradictory or inaccurate. Better to focus on the theological points the genealogies are trying to make, based on whom each genealogy traces Jesus to: Jesus is the Davidic Messiah, here to bless the Nations as promised by Abraham (Matthew) and save all of humanity (Luke).

For a more detailed presentation and discussion of the various theories:

Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 918-923.

"Genealogy" in *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1992).

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