

# The Genealogies of Matthew and Luke

The genealogies are not, to put it mildly, exciting stuff. Long lists of names that stretch back to Abraham or Adam are hardly at the top of anyone's inspirational spiritual reading. Nevertheless they are important to both Matthew and Luke's stories and we cannot really understand the opening of the Gospels without them.

Genealogies were a common feature of the ancient world. Being able to trace family back to ancient origins gave people a sense of identity and stability. The success of the BBC television programme *Who do you think you are?* and the abiding popularity of tracing family trees remind us that this is not just true of the ancient world. Even today, knowing something about your family and where you came from can contribute to a sense of where you fit in the world.

There were many genealogies in Greek biographies of famous people but it is most likely that those in Matthew and Luke were inspired by the genealogies of the Old Testament. There are a couple dotted through Genesis (5.1–31; 11.10–32), as well as a lengthy one at the start of 1 Chronicles (chapters 1–9).

The similarity between them and those in the Gospels suggests that Matthew and Luke were consciously mimicking them. In their different ways, through the language they used, the allusions to Old Testament writing and events they employed as well as the whole style in which they cast their narratives, both Matthew and Luke suggest that what they are writing is not a new story but a sequel to the Old Testament narratives. The genealogies focus our recognition of this in Matthew before the rest of his Gospel begins, and in Luke between the birth narratives and the start of Jesus' ministry.

## Matthew's Genealogy

**Matthew 1.1-17** An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

<sup>2</sup>Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, <sup>4</sup>and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup>and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup>and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, <sup>7</sup>and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, <sup>8</sup>and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup>and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup>and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup>and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

<sup>12</sup>And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup>and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup>and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup>and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

<sup>17</sup>So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

In his genealogy Matthew points us back to Abraham. It is not hard to work out why. For Matthew, Abraham – the father of Judaism – began the story of faith and faithfulness to God that his story of Jesus now picks up.

The introduction to the genealogy has an odd formula. It feels clunky and out of place. The Greek says *‘biblos geneseōs Iēsou Christou’*. This is almost impossible to put well into English, hence the NRSV’s slightly lame ‘An account of the genealogy of . . .’. A better though less clear translation would be something like ‘Book of the origins of . . .’ or even ‘Book of the Genesis of . . .’. It is certainly intriguing that Matthew chose to use the Greek title of the first book of the Bible, ‘Genesis’, to open his genealogy. It feels as though he is drawing our attention here to Genesis, with its story of beginnings. If he is, then he is directing us to think of his story as a new beginning – a new creation.

This connection is especially highlighted when you realize that the creation story beginning at Genesis 2.4 and the genealogy at Genesis 5.1 both open in the Greek translation of the Septuagint with this same phrase, *‘biblos geneseōs’*. It is almost as though Matthew is making a verbal connection with Genesis and reminding his readers that this new tale unfolding before them is both an ancient story that reaches back to the dawn of time and also the start of something entirely new.

### *Three lots of fourteens*

The first thing to jump out of Matthew’s genealogy – not least because Matthew explicitly draws our attention to it in 1.17 – is that it is made up of three lots of fourteen. You will notice that at the end of each of the lots of fourteen something significant happened: 1.6–7 notes the kingship of David and 1.11 the start of the exile. The implication of this is that at the end of this last batch of fourteen generations the time was ripe for something else to happen – something significant that would be at least as world-changing as the reign of David and the departure into exile in Babylon.

## JOURNEY TO THE MANGER

Matthew makes much of the two numbers he uses here – three and fourteen – so it is natural for us to attempt to work out why they were so important. The number three is relatively easy to understand. It runs all the way through the Old Testament: people have three children (Noah in Genesis 6.10 and Job in Job 1.2); people bow down or pray in threes (David in 1 Samuel 20.41 and Daniel in Daniel 6.10); three days are often important (Exodus 15.22), as are three months (Exodus 2.3). In all of these it is traditional to take the number three as a symbol of completeness.

In rabbinic discussion the number three was seen to symbolize a harmony that includes, synthesizes and completes two opposites. Although the discussions date from a later period than Matthew, you can't help wondering whether this is what is happening here. If we take the end of each period of fourteen we have the good of David's reign against the bad of the exile, all brought together in the completeness of the true King in whom all the nations of the earth can find their homecoming. That Jesus comes to complete the third of three sets of fourteen suggests not only completeness but the reconciliation of the golden days of David with the dark days of exile.

The number fourteen causes us more problems because its significance is harder to fathom. Two of the explanations provided are tantalizing, and you will need to decide for yourself whether you are persuaded by either, both or neither of them. The first is that a full cycle of the moon lasts for 28 days: fourteen waning and fourteen waxing. One theory, then, is that the first fourteen generations were a period of waxing reaching its peak in David; followed by a period of waning reaching its nadir at the exile. This would make the final period of fourteen another period of waxing, reaching a new peak with the birth of Christ.

Another explanation is taken from rabbinic exegesis. Something called *gematria* was common among the rabbis. *Gematria* is a complex mix of maths and theology. Each Hebrew letter was assigned a number (one for *aleph*, two for *beth* and so on). The rabbis would add the numbers in words together to make a sum they would then associate with other words that made a similar sum. If you add together the numbers associated with the consonants of David's

name (4+6+4 = 14) you get fourteen (in case you are confused, the Hebrew letter *vav*, which is the middle consonant of David's name, is the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet). Some have also commented, in the light of Matthew's genealogy, that there may be significance in the fact that there are three consonants in David's name – three and fourteen then being suggested by the same name.

The fanciful nature of these explanations suggests that, in reality, scholars do not really know why fourteen was so important to Matthew, but whatever the explanation, it is clear that he believed the time was ripe for God to act again. His genealogy is designed to persuade us of this too. Poised at the end of three lots of fourteen generations, anyone who knew their history would have been ready and waiting for God to act.

### *The four women of Matthew's genealogy*

The other striking feature of Matthew's genealogy is that, in a list otherwise exclusively male, four women are included: Tamar (1.3); Rahab (1.5); Ruth (1.5) and Bathsheba (1.6). Not only are they women but each of them is notorious in her own way. Tamar resorted to a dubious subterfuge to trick her father-in-law into having sex with her so that her children could be counted as the children of her dead husband; Rahab was a prostitute who was willing to betray her city in order to protect the Israelites; Ruth, a Moabite, lay down 'at the feet' of Boaz (a phrase some take to be a euphemism for his genitals); and Bathsheba committed adultery with David.

As you can imagine, there has been much debate about the significance of the inclusion of these women, and there is little agreement about what they signify. My own view is that these women are included to defend Mary against any accusations of unworthiness. Like her, they could all be accused of moral failing in one way or another, according to the customs of their day, but despite that they remain a vital part of the grand story of God's people. Whatever the cultural attitudes that prevail, these women cannot be written out of God's story any more than Mary could.

## JOURNEY TO THE MANGER

If anyone wanted to claim that Jesus could not be who Matthew believed him to be because of suspicions surrounding the morals of Mary, the answer was simply that David was born from a line equally questionable. Not only that, but David's own relationship with Bathsheba raised similar, if not even greater, moral questions.

Matthew's genealogy seems to set out to remind us that God acted and continues to act in history in and through the most questionable of people. Where human beings might be tempted to write them out of the narrative in order to keep the story pristine, God's choice time and time again of the dubious, the outcasts and the marginal insists that they be written back in and remain at the heart of his story of love. We may be able to expunge one or two from this story, but as Matthew reminds us here, there are simply too many valiant, admirable, determined women in the story from Abraham to Jesus to silence. Mary did not stand alone. She stood with her forebears in the faith, a rightful heir of God's blessing alongside Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba.

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### Reflection

I love the idea of these four standing as defenders of Mary's reputation. I have a mental image of this slightly rag-bag bunch of women, battered by life and what they had needed to do to survive it, standing shoulder to shoulder, chins lifted high, defiance in their eyes ready to defend the young Mary from accusations of unworthiness and disrepute.

I love even more the idea that into this picture we need to insert God: the God who protected them all and reassures both them and us that we have no need to defend Mary because he chose her specially; that she as well as Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba plays a vital part in his plan for the world; that despite what people might say, it is and remains a good plan. It was a plan that needed Tamar just as much as it needed Judah; Rahab as much as Salmon; Ruth as much as Boaz; Bathsheba

as much as David. It is a plan that needs us. Whoever we are, however ramshackle and dubious we might be, the God who needed Judah and Tamar, Rahab and Salmon, Boaz and Ruth, David and Bathsheba and Mary and Joseph needs us to be a part of his plan.

No one needs to defend anyone else – all we need to do is hear and respond to God’s call on our lives and to remind ourselves that unworthy as we may feel, we join a long string of people others deemed unacceptable and God declared to be just right.

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## Luke’s Genealogy

**Luke 3.23–38** Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, <sup>24</sup>son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, <sup>25</sup>son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai, <sup>26</sup>son of Maath, son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, <sup>27</sup>son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, <sup>28</sup>son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmadam, son of Er, <sup>29</sup>son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat, son of Levi, <sup>30</sup>son of Simeon, son of Judah, son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, <sup>31</sup>son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, <sup>32</sup>son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, <sup>33</sup>son of Amminadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, <sup>34</sup>son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, <sup>35</sup>son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, <sup>36</sup>son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, <sup>37</sup>son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, <sup>38</sup>son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

### *Journeying backwards*

Luke's genealogy is about as different from Matthew's as one covering the ancestry of the same person could be. Matthew's began with Abraham and worked forward to Jesus; Luke's began with Joseph and worked backwards to Adam. The first difference is easy to explain. For Matthew, with his more Jewish interest, it is natural that he would want to trace Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham, the father of Judaism; Luke on the other hand, with a concern more for a Gentile audience, would want to demonstrate that Jesus' ancestry stretched back to Adam the father of all humankind.

In Luke's case there may also be a significant theological point being made, which is that Jesus, Son of God, was also profoundly human. The ability to trace his ancestry back to the father of all humankind allowed Luke to make a point about Jesus' humanity right at the start of his adult ministry, and to plant the seed in his readers' minds that he was about to tell the story of the second Adam.

#### **'But Joseph wasn't his biological father!'**

– I hear you cry. One of the big problems of both genealogies is that Jesus' ancestry is traced through Joseph who, the birth narratives go to great lengths to prove, was not Jesus' biological father. Surely the whole point of the genealogies is undermined by this simple fact?

Actually for us it would be, but for Matthew and Luke this was clearly not a problem. Here we find ourselves meeting one of those great cultural clashes that from time to time disrupt our ability to understand what is going on in a biblical passage. The key here is adoption in the ancient world. Adoption was widespread within both Roman and Jewish society.

The difference between Roman and Jewish adoption was that in Roman society it was normally of adult men, whereas in Jewish



society adoption of babies was more common. The Roman attitude seems to be linked to infant mortality rates and the desire to leave inheritances in safe hands. Adopting a male adult meant that they had already passed through the perilous childhood years and were more likely to survive.

Where Roman and Jewish attitudes to adoption overlap, however, is in the importance ascribed to the act of adoption. For both societies adoption was absolute, and the adoptee was to be treated as though they were the biological child of the new parents. Legally and formally, then, they were treated as a part of that new family. In the case of Jesus, Joseph was his legal, formally recognized father, part of which meant that Jesus shared with him his ancestry.

Another key difference between Matthew and Luke's genealogies is that Luke's is in a completely different place within his narrative than Matthew's is within his. The placing of Matthew's genealogy makes sense, even if it doesn't produce the most exciting opening for a Gospel. Luke's is a little more confusing. It is located not only after the announcements of the birth of Jesus and the birth itself, but after John the Baptist has begun proclaiming his message in the wilderness.

Some scholars argue that a first edition of Luke began with 3.1 and John the Baptist's ministry. Therefore the genealogy placed just before the appearance of Jesus tells us who he was before Luke went back and added more about the birth narratives. Another possibility is that Luke put it here to aid further reflection after the birth narratives. Luke's account of John's birth makes it very clear that John was of a priestly line; the genealogy points us to Jesus' descent from a kingly line. It may be that its location here prepares us to meet Jesus, the King, alongside his cousin, descended from priests, both in the desert, both proclaiming kingship and worship in terms never previously seen.

*The different names in the lists*

So far so good. It is not hard to appreciate the theological purpose and significance of the genealogies, but they do raise some troubling questions about accuracy. The problem occurs when we look more carefully at the lists themselves: the names on the two genealogies are almost entirely different between the time of David and Jesus. Even Joseph's father is given a different name.

This raises the rather important question about the reliability of the genealogies. There has been a vast amount of discussion about this among scholars and little agreement. Two possible theories to explain the differences are that one represents Mary's line and the other Joseph's (Annius of Viterbo argued that Matthew contained Joseph's line and Luke, Mary's), and that the confusion had arisen because of the citation of male names throughout. Another possibility, which may be a little more attractive, is that Matthew represents the descent of the kings in the Davidic line and Luke the actual descendants of David in the branch of Joseph's family from which he came. In other words although from the Davidic line, Joseph was not descended from the kings in that line but from other sons. One genealogy traced the 'official Davidic line'; the other Joseph's actual line.

**'As was supposed'**

A pleasing little detail is the addition of the small phrase *hōs enomizeto*, which means literally 'as was supposed' or 'as was believed'. In other words Luke is hinting to us that he isn't entirely sure himself and that this is popular tradition. It may help us feel a little better about the discrepancies.

The problem, of course, was that there were no databases of information in the first century. While there is some evidence that priestly families kept a tally of their ancestry in order to demonstrate their purity, there were no central, common lists. As a

result traditions about how ancestry could be traced back were dependent on oral, family history. The most likely explanation of the difference is that Matthew and Luke had different sources to work from and so, inevitably, ended up with different lists.

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## Reflection

People will respond differently to the challenges thrown up by the genealogies: some will be deeply troubled about the discrepancies and will worry that this reveals a fundamental lack of reliability in the Gospel accounts; others will be much less concerned. There is, in all honesty, no easy solution to the issue – if there had been, someone would have provided it by now. For the past 2,000 years, readers of Matthew and Luke’s genealogies have attempted, struggled and then failed to reconcile them. There are a few theories that make the differences more understandable – two of them are outlined above – but no theory removes the problem entirely.

I must admit that I am not someone who is naturally troubled by issues like this. Ancient history is very different from modern history, not least because Matthew and Luke’s genealogies emerge out of a world that has few records of any kind. In a world without accurate record-keeping it would have been very hard indeed to compile a genealogy with absolute certainty of its accuracy.

In my view the accuracy of the lists is of much less significance than the point the genealogies were making. This, in both cases, is that Jesus was a part of the long, circuitous story of the history of salvation that began with Adam and found a focus in Abraham, in David and in the exile. The genealogies locate him in this long chain of history but also prepare us for the fact that something momentous is about to happen that will change the world for ever.

## JOURNEY TO THE MANGER

It may even be that the messiness of the genealogies points us to truth. From the very dawn of time, God in his infinite wisdom has chosen human beings to bear his message of love in the world. These human beings, from Adam and Abraham onwards, slipped up, made mistakes – deliberate or otherwise – and generally failed to live up to the task God gave them. At the end of a long line of calamity came Jesus, God’s own Son, adopted by Joseph into that disastrous, yet beloved, human line. Matthew and Luke’s inability even to agree on precisely which line it was may, in fact, prove the point of the riskiness of God’s venture.

The trustworthiness of the accounts lies not in whether the Gospel writers got one or two or even 25 names wrong in their lists, it lies in the acknowledgement that Jesus, fully God yet also fully human, came to meet us in the mess, to love us, to save us and to give us a new family tree that can be traced back without a shadow of a doubt to him, the source of all life.