

Why Is Luke's Genealogy Different from Matthew's? (Or "Who Was Joseph's Father?")

Luke 3:23-38

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"Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli" - Luke 3:23

"and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ." - Matthew 1:16

Today, we're going to look at one of the most famous Bible "contradictions" critics have pointed out to show the flaws of the Bible: Matthew and Luke each trace the genealogy of Joseph (Jesus' legal earthly father) differently. So, why do these two Gospels have two different, conflicting genealogies?

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus begins with Abraham and works down to David and then down to Joseph, showing how Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of the covenant promises made to Abraham and David. Luke's genealogy starts with Joseph and traces backwards, also going back to David and then to Abraham but not stopping until it goes all the way back to Adam, "the son of God." Luke traces back to Adam because his is a more universal Gospel, not aimed at a Jewish audience but at a Gentile Greek audience.

But the real problem comes with this question: Who was Joseph's father? Matthew says Joseph was the son of Jacob. Luke says he was the son of Heli. So, who's right? Joseph didn't have two dads, did he?

You may have heard some people say that Luke's genealogy traces the lineage of Mary, and that "the son of Heli" could mean "the son-in-law," but that's actually not a convincing argument. That's not how genealogies work. I think the solution is clear and we have a whole book in the Bible that explains to us how to resolve this, the Book of Ruth. In addition to Ruth, the story of Judah and Tamar helps, too.

In the ancient world, having a male heir was essential to passing along your family's inheritance. Thus, a man who died without a son needed help to produce an heir. His wife would be given in marriage to his brother or- as in Elimelech's case in Ruth - if he had no brother, to a close relative, a kinsman-redeemer. The first son to be born from this new marriage would legally be the heir and descendant of the dead husband, while being the biological child of the new husband. Thus, he would have two fathers, This was called Levrite marriage.

Levrite marriages were common enough that we have at least two clear examples in Jesus' genealogy, besides in the case of Joseph. Judah and Tamar had Perez and Zerah, and in Matthew's genealogy they are listed as the sons of Judah. Legally, however, Perez and Zerah were the sons of Er, Judah's firstborn son, who died without a son. Likewise, in Ruth, Boaz's firstborn son, Obed, was legally the heir/son of Elimelech, Naomi's husband and Ruth's father-in-law, who lost his male heirs when both of his sons died. Since Elimelech himself was dead and had no brother, a kinsman-redeemer had to be found to enter into the Levrite marriage.

Confused? It's really very simple: In the ancient world, it would not have been strange for a man to have two fathers, his biological father who raised him, and his legal father, whose heir and legal descendant he was. In this case, Jacob was probably the biological father of Joseph, while Heli was likely his legal father, having died without an heir.

Wouldn't it make sense for Joseph to have two fathers, since he would raise a son who would have two fathers, too? Joseph was Jesus' legal, earthly father, but he was not his biological father. God was the true and heavenly Father of Jesus. Perhaps Joseph would have had some insight into raising someone else's son, if he himself had that experience growing up.

More importantly, we can see that God's word does not contradict itself. Every apparent contradiction has a resolution upon further study.