

SoulManna

The Historical Integrity of Christ's Genealogy

"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham . . . And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations." (**Matthew 1:1, 16-17**) "And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli . . . Which was the son of Enos, which was the son of Seth, which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God." (**Luke 3:23, 38**)

Looking at the Word:

For the Jew returning to the land of Israel following the Babylonian captivity, genealogical records were important. For example, only those who could prove their genealogical qualification as "sons of Levi" were allowed to serve in the priesthood (Ezra 2:62). A public registry of genealogical records would eventually be placed in the Jerusalem Temple for safekeeping. This public registry was meticulous in detail and was used as the final arbiter in determining family lineage. When writing their gospels, Matthew and Luke would have had access to the Old Testament Scriptures, the public registry in Jerusalem, and any private genealogical records Mary and Joseph may have had. Most importantly, the Holy Spirit's work of inspiration ensured the absolute inerrancy and trustworthiness of the genealogical record.

While God's people have always rested in the fidelity of God's Word, they have also recognized the difficulty in harmonizing the genealogies of Christ. Matthew traces the lineage of Christ through David back to Abraham while in Luke the lineage of Christ continues all the way back to Adam. The difficulty comes because the names in the genealogical records are different from one another. Unraveling this apparent discrepancy has been so daunting that some critics have claimed the task to be impossible and have challenged the historical integrity of the genealogical record. However, their conclusions could not be further from the truth. While harmonization of the genealogies is not without difficulties, it is not impossible; nor should these difficulties cause the believer to doubt the veracity of the text.

❖ The Difficulty of Names Omitted from the Genealogies:

- **Time Gaps in the Genealogical Records:** The period of time between Perez (Abraham's grandson) and Nashon (who took part in the Exodus) is estimated to be more than 300 years, yet there are only five generations listed (three in Matthew and another two in Luke). Again, between Salmon (who married Rahab) and David there is a time gap of more than 360 years but only three other generations are listed. In both cases one would expect there to be more generations listed than what there are.
- **Abridged Genealogical Records:** In comparing the genealogical records in Matthew 1:6-11 with 1 Chronicles 3:1-17, it is apparent that Matthew's record is an abbreviated version of the royal genealogy from David to Jeconiah.¹
- **Response:** That the New Testament's genealogical records have been abbreviated is readily acknowledged, but this does not constitute a lack of historical integrity. First of all, any genealogical abridgment in Matthew needs to be seen in light of the perfect literary symmetry (three groups of fourteen generations) which Matthew sets forth as his presentation model (Matthew 1:17). Moreover, abbreviated genealogies are not uncommon in Scripture. For example, Ezra 7:1-5 lists 16 generations while 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 lists 22 generations covering the same period of time. In the Ancient Near East the concept of "begetting" or being "the son of" could refer to a father-son relationship. It could also refer to a grandfather-grandson relationship, or even a family connection spanning several generations. In Christ's day the Jews referred to Abraham as their "father" (Matthew 3:9; John 8:39). In the Ancient Near East genealogical integrity would not have required the inclusion of every generational link. It did, however, demand a clear and unassailable ancestral lineage, which both Matthew and Luke provide.

❖ The Difficulty of Names Inserted into the Genealogies:

While most of the difficulties with omission involve Matthew, all the difficulties with insertion involve Luke. There are two names which need our consideration:

- **Rhesa:** While not mentioned at all in 1 Chronicles 3:16-21, Rhesa is spoken of as the son of Zerubbabel in Luke 3:27. It is argued since Rhesa is an Aramaic title meaning "Prince," we should understand it as an honorific referring to Zerubbabel and not as the name of his son; and that the insertion of Rhesa into Luke's genealogy occurred through scribal misunderstanding and carelessness. **Response:** First, there is absolutely no evidence of a textual variant involving "Rhesa" in any of the manuscripts. Second, it is possible that Rhesa may refer to the man named Rephaiah in 1 Chronicles 3:21. It is also possible that Rhesa, while not included in the canonical record, was nonetheless fathered by Zerubbabel and included in the genealogical registry kept in Jerusalem.
- **Cainan:** In Luke 3:36 Cainan is spoken of as son of Arphaxad and father of Sala (Shelah). The difficulty comes because none of the Old Testament passages which mention this portion of the genealogy include Cainan (Genesis 10:24; 11:12; 1 Chronicles 1:24). The name does not appear in any Hebrew manuscript or in any of the early translations of the Old Testament, except for the Septuagint. It is argued that Luke must have consulted this faulty text and then inserted the name of Cainan into his genealogical record. **Response:** Remember that Old Testament genealogies were not always complete and did not always include every generation. Luke's insertion of Cainan into Christ's genealogy does not contradict the Old Testament record. However, it does offer supplementary material. Whether Luke used the Septuagint or consulted other non-canonical sources in writing

the Gospel of Luke is immaterial. The test is not whether what Luke has written corresponds perfectly in every particular with the Old Testament record, but whether it is true, accurate, and in harmony with what has come before. Furthermore, the burden of proof does not rest on believers to prove the veracity of Scripture. The burden of proof rests on the critic to demonstrate the text to be in error, and that will never happen! The genealogical lists in Scripture are just as inspired and as fully trustworthy as any other portion of God's Word.²

Application and Meditation:

When the Romans burned Jerusalem in 70 A.D. the Jewish public registry of genealogy was destroyed. While we no longer have access to the genealogical records kept in the Jerusalem Temple, the believer can rest with full assurance that Jesus Christ's genealogical bona fides were fully tested and accepted by those who did have access during the time of his ministry. It is significant that not one time was Jesus Christ ever challenged as to his claim of being the "son of David." Surely the Sadducees and Pharisees would have done so, if there had been any doubt as to his lineage. Even his enemies acknowledged his rightful claim to royalty. Paul reminds us that one day even those who have rejected Christ as Savior and have lived in spiritual rebellion will be forced to bow the knee (Philippians 2:5-11). Don't wait until you are forced to acknowledge his sovereignty. Each morning gives believers the opportunity to reaffirm our love for the Savior; each day our obedience demonstrates our true loyalty to Christ's Lordship.

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¹ In comparing Matthew 1:8 with 1 Chronicles 3:12 Matthew omits three generations between Jehoram and Uzziah (Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah). Matthew also omits Jehoiakim between Josiah and Jechoniah (cf. Matthew 1:11 with 1 Chronicles 3:10-12). Note: Uzziah in Matthew 1:8 is a spelling variant of the name Azariah in 1 Chronicles 3:12

² For a more extended discussion see "Difficulties of New Testament Genealogies," R. Larry Overstreet, Grace Seminary. (1981; 2002). *Vol. 2: Grace Theological Journal Volume 2* (303-326). Grace Seminary; *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, J. Gresham Machen, (1930), Harper & Row Publishers, Incorporated; *A Harmony of the Gospels*, "Essay 9: The Genealogies in Matthew and Luke," (313-319) Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, (1978), HarperCollins Publishers