

A Tale of Two Families

Hespeler, 17 December 2023 © Scott McAndless – Third Sunday of Advent

Psalm 126, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, [Luke 3:23-38](#), John 1:6-8, 19-28

If you are like most Bible readers, you might open the beginning of the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew or the end of the third chapter of Luke and balk. In both cases you are presented with long lists of names, most of which mean absolutely nothing to you – the ancestors of Jesus. Who wants to read that?

The temptation, if you don't give up reading altogether, is to just skip all of that and get to the good stuff – the stories and narratives about Jesus. But that might be a mistake. These lists do matter to the overall story – if you know how to read them, in fact, they *are* stories.

A Puzzle to be Solved?

Unfortunately, however, that is often not what people take away from them. In fact, most people who read them carefully usually come away with a problem that they think needs to be solved. You see, if you read the two genealogies of Jesus side by side, if you compare the names in them, they disagree in very significant ways.

They both identify Joseph as the father of Jesus, or at least the seeming father, but then they give different names for the father of Joseph. Matthew says that Joseph is the son of Jacob, while Luke says that he is the son of Heli.

They also both agree that Jesus is descended from King David, but they trace that descent through two completely different lines. In the Gospel of Matthew, that lineage is traced through the line of kings that succeeded David on the throne in Jerusalem, from his son Solomon through to the last king of Judah before the exile in Babylon. But in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is descended from David's son Nathan, who nobody has ever heard of. Neither have they heard of any of the other people between Nathan and Joseph.

Something to Explain Away

And usually that's where people stop. They notice that these two accounts of Jesus' family tree are different. And for some, that becomes a problem that they need to explain away because, well, both genealogies cannot be correct, right? And if one is wrong then the Bible must contain errors and that is not acceptable to them.

Some try to explain it by saying that one of the Gospels is giving the family tree for Joseph while the other is giving it for Mary. Some of you may have heard that one before. But it is an explanation that quickly falls apart if you look at it. Ancient people never traced genealogies through women. They didn't even think that women contributed anything to the genetics of a child, so the idea that a woman could contribute to someone's lineage was simply



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unthinkable to them. I know, that is a foolish way to think of it, but patriarchal thinking is ultimately a very foolish way of thinking about anything.

Living with the Contradiction

No, the contradiction is there, and you can't just explain it away. So, if you are someone who believes (as I do) that the Bible is inspired by God, what you must conclude is that that contradiction is there for a reason – that it is there because there is a truth deeper than just a list of names that needs to be revealed. You are being invited to struggle with that contradiction in order to discover that deeper truth.

And so that is what I would like to do – live in that contradiction for a little while and tell a story about what I find there.

A Funeral

David, the king, was dead. And, as he was laid in the tomb, his many sons gathered around. But two of them stood out before the crowd.

The first, of course, was David's son Solomon. And everyone knew why he mattered. He had already been anointed king and had even started to take over his father's duties before he died. Solomon was dressed in sumptuous robes and surrounded by sycophantic courtiers.

But, as splendid as he looked, Solomon was still just a young man who felt almost entirely out of his depth. He had barely survived a succession crisis and wasn't sure whether or not he would be able to hold on to the extraordinary power that had been passed onto him.

Nathan

The other key person who was present was a son named Nathan. No one really knew who Nathan was, but he mattered. He mattered because he was the man who was charged with the care of the tomb in which David was being laid.

David was being buried with his fathers, which meant that he was being placed in the tomb of Jesse and of his father Obed and of his father Boaz. It was also the resting place of an extraordinary woman named Ruth. Nathan was there because that tomb rested on a piece of land that now belonged to him.

You see, while Solomon would henceforth live in Jerusalem in a palace made of cedar, Nathan would remain and live on the land that had sustained the family for generations – ever since the days of Joshua who had given the land to the people.

God's Promise

God had made a promise to David through his prophet. **“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors,”** God had said, **“I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”**

And as they stood around the tomb and gazed upon the beauty and the wonder that was the young man Solomon, the people present, Nathan included, had no doubt who would inherit that

promise. If anyone could establish a kingdom that would last forever, it would be Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba.

A Dynasty's Failures

But you know what they say about power corrupting; that branch of the family went off the rails almost right away. Solomon quickly began to believe his own propaganda and to use his power to exploit the people through things like forced labour. The richer he became, the more he acted like any other tyrant, lording it over all the people; he became a new pharaoh. Is it any wonder, therefore, that after he died, his great kingdom split apart?

So, the kingdom was greatly diminished. Yet the ruling dynasty endured. And it was true that some of them tried to do their best as rulers. They sought to reform the nation and set up systems to protect the people. But for every good king in the line of David, it often seemed as if there was one or more who fell far short.

The kingdom limped along. It was almost destroyed by the Assyrians; it only survived their attacks by the grace of God. And then came the Babylonians. The House of David failed that challenge entirely, made the wrong choice again and again. The final rulers of the House of David were taken into exile. Their kingdom, which had been supposed to last forever, was no more.

Had the line of David failed?

The Other Line

And where was the other line of David – the descendants of Nathan – all that time? The most likely answer is that they remained on that same piece of land where they had been forever – the same piece of land where Ruth met Boaz while gleaning in his fields – the same piece of land where the boy David had returned with his flocks at the end of the day.

They farmed the land, grew lentils, grapes and barley. They never grew rich or lorded over others. They never made disastrous alliances with other nations either. They just subsisted.

It is even possible that, since they were not so important that invaders would care about them, they weren't caught up in the deportations of the Babylonian Empire. Maybe they just maintained that connection to the land.

The Connection Remains

At least we know that that connection still remained generations upon generations later for Joseph the son of Heli, even though he no longer lived on that land. He was living in the small hamlet of Nazareth in the territory of Galilee. He didn't have any land there. He was only managing to get by as a day-labourer on construction sites – building with wood and stone. (That's likely what the gospel writers mean when they call him a carpenter.) People often ended up living like that when their debts and poverty led to the loss of their ancestral farms.

So Joseph had lost the land, but I suspect that that had happened fairly recently – like within living memory of the family. I know that he hadn't forgotten it because, when Joseph heard, in the days of Quirinius the Governor of Syria, that a census was being held in Judea, he apparently decided to return there. Maybe he was intending to use the registration of the census to lay a claim on his ancestral farm, reclaiming it according to the ancient biblical law of the Jubilee. In any case, it

seems that he was serious enough to take along with him the young woman, Mary, to whom he was betrothed and who was expecting a child. He must have had a very good reason if he was going to take her on such a journey.

Missing the Point

I think you are missing out on a great deal if you look at the Gospel of Luke's genealogy of Jesus and all you see is a list of mostly unpronounceable names and a historical puzzle. Many people don't seem to get past the pretty obvious historical questions of how you reconcile these two irreconcilable genealogies or how Luke could have even known who these ancestors were, given the very low literacy rates in Galilee at that time. But these are the wrong questions. They miss the point.

I believe that God inspired both of these authors. Sometimes people seem to think that the obvious conclusion you have to take from that is that whatever the authors wrote therefore has to be completely accurate information. But accurate information is only one way to communicate important truths. And God is entirely free to inspire people to communicate truth in various ways.

Ancient Genealogies

Genealogies in the ancient world did not work like what happens today when people do their family trees or order an ancestry service from 23 and Me. Those modern activities are data driven, but ancient genealogies were more story driven. It was about telling the story of the past and thus the future of a family.

We'll never know where Luke got his list of names for Jesus' ancestors (at least in the generations between Heli and David – obviously he got the part after that from the Old Testament. But it doesn't really matter if they came from a written record, from family lore that had been handed down by word of mouth or if they came from his own inspired mind. What really matters is the story that he was telling. And he was telling a story about a very different kind of family than Matthew was telling in his gospel.

The Truth About the Messiah

He was telling a story of a family that was incredibly closely tied to their ancestral lands but who had then lost that connection. He was telling a story about jubilee which was an ancient biblical law that was all about reconnecting families to the lands that they had lost. He was telling a story, above all, that would end with Joseph returning to that ancestral home with his betrothed wife for the birth of a child who would be the fulfillment of the promise given to David but ultimately squandered by Solomon's line.

I don't necessarily believe that Luke told the story of this family in this way because he knew it was historically accurate. He told it this way because he knew that it was true. And he knew that it was true because he had been inspired by God. And that is how I have come to understand the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.