

NOT CONFIDENTIAL

An essay published by Dr Alan Branford on Sunday, 4 December 2021. A revised version was published on Sunday, 11 February 2024.

A Tangled Tree

by Dr Alan Branford (© 4 December 2021; revised version © 11 February 2024)

Prologue

People have long been fascinated by genealogies. In some cases, a genealogy may start with a particular person and trace down all the family lines forming a family tree of all their descendants. Other times, a genealogy starts with a particular person and looks backwards in time on all their ancestral lines. Sometimes just one line of parent/child links is all that is of interest.

The reasons a genealogy may be of interest are many and varied. Some are researched purely out of idle curiosity as a hobby for the researcher. But at a more serious level, there may be anthropological reasons to study kinship relationships in different cultures, or medical research may benefit from tracking certain genetically inherited traits, or a lawyer may be required to establish inheritance rights.

The House of David

In this essay, we are principally interested in the genealogies relating Jesus of Nazareth to King David given in two of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. There are many references in the Bible along the lines of stating that the longed-for Messiah would be of the House of David. To be of the House of David, the person would have to be a **patrilinear** (father to son) descendant of King David.

Matthew begins with Abraham and lists the lineage down to King David, and thence down to Jesus of Nazareth. The “Divine Conception” is dealt with by the wording

¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

Luke specifies the lineage from Jesus of Nazareth back to King David, and then proceeds further back to Abraham, Noah and finally Adam, son of God! Luke deals with the “Divine Conception” in the opening line,

²³ Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, ...

Examination of the two genealogies makes it patently obvious that they hardly concur at all! They even give different fathers for Joseph! This observation is not a good start, since logically the two should be identical as we require the purely patrilineal line. However, some care needs to be taken when examining genealogies from different cultures and/or times.

We shall therefore examine each genealogy with a little more forensic care.

Matthew's Genealogy – The Missing Kings

As well as the straightforward “² Abraham was the father of Isaac, ...” from Matthew's top-down genealogy, a genealogy might skip intermediate generations and only mention significant players. An extreme example of that would be to summarize Luke's genealogy as “Jesus the son of David, the son of Abraham, the son of Noah, the son of Adam”. Sometimes just the occasional generation is omitted, to hide a particularly wicked person say.

There is an example of the latter in Matthew's genealogy: “⁸ Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ...” The Old Testament tells us of three generations of Kings of Judah between Jehoram and Uzziah, namely Ahaziah, Jehoash and Amaziah (see 1 Chronicles 3:11-12). Why were these three omitted?

One theory pertains to the consort of King Jehoram, Athaliah. Athaliah was a princess of the Kingdom of Israel, and the marriage of Jehoram of Judah and Athaliah of Israel was a dynastic marriage to bolster the relationship between the two Kingdoms. Upon Jehoram's death, Ahaziah became King. However, his one-year reign was dominated by his mother, who then ruled Judah as Queen-regnant for six more years before her grandson Jehoash became King. Athaliah championed the re-establishment of the pagan religion of Baal, and so this period can be seen as a shameful one for Judah. But why also omit Jehoash and Amaziah?

Transliteration between Writing Systems

Another complication in studying ancient genealogies can be seen in this story. When people have names in a non-Roman writing system, some form of transliteration into the Roman alphabet is required. There are many ways in which this can be done. For example, King Uzziah in Matthew's genealogy is written as King Azariah in 1 Chronicles 3:11-12. (Nicknames and alternative names are also traps: today we nearly always refer to the Apostle Peter, who is designated as the first Bishop of Rome. However, his real name, transliterated into the Roman alphabet and eventually taken into English, was Simon. Jesus nicknamed Simon “the Rock”, which in transliterated Aramaic is Cephas. So, at the time, Simon Peter would have been called Cephas. Peter is the English form of a modified Greek word for rock: the Greek form was used in the Gospels as they were written down in Koine Greek.)

Matthew's Genealogy – Numerological Games

Another theory for the three missing generations of Kings in Matthew's genealogy is that Matthew wanted to have the number of generations from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian exile, and from the Babylonian exile to Jesus, as each being 14. This necessitated omitting three generations in the middle section. But why? The writer(s?) of Matthew's gospel seems to be obsessed with divine signs of Jesus' status, and this extends to numerological games. This numerology theory is not to be dismissed lightly: the Gospel explicitly states at the end of the genealogy, “¹⁷ Thus there were fourteen generations in all

from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.”

One of many hypotheses is that 14 is the number of days in one-half of a full lunar cycle, and in particular the moon waxes for 14 days and then wanes for 14 days. Looking at the history of the Israelites, it could be argued that the 14 generations from Abraham to David were a waxing period, the 14 generations from David to the Babylonian exile were a waning period, and the 14 generations from the Babylonian exile to Jesus were another waxing period.

Matthew’s Genealogy – Another Missing King

The sharp-eyed among the readers may have noticed that we are one generation short! In Matthew’s genealogy, there are only 27 generations from David to Jesus. The Kings of Judah just prior to the Babylonian exile were [Josiah the father of Jehoiakim](#), [Jehoiakim the father of Jeconiah \(also spelled Jehoiachin\)](#). The latter two have forms of their names spelled very similarly, and it is hypothesised that they were inadvertently conflated at some stage. (This explanation, however, does not satisfy the strict Bible literalists, but their explanations are ridiculously far-fetched.)

Matthew’s Genealogy – The Curse of Jeconiah

[Jeremiah 22](#) delivers what is often known as the [Curse of Jeconiah](#). Such were the wickedness and ineptitude of the Kings of Judah leading to the Babylonian exile (the first wave of which happened in the reign of Jeconiah), the Lord decreed through Jeremiah that no offspring of Jeconiah would sit on David’s Throne in Judah. Some have argued that this invalidates Matthew’s genealogy as it passes through Jeconiah. Others have contended that “offspring” means children specifically and not the line forever. It is certainly true that none of Jeconiah’s sons came to rule in Judah. However, after the Babylonian exile, Jeconiah’s grandson, Zerubbabel ruled the returnees as a “prince”, being the Governor of Judah within the Persian Empire that had overthrown the Babylonians. Also, [Haggai 2:23](#) may be read as specifically revoking the curse. So, it may safely be assumed that the events of this period do not invalidate Matthew’s Davidic lineage.

Matthew’s Genealogy – Zerubbabel Gets Two Fathers

It was mentioned above that Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jeconiah, and this is the path that Matthew’s genealogy takes, since numerous Old Testament references confirm that [“Jeconiah father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel father of Zerubbabel”](#) ([Ezra 3:2,8; 5:2; Nehemiah 12:1, Haggai 1:1,12,14](#)). Another son of Jeconiah was Pedaiah, and [1 Chronicles 3:17–19](#) says the Zerubbabel’s father was Pedaiah. Oops!

The Levirate Marriage Law

An important example of why it is necessary to know of different cultural practices is the Ancient Jewish [Levirate Marriage Law](#). The Law may be found in the Book of Deuteronomy. I shall quote it in full, as it not only says what the Law is, but also stipulates the action to be

taken if the Law is not followed. The latter is included simply because I find it rather humorous!

Deuteronomy 25:5-10

⁵ If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. ⁶ The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

⁷ However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me." ⁸ Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her," ⁹ his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line." ¹⁰ That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled.

(Deuteronomy 25:5-10, New International Version)

The purpose of the Law was to protect the inheritance of the childless deceased. The son thus born would still be of the same paternal bloodline and would be the legal heir of the childless deceased. (If the widow remarried into a different family, then the childless deceased's inheritance would pass to another family.)

There has occasionally been speculation on what would happen if there were two **uterine half-brothers**. Uterine half-brothers have the same mother, but different fathers. Levirate marriage here would result in the son thus born having a bloodline father and a different father for his legal line of inheritance. The son could be said to have two patrilinear lines. However, since the whole purpose of the Levirate Marriage Law was to keep the childless deceased's inheritance within his blood family, **the Levirate Marriage Law does not apply to uterine half-brothers**.

Matthew's Genealogy – Zerubbabel's Father

Bible literalists have tried to explain the contradiction in respect of Zerubbabel's father in **1 Chronicles 3:17–19** by speculating – without any evidence – that Shealtiel had died without siring a son, and so his widow entered into a Levirate Marriage with Pedaiah, and the son thus born was Zerubbabel. Thus, they would argue, Pedaiah was Zerubbabel's blood father and this is what **1 Chronicles 3:17–19** is referring to, whereas Shealtiel was Zerubbabel's legal father by virtue of the Levirate Marriage hence all the other Biblical references. But his paternal grandfather is still Jeconiah just the same, so at the end of the day, regarding the patrilinear line, it makes no difference.

This fantasy is not shared by serious scholars. There are issues with the Hebrew (Masoretic) source of **1 Chronicles 3:17–19** which is believed to have given rise to a simple scribal error. Even the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament has **1 Chronicles 3:17–19** state that Shealtiel was Zerubbabel's father, pure and simple.

The Masoretic Texts and the Septuagint

I suddenly threw into the last section mention of the Masoretic Texts and the Septuagint. I should explain. The Hebrew Bible is very ancient, and no record survives of any original texts. Even at the time of the return from the Babylonian exile, there were multiple copies that varied considerably in their content. By the time of Jesus, a transliteration and translation into Koine Greek called the **Septuagint** was widely used as a source. The New Testament writers such as Paul used this Koine Greek language Hebrew Bible when they wished to consult or quote from the Hebrew Bible.

Some centuries later, somewhere between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, the Jewish religious authorities commissioned a group of rabbinical scholars to synthesize the extant texts into a single, authoritative Hebrew Bible. This was to include diacritical marks to guide pronunciation and marginal/footnotes to elucidate finer points. This group of scholars, known as the **Masoretes**, may well have taken generations to complete the task. At its conclusion, there was a single, definitive Hebrew Bible, the **Masoretic Texts**, to be used henceforth. Most translations of the Bible into English use the Masoretic Texts as the source for their translation of the Hebrew Bible parts.

Matthew's Genealogy – Jeconiah to Jesus

The first and major deportation to Babylon occurred in 597 B.C.E., as a result of the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II. The purpose of the assault on Jerusalem was to punish King Jehoiakim, once Babylon's vassal, for allying with Egypt and rebelling against Babylonian dominance ([2 Kings 24:1](#)). Initially, King Jehoiakim retained his court at Jerusalem and died there soon after of natural causes. His son, Jeconiah, reigned for only a few months. This is because he too flirted with rebellion and this time the Babylonians had King Jeconiah and the intellectual and spiritual elite of Judah deported to Babylon. Zedekiah became the King of the rump of the Kingdom of Judah. (There were two smaller deportations, in 586 B.C.E. and 581 B.C.E., after further futile rebellions against the Babylonian overlordship. The deportation in 586 B.C.E. was also accompanied by the utter destruction of the Temple of Solomon, also known as the First Temple to the Lord in Jerusalem.)

Jesus is reckoned to have been born in 4 B.C.E., and so there were 593 years from the deportation to Babylon until the birth of Jesus. It is an established rule-of-thumb that there are about five generations every 100 years, and so one would expect the number of generations from the deportation to Babylon until the birth of Jesus to be 30. This figure is over double that attributed in Matthew's gospel!

Matthew's Genealogy – the Conclusion

The first part of Matthew's genealogy goes from the Mythical Era to the Ancient Historical Era. It is a standard list, but few scholars believe it to be literal history. However, it is not relevant to our analysis of the patrilinear line from King David to Jesus.

The second part of Matthew's genealogy is from King David up to the deportation to Babylon, and Matthew agrees with the lineage implied by the Hebrew sources.

The third part of Matthew's genealogy is from Jeconiah, the King at the time of the deportation to Babylon, to Joseph. The line from Jeconiah to Zerubbabel has just been discussed. Thereafter, to my knowledge, there are no corroborating sources of any kind. The lineage may be true, true in parts, or complete fiction. We have no way of telling. But the lineage is highly suspicious in that it is so short, since it was remarked earlier that the number of generations from Jeconiah to Jesus should have been of the order of 30, not 14! Unlike the earlier "incident" of the "three missing kings", there is no plausible way of reconciling this mismatch.

It is true that the Jews were very pedantic about keeping genealogical records, particularly for princely, priestly, and other important families. Thus, the recording of the descendants of Zerubbabel, particularly the male line, would be expected. However, the evidence for this as a way of validating Matthew's claim is not there.

There is also the step is from Joseph to Jesus to consider. If you subscribe to the dogma of the Divine Conception and the Virgin Birth, then the fact that Joseph married Mary while she was still pregnant implies that Joseph adopted Jesus, and so the matter is settled. If you do not believe in the aforementioned dogma, then there is nothing to be settled.

So, what is our conclusion? Does Matthew establish that Jesus is of the House of David? There is no conclusive flaw or fault, but it is highly implausible. I am **not prepared to believe that Matthew has established that Jesus is of the House of David.**

Luke's Genealogy – the Father of Joseph

We observed earlier that Matthew and Luke name Joseph's father differently: Jacob and Heli respectively. Could this be the same person with two versions of his name (recall the example of Simon Peter)? Even if they were, there are almost no matches at all – even a different number of generations! One must be wrong.

Unless Luke is following Mary's patrilineage!

Jewish genealogies in general did not acknowledge women at all. So, if Heli were Mary's father, then the text would say "**Joseph, the son of Heli,**", but in fact Joseph could be the **son-in-law of Heli!** Since Luke subscribed to the dogma of the Divine Conception and the Virgin Birth, then perhaps he considered it his task to study the patrilinear line of Mary to establish that Jesus was of the House of David, given the rather unusual circumstances.

Luke's Genealogy – Is it Really Credible?

However, all we have from Luke is a list of fathers of fathers, starting at Mary and eventually getting to King David, via another of David's sons, Nathan. And not a scrap of corroborating evidence! It is true that in the list we have a Zerubbabel as the son of a Shealtiel, but the latter's father rules them out as being the princely lineage from Matthew's genealogy. True, it could be another example of a matrilinear link, but now there would be no special case to be made that would justify following one. Luke's pair would be about the right time, but it looks as if he's guessing. Scholars studying the other generations of Luke's genealogy have concluded that there is a definite look of a contrivance by repetition from a stock of names.

Luke quotes the accepted lineage from King David back to the mythic Abraham, but to then take it all the way back to Adam and thence to God! Oh, really.

I'm afraid I am **not at all convinced about Luke's Genealogy**.

Is Jesus of the House of David?

My assessment of the arguments put forward in Matthew's Gospel leads me to **doubt that Jesus is of the House of David**. Luke's genealogy I regard as being almost completely fiction.

* * * * *