

The Genealogies of Jesus: Matthew, Luke, Jewish Tradition, and the Apocryphal Gospels

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Physics, Independent Research

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800818>

Received: 26 August 2026; Accepted: 3 September 2026; Published: 18 September 2026

ABSTRACT

The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1:1–17 and Luke 3:23–38 present one of the most persistent interpretive problems in the New Testament. Both genealogies seek to establish Jesus within the biblical history of Israel, yet they differ substantially in names, sequence, structure, and apparent relationships. Matthew traces Jesus from Abraham through David and Solomon to Joseph, while Luke traces Jesus backward from Joseph through a different branch of David's family and ultimately to Adam. The problem becomes more complex because both Matthew and Luke present Jesus' conception as occurring through the Holy Spirit rather than through ordinary biological fatherhood by Joseph.

This paper examines these discrepancies in the context of Old Testament genealogy, Jewish concepts of lineage, inheritance, legal sonship, Davidic kingship, levirate marriage, and messianic expectation. It also considers the contribution of the apocryphal gospels, particularly the *Protoevangelium of James*, to later Christian understanding of Mary and Joseph. The paper argues that the genealogies should not automatically be interpreted as modern biological family trees. Ancient Jewish genealogies could communicate ancestry, tribal identity, inheritance, legal status, dynastic legitimacy, and theological purpose. Matthew appears particularly concerned with Jesus as the Davidic Messiah and legitimate heir to the royal promises, while Luke places Jesus within the broader history of humanity, extending the genealogy to Adam and God. The differences remain historically significant and cannot be completely harmonized from the surviving evidence, but they need not be regarded as fatal contradictions to the Christian theological claim. Their ultimate purpose is to establish Jesus within the biblical story of Abraham and David while the wider New Testament makes the much greater claim that the Davidic Messiah is also the Son of God.

Keyword: Genealogies, substantially, Testament.

INTRODUCTION

The genealogy of Jesus is one of the first issues encountered when comparing the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew opens his Gospel with a genealogy and explicitly identifies Jesus as:

"the son of David, the son of Abraham."

Luke provides another genealogy, but its structure and content are substantially different.

At first sight, the differences appear contradictory. Matthew says that Joseph was the son of Jacob, while Luke associates Joseph with Heli. Matthew traces the Davidic line through Solomon, whereas Luke traces it through Nathan. Matthew begins with Abraham, while Luke continues beyond Abraham to Adam and ultimately to God.

The problem becomes particularly significant because genealogy is central to the Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah. The Old Testament establishes a developing chain of covenantal relationships involving Abraham, Judah, David, and the future Davidic ruler. If Jesus is to be identified as the promised Messiah, his relationship to David becomes an important part of the argument.

At the same time, Matthew and Luke both teach that Jesus was not conceived through ordinary biological fatherhood by Joseph. This creates an apparent tension:

If Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, why is Joseph's genealogy important to establishing Jesus' Davidic identity?

The answer requires an examination of ancient Jewish concepts of genealogy and legal identity rather than simply applying modern assumptions about biological descent.

The Old Testament Foundation

The genealogical problem begins long before the New Testament.

The biblical narrative develops a sequence of covenantal relationships.

Abraham becomes the father of the covenant people. His line proceeds through Isaac and Jacob. Jacob's descendants become the twelve tribes of Israel. Within these tribes, Judah assumes particular significance.

Genesis 49 associates rulership with Judah. The biblical narrative subsequently develops Israel's monarchy through Saul and, more importantly for later messianic expectations, David.

The covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 becomes foundational. God promises David an enduring dynasty and kingdom. The idea of the **House of David** subsequently becomes an important component of Israel's royal and messianic expectations.

The genealogical argument can therefore be represented as:

Abraham → Isaac → Jacob → Judah → David → Davidic dynasty → expected future ruler

The New Testament places Jesus within this framework.

Matthew's Genealogy

Matthew 1:1–17 proceeds from Abraham toward Jesus.

Its principal structure is:

Abraham → Isaac → Jacob → Judah → David → Solomon → Davidic kings → Joseph → Jesus

Matthew's choice of Solomon is significant.

Solomon was David's royal successor. Matthew therefore follows the principal royal line associated with the kings of Judah.

The opening sentence is itself a theological statement:

Jesus Christ → Son of David → Son of Abraham.

Matthew is identifying Jesus simultaneously with the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic monarchy.

Matthew's three divisions

Matthew deliberately divides the genealogy into three groups of fourteen generations:

Abraham to David

David to the Babylonian exile

Exile to Christ

This arrangement indicates that Matthew is doing more than reproducing a modern genealogical register.

The genealogy is structured as a theological interpretation of Israel's history:

Abraham → David → Exile → Messiah

The exile represents a major crisis in Israel's history. Jesus' arrival represents the culmination of the story.

Consequently, Matthew's genealogy functions as both genealogy and theology.

Luke's Genealogy

Luke 3:23–38 operates in the opposite direction.

Luke begins with Jesus and moves backward through his ancestors:

Jesus → Joseph → Heli → ... → David → Abraham → Adam → God

The genealogy therefore extends beyond the national history of Israel.

Matthew ends the relevant ancestral story at Abraham.

Luke goes beyond Abraham to Adam.

This difference may reflect a difference in theological emphasis.

Matthew emphasizes:

Jesus → Abraham → Israel → Davidic Messiah

Luke emphasizes:

Jesus → David → Abraham → Adam → humanity

The final reference to Adam and God gives Luke's genealogy a universal dimension.

Jesus is not merely the Messiah of Israel. He is being placed within the history of humanity itself.

The First Major Discrepancy: Jacob and Heli

Matthew identifies Joseph in relation to Jacob.

Luke identifies Joseph in relation to Heli.

Thus the apparent relationship is:

Matthew: Jacob → Joseph

Luke: Heli → Joseph

If both are understood as statements that Joseph's biological father was being named, they cannot both be literally correct.

This is the most obvious genealogical discrepancy.

Several explanations have been proposed.

The Mary Interpretation

One traditional Christian explanation is that Matthew gives Joseph's genealogy while Luke gives Mary's genealogy.

Under this interpretation:

Matthew → Joseph's royal/legal genealogy

Luke → Mary's biological genealogy

This would explain why Matthew and Luke follow different lines after David.

Matthew follows:

David → Solomon

while Luke follows:

David → Nathan

Solomon and Nathan were both sons of David.

Under the Marian interpretation, the two genealogies would therefore represent two different Davidic branches that eventually converge in Jesus.

The problem is that Luke does not explicitly say that his genealogy is Mary's.

Luke names Joseph.

Consequently, the Marian interpretation is a traditional Christian explanation, but it should not be presented as an explicit statement made by Luke.

Legal and Dynastic Genealogy

Another explanation is that the genealogies may involve different types of relationship.

Ancient genealogies did not necessarily function as modern DNA-based family trees.

Genealogy could establish:

- ancestry;
- tribal identity;
- household membership;
- inheritance;
- legal fatherhood;
- royal succession;
- dynastic legitimacy;
- covenant identity.

Consequently, two genealogies could potentially describe different aspects of an individual's family identity.

This possibility becomes especially important when considering Joseph.

Jewish Patrilineal Tradition

Ancient Jewish identity was strongly associated with paternal lineage.

Tribal affiliation was ordinarily traced through the father.

Thus:

Judah → descendant of Judah

Levi → descendant of Levi

David → member of the Davidic line

This creates a particularly interesting problem for the Christian doctrine of the virgin conception.

If Joseph is not Jesus' biological father, how can Jesus be called the Son of David?

The answer in Christian interpretation involves the distinction between **biological descent and legal/dynastic status**.

Joseph is presented as Mary's husband and Jesus' legal father.

Matthew can therefore establish Jesus' relationship to the House of David through Joseph without claiming that Joseph biologically conceived Jesus.

The House of David

The concept of the **House of David** is more important than simply identifying one biological ancestor.

Davidic kingship was dynastic.

The covenant of 2 Samuel 7 concerns David's house, throne, kingdom, and continuing dynasty.

The Messiah is therefore not simply someone who happens to possess David somewhere in a biological family tree.

He is associated with the **Davidic royal house**.

Matthew's genealogy can consequently be understood as establishing Jesus' credentials as the legitimate Davidic Messiah.

This is why the title "**Son of David**" is so important throughout the Gospels.

The Problem of Joseph's Biological Father

Jewish genealogical customs help explain why Matthew's genealogy is important, but they do not completely solve the discrepancy.

If Matthew and Luke were both intending to identify Joseph's biological father, Jacob and Heli remain incompatible.

Several possibilities therefore remain:

1. They preserve different genealogical traditions.
2. One genealogy represents a legal rather than biological relationship.
3. One genealogy may represent Mary's family.
4. A marriage or inheritance arrangement may account for the difference.
5. Matthew and Luke may have adapted genealogical traditions for different theological purposes.

No surviving evidence allows one of these explanations to be established with complete certainty.

Levirate Marriage

Jewish law contains the practice of levirate marriage, described in Deuteronomy 25.

Where a man died without a son, his brother could marry the widow and the resulting child could preserve the deceased man's name and inheritance.

This demonstrates an important principle:

biological fatherhood and legal genealogical identity could sometimes be distinguished.

This has led some ancient Christian interpreters to propose that the genealogies of Matthew and Luke could reflect biological and legal lines.

However, neither Matthew nor Luke states that Joseph's genealogy resulted from a levirate marriage.

The explanation is therefore possible but speculative.

It demonstrates the kinds of legal and family relationships that existed in ancient Jewish society, rather than providing a proven solution to the Gospel discrepancy.

Jewish Inheritance and Genealogy

Jewish genealogy was also closely connected with inheritance.

Genealogical identity could determine:

- tribal membership;
- property rights;
- family inheritance;
- priestly status;
- royal legitimacy;
- membership within a particular household.

Consequently, the ancient question:

"Whose son are you?"

could have social and legal implications far beyond biological paternity.

This helps explain why Jesus' relationship to Joseph could be significant even if Joseph was not Jesus' biological father.

The Messiah and the Son of David

The expression "**Son of David**" is central to the New Testament's understanding of Jesus.

Matthew explicitly identifies Jesus as the Son of David at the beginning of the Gospel.

Throughout the Gospel tradition, people address Jesus as Son of David.

This is not simply a genealogical observation.

It is a **messianic title**.

The claim is:

Jesus is the expected Davidic ruler.

The genealogy therefore functions as a credential for messianic identity.

Matthew's Christological Purpose

Matthew's genealogy should be read together with the rest of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew repeatedly presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures.

His genealogy establishes:

Abrahamic identity

Judahite identity

Davidic identity

royal identity

messianic identity

The genealogy is therefore the opening argument for Matthew's larger presentation of Jesus.

Matthew is effectively saying:

The story that began with Abraham and reached its royal expression in David reaches its fulfillment in Jesus.

Luke's Universal Purpose

Luke's genealogy has a different endpoint.

Instead of stopping at Abraham, Luke proceeds to Adam.

This may reflect Luke's larger emphasis on the universal scope of salvation.

The structure becomes:

Jesus → David → Abraham → Adam → God

Jesus therefore belongs simultaneously to:

Israel

the Davidic tradition

humanity

and ultimately the creation of humanity by God.

Luke's genealogy therefore has a broader theological scope than Matthew's.

The Apocryphal Gospels

The apocryphal gospels contribute additional information concerning Jesus' family, particularly Mary and Joseph.

The most important for this subject is the **Protoevangelium of James**, probably composed in the second century.

It introduces the names:

Joachim and Anna

as Mary's parents.

It also provides an expanded account of Mary's childhood and her relationship with Joseph.

Joseph is portrayed as an older man and widower with children from an earlier relationship.

This tradition became important in later Christian explanations of Mary's perpetual virginity and the identity of Jesus' brothers and sisters.

The Importance of the Protoevangelium of James

The *Protoevangelium of James* does not explicitly solve the Matthew/Luke genealogy problem.

Its importance is different.

It provides an early Christian tradition distinguishing:

Mary's family

from

Joseph's family

and provides additional background about both.

This helped later Christians develop more elaborate interpretations of the genealogies.

However, because the text is later than the canonical Gospels, it cannot automatically be used as a first-century historical correction.

It demonstrates what some later Christians believed, rather than proving what actually occurred.

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* provides stories concerning Jesus' childhood.

It is concerned less with genealogy than with the question:

What was Jesus like before his public ministry?

Its stories demonstrate that early Christians wanted additional information about Jesus' childhood that Matthew and Luke did not provide.

This illustrates an important feature of early Christian literature: traditions concerning Jesus' family and childhood expanded over time.

The Gospel of Peter

The *Gospel of Peter* is primarily concerned with Jesus' Passion and resurrection.

It therefore contributes little directly to the genealogy problem.

Its importance lies in demonstrating the diversity of early Christian traditions concerning Jesus.

The existence of these different writings shows that early Christianity contained a variety of narratives and interpretations.

Historical Value of the Apocryphal Gospels

The apocryphal gospels should therefore be used cautiously.

They are valuable evidence for:

- early Christian beliefs;
- later traditions concerning Mary and Joseph;
- the development of Christian theology;
- the way Christians interpreted gaps in the canonical narratives.

They are less secure as evidence for the actual historical genealogy of Jesus.

The chronological difference is important.

The canonical Gospels are generally earlier than the surviving apocryphal infancy traditions.

Therefore the apocryphal texts should not simply be substituted for Matthew and Luke.

The Three Genealogical Traditions

The evidence can be summarized in three levels.

The Old Testament tradition

The Old Testament establishes:

Abraham → Judah → David → Davidic dynasty → future ruler

This is the theological foundation.

Matthew and Luke

Matthew and Luke independently place Jesus within this history but use substantially different genealogical structures.

Matthew emphasizes:

Abraham → David → Solomon → royal dynasty → Joseph → Jesus

Luke emphasizes:

Jesus → Joseph → Nathan → David → Abraham → Adam → God

Apocryphal tradition

The apocryphal literature expands the family story, particularly through:

Joachim + Anna → Mary → Jesus

and through an expanded account of Joseph.

It does not provide a definitive reconciliation of Matthew and Luke.

Are Matthew and Luke Contradictory?

The answer depends upon the definition of genealogy being used.

If both are interpreted as **complete modern biological genealogies**, then there are substantial contradictions.

Jacob and Heli cannot both be Joseph's biological father.

Furthermore, Matthew's Solomon line and Luke's Nathan line are different.

However, if the genealogies are understood according to ancient Jewish conventions, the situation becomes more complex.

They may represent:

different family traditions

legal and biological relationships

dynastic succession

different branches of David's family

or **theological constructions based on established genealogical traditions.**

The discrepancies remain real, but they need not represent careless writing.

The Central Christian Problem

The deepest issue is not actually the difference between Jacob and Heli.

It is this:

How can Jesus be the Son of David if Joseph is not his biological father?

This is where genealogy and Christology meet.

Christianity answers through several related concepts:

legal sonship

Davidic dynastic inheritance

the virgin conception

Jesus' human descent

the Incarnation

The Christian claim is therefore not simply that Jesus is another biological descendant of David.

It is that Jesus enters the human and Davidic story while possessing an identity that ultimately transcends ordinary human genealogy.

David's Son and David's Lord

This becomes particularly significant in the Gospel discussion concerning the Messiah.

Jesus asks how the Messiah can be David's son when David calls him "Lord."

The question creates a theological paradox:

How can the Messiah be David's descendant and simultaneously David's Lord?

The Christian answer is that Jesus possesses two dimensions of identity.

According to his humanity, he belongs to the human and Davidic story.

According to Christian theology, he is the Son of God.

Thus:

Son of David

and

Son of God

are not competing descriptions.

They express different dimensions of Christian Christology.

Romans 1:3–4

Paul provides an especially concise formulation.

Jesus is described as:

descended from David according to the flesh

and as

the Son of God declared through the resurrection.

This provides a useful framework for understanding the genealogies.

The genealogies establish Jesus' relationship to David **according to the flesh and the covenantal story.**

The resurrection becomes the central Christian testimony concerning his divine identity.

The Genealogy Is Not the Whole Christian Argument

Christianity therefore does not depend upon Matthew and Luke having identical genealogies.

The genealogies are one component of a much larger argument:

Old Testament promise

↓

Davidic covenant

↓

Messianic expectation

↓

Jesus

↓

Crucifixion

↓

Resurrection

↓

Son of God

↓

Lord and Messiah

The genealogy establishes Jesus' place in the biblical history.

The resurrection is the central event upon which the apostolic proclamation rests.

A Comparative Summary

Feature	Matthew	Luke	Jewish Background	Apocryphal Tradition
Direction	Abraham → Jesus	Jesus → Adam	Ancestry often traced through family lines	Expands family history
Starting point	Abraham	Jesus	Abraham is covenant patriarch	Mary receives expanded ancestry

Davidic branch	Solomon	Nathan	Davidic house is dynastic	Later traditions elaborate Joseph
Joseph's father	Jacob	Heli	Legal and biological relationships could differ	Joseph portrayed as older widower
Endpoint	Jesus	Adam/God	Humanity ultimately derives from God	Focus on Mary and Jesus' childhood
Primary emphasis	Messiah and king	Universal humanity	Covenant, tribe, inheritance, dynasty	Development of Marian/Joseph traditions
Historical certainty	Ancient Gospel tradition	Ancient Gospel tradition	Broader cultural framework	Later than canonical Gospels

DISCUSSION

The genealogical discrepancies are best understood as a combination of **historical, literary, legal, and theological phenomena**.

It would be anachronistic to assume that Matthew and Luke were attempting to produce modern genealogical databases.

At the same time, it would be equally inappropriate simply to dismiss the differences.

The texts really do provide different genealogies.

The strongest historical conclusion is therefore not that every discrepancy has been solved, but that the evangelists were working with genealogical traditions that served different purposes.

Matthew's genealogy is particularly suited to establishing Jesus as the **Davidic King and Messiah**.

Luke's genealogy places Jesus in the much broader context of **humanity descending from Adam**.

The Jewish concepts of legal status, inheritance, dynastic succession, and the House of David help explain why Joseph's genealogy could be important even within a virgin-birth narrative.

The apocryphal gospels then demonstrate that early Christians continued to develop traditions concerning Mary's and Joseph's families, especially where the canonical Gospels were silent.

CONCLUSION

The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke contain genuine discrepancies. Matthew identifies Joseph with Jacob and follows David through Solomon, while Luke associates Joseph with Heli and follows David through Nathan. The two genealogies therefore cannot simply be combined into one continuous modern biological family tree without considerable reconstruction.

Jewish tradition provides an important framework for understanding the problem. Ancient genealogy could establish not only biological ancestry but also **tribal identity, legal status, inheritance, household membership, and dynastic legitimacy**. The Davidic monarchy was fundamentally associated with the House of David, and the Messiah was expected to be connected with that royal tradition.

This helps explain why Matthew emphasizes Joseph's genealogy even though Joseph is not presented as Jesus' biological father. Jesus' relationship to Joseph can be understood in terms of legal and dynastic identity, while the virgin-birth tradition establishes a different understanding of Jesus' biological conception.

The traditional identification of Luke's genealogy with Mary's ancestry provides a possible reconciliation, particularly because Matthew follows Solomon while Luke follows Nathan. Nevertheless, Luke does not explicitly identify the genealogy as Mary's, so the interpretation remains uncertain.

The apocryphal gospels, especially the *Protoevangelium of James*, contribute additional traditions about Mary and Joseph and demonstrate how early Christians attempted to fill the gaps in the canonical accounts. They are valuable witnesses to the development of Christian tradition but do not provide a definitive historical solution to the genealogical problem.

The most important conclusion is therefore theological rather than merely genealogical. The biblical genealogies place Jesus within the great sequence:

Abraham → Judah → David → Davidic promise → Messiah → Jesus.

Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the **Davidic Messiah and King of Israel**. Luke extends the genealogy to **Adam**, emphasizing Jesus' relationship to humanity as a whole. The broader New Testament then makes the extraordinary Christian claim that this descendant of David is also the **Son of God**.

The genealogy establishes **where Jesus belongs in human history**.

The Gospel proclamation addresses the greater question:

Who is Jesus?

Christianity's answer is that Jesus is simultaneously **Son of David according to the flesh, Messiah according to the promises, and Son of God according to his divine identity**.

Thus the discrepancies in the genealogies are not merely a problem to be eliminated. They reveal that the earliest Christian writers were using genealogy to address different dimensions of Jesus' identity: **ancestry, covenant, kingship, inheritance, humanity, messiahship, and ultimately divinity**.

The apparent conflict between Matthew and Luke therefore leads directly to the central question of Christian theology: not simply **which genealogy is correct**, but **how the historical Jesus can simultaneously be understood as David's descendant, Israel's Messiah, and David's Lord**.

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Particularly important references for the paper

If the paper's central argument is “**Why do Matthew and Luke give different genealogies, and what does the discrepancy tell us about Jesus' identity?**”, the essential scholarly core would be:

- Matthew 1:1–17
- Luke 3:23–38
- 2 Samuel 7:12–16

- Isaiah 11:1–10
- Jeremiah 23:5–6
- Micah 5:2
- Romans 1:3–4
- Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*
- Davies & Allison, *Matthew*
- Fitzmyer, *Luke*
- Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 1
- *Protoevangelium of James*

These give you a strong foundation for distinguishing **historical genealogy, legal genealogy, biological ancestry, Davidic succession, Jewish messianic expectation, and theological genealogy.**