The Importance of Luke 3

by Patrick Russell

There are around twenty-five genealogies in the Old Testament, but only two in the New Testament. The genealogies found in the New Testament are the only extant genealogies of Jesus and yet, from David through Joseph, they have very little in common. This raises the question of what to do with these differences. More specifically, how might one approach the genealogy recorded in Luke?

Understanding an approach to Luke’s genealogy will require an acknowledgement of textual variants, placement within the text, and a

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short overview of biblical functions of genealogies. With these things in place, one can begin to piece together some idea of why Luke includes a genealogy and how it might still be relevant in a modern context.

TEXTUAL ISSUES

Luke 3:23-38 is challenging because there is some variation in the manuscript (MS) evidence as to its structure and placement. Sanders points out that some of the manuscripts (MSS) of Matthew separate the Matthean genealogy from the rest of the text as a sort of preamble/introduction, but such an understanding would not account for the current placement within Luke. It is possible, however, to consider that Luke 3 was at one time the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, which would mean the genealogy started in a more sensible location.

Whether or not Luke 3 could have been the starting point for the Gospel, there are still variations within the MSS that pose problems when trying to understand the genealogy in this text. Depending on the MS, one may find a list of anywhere from seventy-two to seventy-eight names in the genealogy. Add to this the variations of names within the text, especially the debate over how many names there are in 3:33, and the whole pericope presents quite the complication.

The complications continue for this text when looking at other MSS because there are some where the genealogy is completely absent, sometimes with part of v.23 or without it. Then there is at least one MS where the genealogy of Matthew in reverse order has been copied into the text instead of the genealogy of Luke while still retaining the generations prior to Abraham. With the many differences in the MSS, it becomes even more important to consider the purpose of a genealogy before considering the genealogy of Luke in its current form.

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BIBLICAL GENEALOGIES

Genealogies give a summarized account of a people’s history as it is understood by a given group. Such records help establish limits of identity within a polemical framework. This allows one to live within certain social boundaries as an expression of genealogical connections. In a more tribal context, such information of kinship is particularly vital for understanding personal status, rights, and obligations.\(^7\)

A natural phenomenon of genealogies, especially oral ones, is something called fluidity, where changes in kinship occur between members of a genealogy. This event might be sudden or may develop over time, but whether intentional or not, they typically reflect shifts in social standing, political power, or religious authority.\(^8\) It is important to note that relationships between different segments of a genealogy may change depending on the social context in which they are applied. Conflicting genealogies may result from this because the persons highlighted for political reasons might not be the same ancestors highlighted in a religious debate.\(^9\)

In the context of the Old Testament genealogies, there are several texts which offer clarification of kinship.\(^10\) In each one of these cases, Israel is presented with a list of persons, and by reciting them builds a level of relationship to those named. Israelites, Ishmaelites, Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites—all share some level of kinship according to Genesis, but in making that designation one also understands a degree of separation. The polemic nature of the other is hard to ignore, especially considering the elected status of Israel.

A national polemic surrounding genealogies is made even more explicit in the post-exilic period. In the context of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, the idea of separation is one of the pillars of national identity. This is driven home emphatically in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, where one finds six


\(^8\) Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 27.

\(^9\) Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 31.

\(^10\) Genesis 11, Genesis 25, and Genesis 36 (descendants of Shem, the genealogy of the Ishmaelites, and the genealogy of the Edomites, respectively).
families of Israel who search for and are unable to verify their ancestry. The result is immediate exclusion for those who claim priestly descent. Given the polemic nature of genealogies in Genesis and the post-exilic period, it seems possible to posit a similar function for Luke 3:23-38. Though if that is the case, one must still try to answer the question: what is the polemic function of the genealogy in the Gospel of Luke?

LUKE 3:23-38

Many have tried to argue throughout the history of the Church that the genealogies in Matthew and Luke do not match for various reasons. Some argue that Matthew represents Joseph’s descent while Luke presents Mary’s ancestry, others that Matthew’s genealogy is the biological descent of Joseph while Luke’s is the legal/adoptive descent of Joseph. But, regardless of what variation on these has been taken, they do not make much sense in light of the Lukan text. Luke specifically draws out the understanding that Jesus was thought to be, though wrongly, the son of Joseph. That puts Joseph squarely as the line of descent in Luke just as it does in Matthew. If then, Joseph is the point of descent in Luke as well as Matthew, there is still the problem of discontinuity which is not easily brushed aside.

Wilson does point out in oral genealogies, the names most often lost or changed are those in the middle, which may be what is behind the New Testament sources. The names at the beginning remain important because they establish the origins of the group, and the names at the end remain important because they are the members who are alive. In the case of Luke, this would be reversed since the names are recorded in the opposite direction, but this would at least give a plausible reason as to why Matthew and Luke disagree.

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11 Nehemiah 7:64-65 “These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor, therefore, ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there should be a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.” See also Ezra 2:59-63.


14 Wilson, Genealogy and History, 33.
It is interesting that where Matthew records from Abraham to Jesus, making Jesus the telos of the list, Luke records from Jesus back to God, which would seem to make God the telos. That being said, Luke gives a list of ancestors from Terah back to Adam, which is lacking in Matthew but seems to be in harmony with Genesis 5 and 11. The list from Abraham to David given in Luke and Matthew is seen as the same, with the exception of two names and some variant spellings of other names, which leaves the point of contention from after David to Jesus.\(^\text{15}\)

What polemical reason could there be for such a stark difference in the lists of names from David to Jesus? On the one hand, the difference could be that of simply a different genealogy (either written or oral), but there is also the possibility that the change is due to Luke’s desire to avoid political claims. If Luke is writing in a more Roman context, the avoidance of kingly implications and national political affiliations would help serve such an end. By tracing the descent through Nathan, an obscure son of David who was never king, political tensions can be sidestepped while still retaining the historical foundations of Jewish identity.\(^\text{16}\)

Marshall Johnson raises the possibility that there was an understanding, presumably within the Lukan community, that the Messiah would arise from the line of Nathan as recorded in Luke 3. If that is the case, then it would make sense for Luke to structure the genealogy according to that understanding. The underpinning of this idea seems to be Zechariah 12:10-14 where v. 12 reports, “The land shall mourn, each family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves…”\(^\text{17}\) If the Nathan in Zechariah 12 is the son of David, the separation of Nathan from David is curious but could be the origins of such a Messianic idea.\(^\text{18}\)


\(^{17}\) Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

The possibility of a Davidic Messiah coming from Nathan is made even more interesting given there are some sources that erroneously conflate Nathan the prophet with David’s son Nathan. This idea could have arisen as early as the second century *Letter to Aristides*,¹⁹ where it seems to be an assumed fact.²⁰

Johnson also points out that some may have excluded the possibility of royal descent through Solomon because of the curse of Jeconiah.²¹ The curse of Jeconiah was seen by some as a point of disqualification and therefore necessitated that the messianic line move to one of the other sons of David, in this case Nathan. The fact that in this view Nathan also has a prophetic function would again point to Nathan the prophet being seen as the same person.²² So, it could be that Luke is writing the genealogy with this Nathanic idea in mind while also avoiding political tensions. If that is the case, then the differences in names between David and Jesus are not completely surprising, though the name of Joseph’s father remains a sticking point of discrepancy between Matthew and Luke.

Polemically, Luke’s genealogy, by being less political, brings one into discussing the question, why place the genealogy where it is. If one accepts the polemic function of the genealogy, why put it after the baptism of Jesus instead of somewhere in the birth narrative of Luke 1-2? It seems a curious location, unless that too has another reason.

Aside from the argument that Luke 1-2 was added later, which would explain 3:23-38 not being found earlier, it still seems an odd placement for a genealogy after Jesus’ baptism and before Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. This oddity is heightened by it being situated between what would otherwise be in keeping with the narrative flow of Mark.²³

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¹⁹ “For if Nathan was a prophet, so also was Solomon, and so too the father of both of them; and there were prophets belonging to many of the tribes, but priests belonging to none of the tribes, save the Levites only.” (*Epistle to Aristides* 1.1).
²¹ See Jeremiah 22:24-30.
Luke 3:23 gives one of two references in the New Testament to the adult age of Jesus. 24 It is interesting that the genealogy starts with this detail though it is in accord with similar details given about Jesus in the preceding chapters. For example, Luke has previously made note of the eighth day, six weeks, and twelve years, which seems to indicate thirty years as another important detail, though it might simply be important because it is when his ministry began. This reference might also be an allusion to the beginning of David’s reign or the age one takes up priestly office. 25

Stylistically, Luke presents a very limited text. Comparatively, Matthew’s genealogy provides a few interesting caveats. Here the reader is left with only a list of names from Joseph to Adam, son of God, where the Greek simply uses the genitive τοῦ in a long chain. This is a very simple genealogy that serves to recount the history of salvation in miniature. 26

THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The baptism of Jesus takes place, literarily, after the arrest of John the Baptist, which further highlights the differences between John and Jesus. Luke has structured the narrative up to this point in such a way that it becomes clear Jesus is greater than John. There is a clear separation between the ministry of John and that of Jesus. Add to that the earlier revelation in 1:35 where Mary is told “he will be called Son of God” while John is simply a prophet, and the reader is presented with the magnitude of the difference.

A voice from heaven calls Jesus “beloved son” in 3:22, which is akin to the designation “Son of God” that will follow shortly in the genealogy. 27 “Beloved son” is used again in 9:34-35 in the Transfiguration and in 20:13 in the Parable of the Vineyard with the implication being that of the Messiah. In a Messianic context, or in the case of the Transfiguration, in a theophanic context, it would make sense to see all three texts as

24 See also John 8:57.
revelatory regarding the identity of Jesus for the reader.

“Son of God” is seldom used in Luke as a title for Jesus. Of the six times it is used in the Gospel, five of which apply to Jesus, only the first two occurrences appear in a positive light. Son of God is used by Gabriel in the Annunciation to Mary and will not appear again until 3:38 where it is used positively to refer to Adam. In both these verses it can be seen as a title, but it also clarifies identity. To identify Jesus and Adam as son of God should make one wonder why, especially since the other four occurrences (4:3, 4:9, 4:41, and 22:70) all have negative connotations. It might even be fair to see these as challenges brought by forces opposed to God.

To sandwich the genealogy between baptism and temptation, then, makes it possible to see Jesus as the Son of God in a way which is different from, yet similar to, the sonship of Adam. Where chapter 4 will challenge that identity in the temptation, that identity is precisely where Jesus begins his ministry when he reads from Isaiah in the synagogue. This Messianic marker, stated by God, conferred on Adam, and challenged by evil, is what brings the reader into the ministry of Jesus. This title is the bridge between 3:22 and 4:1ff, but why place it in the genealogy?

Son of God/beloved Son are connected, as previously indicated, and form a thematic inclusio between the baptism and the genealogy. It is worth noting the use of ὡς ἐνομίζετο in 3:23. It has already been established that Joseph is the referent for the list of names, but by using ὡς ἐνομίζετο, the idea is that Jesus is not biologically the son of Joseph, which ties in well with the statement from heaven after the baptism: “my beloved son.” Without the baptism, the sonship of Jesus would be up for discussion within Luke. However, because of ὡς ἐνομίζετο the reader is drawn back to 3:22 for the true marker of sonship.28

The divine sonship of Jesus, established at the start of his public ministry and before the temptation in the desert, makes it possible to understand the beginning of chapter 4 in a particular way. Jesus is tried in the desert, much like the Israelites during the Exodus. Unlike the people with

Moses, Jesus succeeds. Jesus’ actions recapitulate the story of the Exodus to one of victory.

More than an allusion to Moses and the Exodus, however, is the picture of Adam after the Expulsion from Eden. Adam having failed a similar temptation is redeemed in the successful resistance of Jesus. St. Irenaeus goes so far as to state, “Wherefore Luke points out that the pedigree which traces the generation of our Lord back to Adam… connecting the end with the beginning, and implying that it is He who has summed up in Himself all nations dispersed from Adam downwards, and all languages and generations of men, together with Adam himself.”29 The implication is that Jesus as the Second Adam will restore the first Adam.30

The possible restoration of Adam is great, but the implications go deeper than that. If the genealogy had stopped at Abraham, then it would be possible to maintain the specifically Jewish nature of the Messiah, but because Luke goes back to Adam, the reader is effectively left with a Messiah for the life of the world. By going back to Adam, Luke presents a Messiah who has come for all people, not just one nation or ethnic group.31 Clearly, Israel is included, but the exclusionary polemic of previous genealogies has been theologically erased with this outlook.32

Though the idea of Jesus as Second Adam is not explicit within Luke,33 there does seem to be at least one other possible allusion to this idea. That allusion is found in the most unlikely place: Golgotha. Jesus’ reply to the thief on the cross, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise,” is unique as the only reference to Paradise in all four Gospels. After setting up the genealogy to include all nations, effectively reversing the Fall as well as Babel (something made explicit in Acts 2), this reference hardly seems coincidental. However, if it is understood as an allusion to Eden, which is possible, then Jesus is the Second Adam who

29 St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III.22.3.
has come to restore Creation. As seen throughout Luke’s telling of Jesus’ ministry, such a restoration is both a present reality and a future hope yet to be realized.  

CONCLUSION

The genealogy in Luke 3:23-38 is not an easy passage to understand, but it is worth wrestling with nonetheless. Taking the time to see that genealogies do not always function as conveyors of historical data is a good starting point. Once historicity is set aside, it becomes possible to explore the importance of the genealogy for its polemical functions. These functions can be political, religious, or societal. In the case of Luke, the polemic is most likely religious, or in this case theological, though societal implications are not absent from the theological sphere.

To understand that it is not necessary to reconcile Luke 3 with Matthew 1 is at first intimidating but also freeing. There is no need to make up strained arguments as to why they differ. Instead, one can approach Luke 3:23ff on its own terms and appreciate it in its own literary context.

To place the Lukan genealogy between Jesus’ baptism and Jesus’ temptation puts it in a place of great significance. Much like Genesis 11, which bridges the gap between the primeval history and Abraham, Luke 3:23ff links the birth narrative with the ministry of Jesus while also linking Abraham and the history of Creation with the ministry of Jesus. This presents the reader with a profound theology of sonship and restored creation. Both of these points are held together in the implicit idea of Jesus as the Second Adam, and it is because Jesus is the Second Adam that the genealogical exclusivity of prior times has found reversal. Luke opens the door for hope and the gathering of nations to Zion. Thus, the reader is prepared for the events of Acts and the ministry of Paul.

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Bibliography


