

An Extraordinary Family Tree (Lk 3.23-38)

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21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." 23 Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli, 24 the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melchi, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, 25 the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Esli, the son of Naggai, 26 the son of Maath, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josech, the son of Joda, 27 the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, 28 the son of Melchi, the son of Addi, the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, 29 the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, 30 the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, 31 the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, 32 the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Sala, the son of Nahshon, 33 the son of Amminadab, the son of Admin, the son of Arni, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, 34 the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, 35 the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, 36 the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, 37 the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalaleel, the son of Cainan, 38 the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

Introduction

I dare say that most of us know nothing about most of the people named in this genealogy (Lk 3.23-38), and all of us have difficulty just pronouncing their names. We are familiar with some of them such as Mary's husband Joseph (v. 23) where the genealogy begins, and Adam (v. 38) where it ends (it ends with the first man to set foot on the face of this earth). We have to enquire about the importance of all these names, and their place in the Gospel record, but one thing will become clear: this is a profoundly remarkable genealogy. This text presents us with "An extraordinary family tree," and I have two main points to cover regarding it, in the form of two questions: 1) Whose family tree do we have before us in Luke 3? and 2) what applications can we make of the family tree we have before us in Luke 3?

1A. Whose genealogy do we have before us in Luke 3?

There are two typical answers: perhaps it is Joseph's or perhaps it is Mary's.

1B. Perhaps it is Joseph's genealogy

Probably, the best way to begin is with the claim that this is Joseph's lineage. That is, it covers the same ground as Matthew's genealogy of Joseph, but with a different emphasis. Whereas Matthew traces Joseph's royal lineage, Luke traces his bloodline.

This view is held by good scholars including Machen in his book on the Virgin Birth. Machen rejects the other interpretation of merit here, namely, that the "as was supposed" phrase points us away from Joseph and thus to Mary. If it is Mary's heritage, then the idea is this, "Jesus was supposed to be [thought to be] the son of Joseph, but was really the son of Heli" (*Virgin Birth* 203, brackets mine).

Machen claims that it is rather unnatural to take the text to be pointing away from Joseph. The unnatural idea includes Joseph within the parentheses and *separates him from Heli: being son (as was supposed of Joseph) of Heli*. The parenthesis, for Machen, only includes “as was supposed” leaving Joseph as the biological son of Heli: **being son (as was supposed) of Joseph, [the son] of Heli**. Note that the word “son” before Heli is supplied from the word son at the beginning of the verse where we have “Jesus being son”; thus it controls all the uses of “son of” in 23-38.

Machen states that any reader (without punctuation marks that guide interpretive reading) would naturally take “every name as depending upon the immediately preceding name” (204). Thus, “of Heli” depends on, and connects with, “Joseph”; the connection is strong and Joseph is Heli’s son.

Machen argues that the scales of interpretation are weighted to the common interpretation that Joseph’s genealogy is in view and Heli is his father. His key reason comes from Luke 1.27, which mentions the Davidic descent of Joseph (the angel was sent to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary). Luke does not call attention to the Davidic descent of Mary, so Machen concludes: “it is natural to find that the genealogy which he inserts at a later point in his book is a genealogy of Joseph and not of Mary” (204). For Machen, both Luke and Matthew give the genealogy of Joseph: Luke gives the actual blood line back to David through Nathan, and Matthew gives the legal line in which kings may not have sons and that means that the father to son bloodline is broken because the royal line passes to another man’s son. Of course, this means that there will be many differences between the two genealogies of Joseph, between the one in Matthew and the one here in Luke.

However, a significant need arises immediately regarding Machen’s position. We need to explain how Joseph can have two fathers: Heli, according to Luke, and Jacob, according to Matthew. Machen takes up that task and along the way mentions some alternatives that he says overload the explanation (208). On the whole, it seems that Machen’s entire effort (204-209) is “overloaded” and needs a close shave by Ockham’s razor (a medieval philosopher, 1285-1349 AD, who argued along the lines that the simpler explanation is the better one). Machen has a problem with unnaturalness in the view he rejects, but his view has too many patches and the resulting garment falls apart. This makes us look at the claim that this is Mary’s ancestral tree.

2B. Perhaps this is Mary’s ancestral tree

Is it “rather unnatural” to find Mary’s family tree here in Luke? The idea that it is Mary’s has merit when we consider the host of entanglements to which the Joseph view leads. Granted, it seems odd to have a genealogy of Mary and not Joseph that does *not* mention Mary, but *does* mention Joseph. So, let us look a little closer at the text.

1) First, Mary is not named, but typically women are not named in a genealogy.

Thus, the three women cited in Matthew’s genealogy of Joseph are not named in order to trace their family trees. Instead, mentioning them reveals other things such as: Gentiles are part of our Lord’s royal ancestry, and so are prostitutes (cf. no genealogical amnesia, Green, 188).

2) Second, the way Joseph is named indicates that this is not his genealogy.

Two things point in this direction. On one hand, the “supposedly” phrase indicates that he is actually outside the ancestral stream in view. On the other hand, a minute grammatical point confirms his outside status. Namely, all of the names in the genealogy have the definite article in front of them except Joseph’s name: we have “of Joseph, of *the* Heli, of *the* Matthat... The idea of the article is to this effect: “of the man known by the name of.” The point is that this is stereotypical language of someone’s genealogy. The bottom line, as the commentator Godet argues (*Luke* I, 198-201), is that this is not Joseph’s genealogy. Instead, it is Heli’s. Why is

Joseph mentioned? Joseph is mentioned in order to counter the thought that Jesus was his biological son.

3) Third, consider the notion of unnaturalness again.

Perhaps, there is unnatural grammar here, but the subject matter is quite unnatural, namely, that Jesus did not have Joseph or any man as His biological father.

The question to which the virgin birth brings us is this: is Jesus the son of Joseph in a biological sense? The definite answer in Luke 1-3 is no. So, we have this much, at the least, in the parenthesis: “Joseph was thought to be the biological father of Jesus, but that is clearly not the case.” This leads to another question: what is the relationship between Joseph and Heli? Is Joseph the biological son, or better, the biological descendent of Heli? Think for a moment what this means. If it is Joseph’s lineage through Heli, *then it does not give the biological descent of Jesus*. Jesus cannot be the descendent, as to the flesh, of Heli if Heli is the father of Joseph.

Now we come to the biggest problem with Machen’s view. Since this record in Luke 3 takes us back to Adam, then the idea of legal descent from David is not the ultimate focus (it does go back to David and establishes that connection through David’s son Nathan, but not through Solomon through whom the kingly line was established, 2 Sam 7.13; it was Solomon who built the temple, the house for God’s name). The legal descent is the focus in Matthew’s account that does not go back to Adam. (That it goes back beyond David to Abraham is in keeping with the promise of a kingly line to Abraham through David.)

What I am getting at is this: if we read the genealogy as a whole and not atomistically then it is easy to see that the point here is to connect Jesus with the human family all the way back to Adam. The linkage of Jesus to Adam is unqualified; the only qualification (the only exception) is Joseph. Thus, no “he was thought to be son of” applies to the literal posterity of Jesus from Heli back to Adam. It seems that the biological ancestry of Jesus is the elephant in the room in this discussion. The legal right of Jesus to the throne of David (as in Matthew) is not the concern of Luke. The text states that Jesus was wrongly thought of as *being biologically the son of Joseph*; thus, **being son means son biologically**. Now are we to infer that Luke has no interest here in telling us who Jesus is biologically the son of?

Thus, with Godet, we can make the meaningful observation that Jesus is the son of or descendant of Heli. That is, and to make the point emphatic, Jesus is the biological grandson of Heli. Using the term son for descendant or grandson is not uncommon or unnatural. Just think of how Matthew begins by stating that Jesus is the *son* of David: **The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham** (Mat 1.1). So, why do we have the exceptional case here in Luke where the grandson is called the son of his grandfather? The answer is as plain as it is powerful: in Luke, we have a gap between the grandson and the grandfather because there is no human father! Thus, Luke’s reporting is set up for emphasis to counter what is false and to affirm what is true. He introduces the name of the presumed father of Jesus in order to identify and refute the false notion that Jesus is Joseph’s son. Joseph is not a part of this family tree! At the same time, Luke affirms the truth that Jesus Christ is the biological grandson of Heli.

Therefore, Heli is Mary’s father. Interestingly, extra-biblical Jewish tradition confirms the view that Mary is the daughter of Heli (Godet, I, 202). Accordingly, Matthew traces the family tree of Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, and Luke traces the family tree of Mary the actual mother of Jesus. So, we have the interesting question: whose genealogy is on record here in Luke 3? It is interesting because of the possibilities. Is it the genealogy of Joseph, of Mary, of Heli? Technically, it is the actual ancestral record of Heli, the father of Mary; so it is not Mary’s genealogy in a technical sense. Clearly, it is not the genealogy of Joseph due to the fact that he is cited because of a false supposition about him, that is, because of the false idea that he was the

father of Jesus (that Jesus was his son). Now, we have to add something. Although this is technically the record of Heli, *it is the genealogy of Jesus: Jesus being son... of Heli...* This is the astounding fact. It gives His biological, physical, real, fleshly, genealogical and ancestral record through His actual grandfather back to the first man, Adam, the son of God.

2A. What applications can we make of the genealogy we have before us in Luke 3?

1) First, we learn to emphasize the extraordinary in the heritage of Jesus

This grounds proper worship in a detailed and literally “fleshed out” way.

We can ask the question one more time to move our thoughts forward in a big way: whose genealogy do we have here? In a loose sense, it is Mary’s, but with definite focus on her son; it is the genealogy of the Son of Mary. This is the genealogy of Jesus, but Jesus speaks of God as His Father in an exclusive and unique sense; and, in a unique way, God, in this context (3.23), refers to Jesus as “my Son.” He has the title “My beloved Son” like none other. Therefore, the answer ought to sound peculiar, even odd, if not off the wall: this is the genealogy of the Son of God, of God the Son, of the second person of the eternal trinity. How can the eternal Son even have a genealogy? He has one because of the reality of the incarnation in which He voluntarily added full humanity to His full deity. Therefore, in generational details, one after another, the refrain is repeated by implication that God the Son Jesus is biologically the son of Heli, Jesus is the son of Matthat, and so forth of Melchi, Jannai...Nathan, Jesus is the son of David, Jesse, Boaz, Jacob, Isaac, Jesus is the son of Abraham, Jesus is the son of Noah, Methuselah, Seth, Adam and Jesus is the son of God. The Son of God is the son of God; Son of God is Son of man. Our worship of Jesus is governed by these deep ancestral roots.

2) Second, we learn how to read Luke’s Gospel in light of the heritage of Jesus

From this report at the end of Luke 1-3, we get foundational truths, great truths, that guide and govern how we are to read the entire narrative. Granted, we come to these opening chapters with the whole book in mind (life, death, and resurrection), but every new reading involves a relaying of the foundation by which to see, hear, read what is yet to come in the book. Thus the idea of a commitment to repentance-baptism, the involvement of the triune God in the ministry of Jesus (Jesus prays, the Spirit descends, and the Father speaks), thus, the realization of the eternal covenant of redemption, and the deity of Christ as the Beloved Son all give the vantage point from which to view our Lord’s earthly life from beginning to end. What more can we seek at this stage in Luke’s narrative? He gives us the marvelous balance of truths that the Son of God with the essence of deity is also son of God with all that is essential to humanity.

3) Third, we learn that Jesus saves according to His heritage

This genealogy brings us back in context to John’s emphasis on a new Israel. To be clear, John, of course, did not disparage the idea of covenant identity that traces the Jews of his day back to Abraham. He warned against trusting in that identity *per se* and with pride. Still, he spoke of a new people of God that would be formed not from Abraham by birth (not something bad in itself) but by God’s gift of life to the lifeless (as to stones) through His effectual call in the context of the gospel call to repentance-baptism. By repentance-baptism, sinners enter the new covenant community.

To form this new Israel in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, a key figure must arise within the human family and the family of Abraham. That key figure is the Son of Eve and Son of Adam who will bring restoration to fallen sinners from all the effects of the fall (Gen. 3.15). He is also the son of Abraham through whom all families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12, 17).

Therefore, even though God is going to form a new children of Abraham that includes both Jews and Gentiles who are otherwise lifeless like stones, He will do so by keeping covenant with Adam and with Abraham, his children, and his children's children in all their generations. Centrally, He will keep His covenant by giving Abraham a son, Isaac, who is destined for the altar of sacrifice as his father's beloved son. In the end then, family ancestry is acutely relevant to the formation of a new children of Abraham composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

In this genealogy, we have a strong reminder that people like us, lived and died generation after generation. They died because of sin that has infected the human race since the fall of Adam. Abraham's father Terah was an idolater, Abraham a liar, Jacob was a deceiver, Judah a whoremonger, and David was a murderer. They all died because God **knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; 16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more (Ps 103.15-16).** Adam is the son of God (3.38). He is the covenant breaker of record. All are fallen in him. All members of the human race are prodigal sons and daughters.

But God gives gracious promises to needy sinners of salvation from the family line of fallen sinners: to Adam (Gen 3.15), to Abraham (Gen 12.2-3), to Jacob (Gen 28.14), to Judah (Gen 49.10) and to David (2 Sam 7.12-16). Only those, but all those who trust in Christ have the right to be called the sons of God. By faith they become restored image-bearers of God like Adam.

Therefore, the genealogy of Jesus reveals our hope as Paul states (1 Cor 15.22-23): **For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.**

Thus, from the beginning of His ministry as the outworking of triune covenant of redemption, we are guided to think of Jesus as God and man, the Son of God who is son of God and second man who has come to this ministry by covenant and on mission to redeem the human race from its plunge into sin, death, and eternal judgment, as proclaimed by John.

May we fall down before the majesty of the great God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; may the Holy Spirit teach us how to worship this extraordinary Savior who is Son of God and image of God, Son of God and Son of Man. May He grant us growth in our learning of the Gospel of Luke that we may be disciples indeed, and in deeds, for the glory of the triune God, now and forevermore, amen.