

A Bible Puzzle: How is Jesus descended from King David?

(by Silvia Purdie, July 2018)

Have you ever noticed ...

that the genealogy of Jesus in Luke's gospel is totally different from the genealogy in Matthew's gospel??

Both Luke and Matthew agree that Jesus' adopted father, Joseph, was "from the house and line of David" (Luke 2:4). This means, of the royal family who ruled for 400 years from the time of David (1000BC) until the kingdom fell to the Babylonians. This genealogy is given at the start of Matthew's gospel: starting with King David, through King Solomon, down through the royal line. Matthew then links this to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the City of David (in Maori terms, the turangawaewae of the iwi of David). This then is Jesus' formal 'clan identity', through Joseph.

So why does Luke give us a completely different genealogy? Luke interrupts his narrative about Jesus' entry into public ministry, in chapter 3, to introduce Jesus through his ancestry. This works the other way around from Matthew's one, starting from Joseph and working backward to King David and beyond all the way to "Adam the son of God." And this genealogy links to David through his little known son Nathan. Nathan? 1 Chronicles 3:5 lists Nathan as one of David's 19 sons (not counting sons by his concubines! v9). Surely not all the descendents of all 19 sons of David could describe themselves as being "of the house and line of David"!? My explanation is that Luke's genealogy in chapter 3 is in fact Mary's genealogy. Remember that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, not Bethlehem, part of Mary's family. I believe that Luke himself must have met Mary personally, as the narrative he writes in chapters 1 and 2 is so intimate, from Mary's perspective, that it must have come directly from her. So it seems natural that Mary also told Luke her ancestry, tracing also right back to King David, but through a lesser known path. Remember that at that time genealogy was only through the male line. So I interpret Luke 3:23b to read "... son of Joseph, son-in-law of Heli." In other words, Heli was Mary's father.

If this is a correct reading of Luke and Matthew, then biblical claim is two-fold. First, that Jesus through his adopted father was officially part of the Israeli royal family, formally descended from King David, heir to the 'mana' and spiritual status of this inheritance. Second, that the family of Jesus in Nazareth were also descendents of King David through his mother's family line, in a humbler more round-about way. Perhaps Jesus was proud of both.

As Jesus went on to redefine kingship he claimed that "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:33-37). He invited ordinary every-day people to enter a kingdom which was an alternative reality of simple faith, radical change, new life, wholeness and justice. Jesus stood in the house and line of King David and inherited the promises and prophecies of God's covenant with David. And Jesus very much made these his own.