

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: The Lineages of Christ

There is no issue more appealed to by those who wish to reject Scripture and its claims on men and their lives than the issue of supposed “contradictions in Scripture.” They seek for what they consider “obvious” contradictions, and then use them to scoff at the Bible and its moral authority to dictate right and wrong.

In I Timothy 1:19, the Lord speaks of the dangers that faith in His Word can face, and says, “having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck.”

Yes, the faith of some can be shipwrecked. Indeed, we see many influences around us today seeking to shipwreck those who are weak in faith. Many are the critics of God’s Word who would seek to extinguish our faith in the word of God.

One example in Scripture of a man who cut apart Scripture in this way is the wicked king Jehoiakim. He was a king who, according to the words of II Kings 23:37, “did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done.”

In Jeremiah 36, we read of an event during the reign of this wicked king Jehoiakim. Jeremiah was God’s prophet to Israel at that time, and he carried a message to the king that he didn’t want to hear. In Jeremiah 36:2 we read of a specific set of instructions that the LORD gave to Jeremiah. There He told Jeremiah, “Take a scroll of a book and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel, against Judah, and against all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah even to this day. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the adversities which I purpose to bring upon them, that everyone may turn from his evil way, that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.”

Jeremiah did exactly that, calling his friend Baruch to be his scribe and write the scroll for him. Then, because Jeremiah was confined and could not go into the house of the LORD, he had Baruch go to the temple and read the scroll aloud to the people. Certain princes heard the words of the scroll and were greatly moved by them. Therefore, they took the scroll from Baruch and brought it before the king to read. There, they read the king the words of warning that the LORD had written to Judah. We read, however, of the king’s response to these words in Jeremiah 36:22-23, “Now the king was sitting in the winter house in the ninth month” (that would be approximately December or January according to our months) “with a fire burning on the hearth before him. And it happened, when Jehudi had read three or four columns, that the king cut it with the scribe’s knife and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the scroll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth.”

Such little regard did King Jehoiakim show for the Word of God! He cut it apart piece by piece as it was read to him and burned it in his fire. Yet how similar to many who attack the Word of God today! Passage by passage they cut it apart, destroying any credibility it may have and leaving nothing to believe, nothing in which to have faith.

Two of the favorite passages used as ammunition by those who wish to cut apart God’s Word are the genealogies listed in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-28. Those who are familiar with the New Testament will recognize these passages as giving what many refer to as the lineage of Christ. Yet the

critics of the Bible would point out that these passages are very different. Matthew claims that the Lord Jesus was descended from David through his son Solomon and all the subsequent kings of Judah. Yet Luke claims that He was descended from David through his son Nathan, and was not related to the other kings of Judah at all! Moreover, Joseph is listed as the son of Jacob in Matthew, and as the son of Heli in Luke. These lineages, the enemies of Scripture would point out, are flatly contradictory. Either Christ was descended from all the great past kings of Judah or He was not. Either Joseph was the son of Jacob or He was the son of Heli. Both these lineages cannot be true. Thus, at least one of them must be incorrect, and the Scripture must contradict itself on this point. Thus, that there are contradictions in Scripture is proved, and we who call ourselves “Believers” can no longer claim that it is free of errors.

Yet how much does all this matter? That was a question put to me by some in a group as we were discussing the issue of contradictions in Scripture, and particularly of the genealogies of Christ in the books of Matthew and Luke. Some suggested that perhaps this issue was of little importance. After all, they argued, salvation is what is really important, and the Bible teaches us to live for God and to love each other. Isn’t getting caught up in little, picky details like this just going to bog a believer down and distract him from what is really important?

I do not believe for a second that this is true. I will not deny the importance of understanding salvation or of reaching the lost. Nor do I deny the necessity of loving each other and living in godly fellowship with other believers. Yet these issues are important. I believe that Satan can take the smallest detail, the seemingly most technical point, and use it to destroy someone’s faith in the Bible and in God. That is why it is important that we examine issues like this. That is why we cannot take a “details aren’t important” attitude. For the moment we let some charge against the Bible such as this slip by, then we may have lost another person to the snares of the Evil One.

After all, if the Bible can be wrong on one point, then why not on another? If it is wrong on the genealogy of Christ, then why couldn’t it be wrong on His resurrection? If it could be wrong on the account of Creation, why couldn’t it be wrong on the account of our salvation?

I remember sharing with one man that I believe that II Timothy is Paul’s last book because Paul says in II Timothy 4:6-7 that “I am already poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” I claimed that Paul was looking forward to his upcoming execution when he penned these words, and that this means he must have been about to die. My friend wrote back to me and said he thought that Paul was just being pessimistic, and that he was in fact about to be released! Yet I couldn’t help but thinking, “What if Paul was just being OPTIMISTIC when he said, “Salvation is by grace through faith”? What if he was just being nice when he told us that God is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”? What if our sins are really forgiven by works? What if few if any will ever be saved, and God just didn’t have the heart to tell us this? Don’t you see that if God could be wrong or alter the truth on one thing, then even our very salvation can have no reliable basis in the Word?

Thus we see that this issue is indeed truly important! Yet what causes these differences between Matthew and Luke? Why is there a contradiction here?

First of all, we need to realize that Matthew and Luke are not just written as genealogies or lineages, as most people are wont to think. We need to keep in mind the purpose for which both the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke were written. Matthew was written from the viewpoint that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. As such, its purpose is to demonstrate that He is that King. Thus when His lineage is given, it is not just to show who His ancestors were. The purpose for which His lineage is given is to present His kingly pedigree! What His exact lineage was is not so important as that He was descended from all the right people in order to inherit the throne!

Thus, each particular step in the lineage is not so much the next person in a family tree as it is the next in order of a series of events that led up to Christ’s birth and inheritance of the kingship. Each step is not so much the next tree branch as it is the next ancestor in the line of the great King of

kings. The word we have translated as “begot” when we learn that “Abraham begot Isaac” or “David begot Solomon” is not so much the idea of literal generation through copulation, but of producing the next link in the kingly line. “Abraham produced Isaac” or “David produced Solomon” is more the idea carried in the Greek of the passage.

Thus, as we scan down the lineage given in Matthew, we can spot some obvious holes. For example, in verse 11 that “Josiah begot Jeconiah and his brothers about the time they were carried away to Babylon.” Yet we know that Jeconiah was not the child of Josiah at all, but rather his grandchild! Some have pointed to this as an error. Yet grandfathers must be credited with producing their grandchildren, even though they did not directly participate in the act that created them. Josiah can certainly be credited with “producing” the generations after him, even if we are speaking of the generation of his grandchildren rather than his children.

Yet why would a generation be left out? Why skip from the generation of Josiah to that of Jeconiah while ignoring the link in between? The answer is simple. The man who bridges this gap is the same wicked man we mentioned earlier in this article, the ungodly king Jehoiakim! He had so dishonored God’s Word that he had cut it apart and burned it piece by piece in the fire. Thus, God likewise dishonors him and no longer considers him worthy of inclusion in His official lineage. This pathetic and ungodly man would not be a benefit to the kingly pedigree of Christ, but rather a detriment. Therefore he as unworthy is cut out of the record. God cuts him out of His royal lineage just as Jehoiakim himself had cut out the pieces of the Word of God and cast them into the fire. God has a perfect right to do this. Any human king would do the same, listing proudly his honorable ancestors that had preceded his ascension to the throne and utterly ignoring those ignoble ancestors who would besmirch his reputation. No man would blame a human king for listing his pedigree this way, and yet many claim that God has committed an “error” in doing the same thing with His kingly lineage. Yet this is not the truth. God has as much right as any king to exclude a dishonorable man like Jehoiakim from his official royal line.

But there is a wicked man included in this lineage. That is Jeconiah, the son of Jehoiakim. He was really no Godlier than his father. In fact, he presents the biggest obstacle, the biggest problem, to Christ’s kingly lineage that we could imagine. Consider with me Jeremiah 22:28-30. This passage speaks of King Jeconiah, though it calls him by a shorter name, “Coniah.”

28. “Is this man Coniah a despised, broken idol--
A vessel in which is no pleasure?

Why are they cast out, he and his descendants,
And cast into a land which they do not know?

29. O earth, earth, earth,
Hear the word of the LORD!

30. Thus says the LORD:
‘Write this man down as childless,
A man who shall not prosper in his days;
For none of his descendants shall prosper,
Sitting on the throne of David,
And ruling anymore in Judah.’”

This passage, at first glance, seems to ring a death-knell for Christ’s claim to the throne of David, for His lineage is traced through Jeconiah, and Jeremiah proclaimed that none of his descendants would ever sit on the throne of David again. How, then, could Christ be the King Who would reign over Israel forever? The answer is found in what follows the lineage in Matthew: the important record of His virgin birth. The Lord Jesus was not a descendant of Jeconiah! Though he was the legal son and heir of Joseph, he was born of the virgin Mary, and thus was not one of Jeconiah’s descendants. For, as we see in the lineage in Luke, Mary was not descended from Jeconiah at all, but was from David’s son Nathan, and not from any of the royal line after that. So Christ inherited the throne through His foster-father Joseph, but He did not inherit the curse of Jeremiah 22:30 because He was not Joseph’s blood child. Thus, He was not only the heir to the throne, but He was the ONLY One Who could be the heir to the throne, since He was the only One of the kingly line Who was not a descendant of Jeconiah.

Therefore, this important passage in Matthew demonstrates to us Christ's right to the throne of David, firstly from His pedigree of attachment to the royal line, and secondly from the fact that He was born of a virgin, so He was not of the seed of that same, now-cursed royal line. How crucial this passage is to our understanding! Far from providing contradictions, it clears them up, and shows us the truth that makes the prophecies of Christ all fit together.

Now let us consider the lineage as given in Luke. In this passage, we read the lineage backwards, unlike Matthew, which reads forwards. In Matthew we were concerned with the events that had produced the King, and so they were considered in the order they occurred as leading up to the birth of the King of kings. They started with Abraham, since he was the father of the nation, and the King of the Jews need only be concerned with His lineage as long as the nation of Israel existed. Who His ancestors might have been before that is unimportant.

Luke, however, presents Christ as God's perfect Man. As such, His human, blood lineage is what is important. Christ was only related to Joseph through the law, since He was not actually descended from him, but was the Son of God. Yet He was related to Mary through blood, and this is the lineage that we must be concerned with to consider Christ as the Son or representative of Man. Moreover, in order for Him to be the representative of man, what is important is not so much that he was finally born, but that His line went all the way back to the first man Adam. Thus, Luke's lineage is listed in reverse, and traces the line all the way back to the first man, Adam.

Yet, some might argue, the lineage in Luke does not claim that Christ was the Son of Mary, but rather the Son of Joseph. How then can I say that it is His lineage back through Mary? In order to answer this question, I refer back to my definition of the word "son" as set forth in my message on "Sonship." A son is not someone's "little boy," but rather the representative of his father. Usually the son was the eldest male. Yet sometimes there were exceptions to this. One obvious one is if there were no male children. In that case, the daughters of a man had to become his heirs. So that they would not take their inheritance and pass it on to a different tribe, however, such women heirs were commanded to marry men of their own tribe and as closely related to their family as possible (without breaking God's incest laws, of course.)

Now it appears that this is what happened in the case of Mary. Her father Heli died without leaving a son to take over the family. Thus the duty fell on Mary, the eldest daughter, to insure her family's inheritance. She must now not marry a man of a different tribe, for then her inheritance would pass from Judah to that tribe. Rather, she must marry a man of her own tribe of Judah, and as close as possible to her family in Judah (the descendants of David.) Thus, the man Joseph, of the tribe of Judah and the family of David, was a perfect choice for her as a marriage partner. So, when she married Joseph, he would have legally become the son that Heli didn't have, and his first son Jesus would have become likewise the heir to Heli's line as well as Jacob's. This is the reason that Joseph is listed as Heli's son as well as Jacob's. He was indeed heir to both, just as Christ was heir both to the throne of David as Solomon's legal descendant and the throne of the whole world as a human being descended by blood from the line of Adam through Heli.

Thus our supposed "contradiction" is explained. The difference in genealogies is not due to errors, as many have claimed, but rather to the purpose of the two gospels and thus the purpose for which the genealogies are different. Those who claim a contradiction exists assume that the two ought to be the same, and when they are different they blame the Bible for the "error." Yet when we truly understand the purpose of both these lineages, we see that there exists no error except in the minds of those who claim to see it. Rather, these lineages are recorded just as the Holy Spirit intended them and accomplish the purpose for which He gave them. Thus, once again, we see no contradiction in Scripture, but rather the mighty hand of God setting forth to us His truth. Let us thank Him that we can have absolute confidence in His Word!

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