

I'm glad you asked:

Why are Jesus' two genealogies different?

Don Reigstad

Differences between Matthew and Luke's accounts

(Significant help from The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8)

Texts: Matthew 1: 1-17 and Luke 3:23-38

1. Matthew chooses to begin his account with the genealogy, whereas Luke waits until Jesus is about to begin his active ministry.
 - Matthew, writing to primarily a Jewish audience, has the concern of making an immediate connection to the Old Testament and the Jewish roots of Jesus. Luke, writing to Greeks, does not have the same concern.
2. Matthew traces back to Abraham, Luke back to Adam.
 - Again, Matthew's interest is connection to Abraham, father of Israel. Luke is more interested in connection with Adam, father of all.
3. Matthew groups his names symmetrically, whereas Luke simply lists them.
 - Perhaps accounted for by Jewish interest in numbering. 3 sets (3 is often suggestive of God, i.e. Trinity) of 14 (twice the number 7, often suggestive of completeness) may suggest perfection and even divinity to Jews, or may simply relate to cognitive organization to aid memorization.
4. From David on, the genealogies diverge significantly and have been answered in mainly 3 different ways.
 - Matthew traces Jesus back through Joseph's lineage. Luke traces through Mary's line.
 - This would be highly unusual in Jewish genealogical history, however, Luke has already demonstrated the precedent setting nature of this birth
 - Furthermore, his primarily Gentile audience might be a bit more accepting of a genealogy traced through the woman's side.
 - This seems to contradict Luke's mention of Joseph as a descendent of David (1:27; 2:4) without note of the same being true of Mary.
 - Matthew does narrate from Joseph's perspective, while Luke does more so from Mary's vantage point.
 - Matthew traces Jesus back through the legal line of David while Luke traces the actual lineage.
 - This is possible and may explain breaks in Matthew's line while the legal heirship is still retained.
 - A levirate marriage occurred. Matthew notes that Joseph's father is Jacob and Luke names him Heli. This Jewish phenomenon so foreign to us may explain the difference. According to this theory, Heli and Jacob were half brothers, born of different fathers, with different names, but of the same mother. Perhaps Heli died and Jacob married his widow to raise a child in his brother's name. In this sense Joseph, born to Jacob could be seen as the son of Heli as well as the son of Jacob.

It is simply impossible to be sure what the situation was. Jewish genealogies sometimes had strange twists. Furthermore, both Matthew and Luke are dealing with a unique situation for which the normal rules might understandably be set aside.

