

# A Close Look At Luke 3:23: Does it refer to Joseph's Ancestry Or To Jesus' Human Ancestry?

(All scripture quotations are from the ESV)

## Introduction

Have you ever noticed the way that Luke 3:23 is read in almost all English translations gives the impression that Joseph's genealogy is being discussed? <sup>1</sup> Listen to this verse in the English Standard Version (ESV): *"Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli,"*. And then listen to the same from the NASB 2020: *"When He began His ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years old, being, as was commonly held, the son of Joseph, the son of Eli,"*. The CSB goes like this: *"As he began his ministry, Jesus was about thirty years old and was thought to be the son of Joseph, son of Heli,"*. What we already know is that Joseph was said to be the son of Jacob in Matthew 1:16. Matthew's genealogy starts with Abraham and goes forward all the way to Joseph. It becomes clear that the intention there was to show that Jesus being adopted by Joseph who was of the line of David and also of the Kings of Israel gave reason to qualify him as The Christ that was coming and the legitimate King of Israel. But what about Jesus' human ancestry? We believe that Jesus was both divine and human in the same person. That is why he could be the Savior, since he was one of us and also fully God as Colossians 1:19 says: *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,"*. John 1:1-3 says that Jesus was God: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made."* And then verse 14 in John 1 says that He was fully man: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."* One simple solution has been suggested that Joseph could be thought of in the sense of son-in-law. <sup>2</sup> But, could it be that we

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<sup>1</sup> One exception is the Contemporary English Version (CEV), ©1995 by the American Bible Society which reads: *"When Jesus began to preach, he was about 30 years old. Everyone thought he was the son of Joseph. But his family went back through Heli,"*

<sup>2</sup> The Complete Biblical Library, The New Testament Study Bible Luke, ©1988 by The Complete Biblical Library, pg. 105; also The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, ©1975, 1976 by The Zondervan Corporation, general editor, Merrill C Tenney, Volume 2, *article on the Genealogy of Jesus Christ*, pg. 676

might be reading Luke 3:23 wrong? What follows shows evidence that a different reading is to be preferred.

### **Testimony from the Whole of Scripture**

Scripture has already said that Jesus was human as we have seen above. But scripture goes further. First look at the Old Testament in Isaiah 9:7 which speaks of his deity and humanity in one verse: *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* And then Isaiah 7:14 speaks of his humanity and deity as well: *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”* Next we find the angel Gabriel speaking to Mary in Luke 1:30-33: *“And the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”* Not only is Jesus affirmed as human by the angel Gabriel, but he is called a descendant of David! And the apostle Paul says that Jesus was a descendant of David in Romans 1:3: *“concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh”* also listen to 2 Tim 2:8: *“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel,”* We know that scripture has one Divine Author and therefore that is why it cannot contradict itself!

### **Testimony from the Context**

Luke was aware of other accounts of what Jesus had done in life and through his death when he says the following in chapter 1, verse 1-4 of his gospel: *“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”* The word “many” means two or more. We know that Mark and Matthew had already been written before Luke.

Mathew had already given an account that was very clearly that of Joseph's ancestry back to Abraham. See Matt. 1:1-16 where he says the following in verse 16: *"and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ."* Matthew was written it seems from Joseph's point of view since it is there that the angel told Joseph not to divorce Mary but that the child to be born from her was from the Holy Spirit. (Math. 1:18-20) Joseph believed the angel and did not divorce her! And Jesus being an adopted son was within the right in that way to be qualified to be the Christ being descended from the David through the line of the kings of Israel through Joseph. (Math. 1:1-16, 20) This gospel of Matthew, that was written for a Jewish audience, is clearly seen.

Now Luke knowing the genealogy of Joseph in the gospel of Matthew would not have knowingly contradicted Matthew and be talking of Joseph's ancestry through a different list as it is in Luke 3:23-38. Luke had also just explained how Mary had become pregnant in Luke 1:35: through the Holy Spirit! Luke is saying through all this contextual evidence that the ancestry in Luke 3:23-38 is that of Jesus! Many study bibles and commentaries believe this list to be that of Jesus human side anyway! <sup>3</sup>

### **Testimony from the Focus and Grammar of the Text**

It is interesting that the mention of this genealogy in Luke 3:23 comes right after the baptism of Jesus in verse 22 where the voice of God came from heaven which said: *"...and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'"* Jesus' divinity had just been affirmed! And without going right into the temptation of Jesus as chapter 4 starts with, this genealogy is mentioned. A minor point as verse 23 begins is that the word *kai* normally translated "and" could also be translated "yet". <sup>4</sup> What is very interesting in the beginning of this verse of major importance is that the grammar has the pronoun "autos" (himself in the adjectival intensive) in the sentence with "Jesus" emphasizing that the

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<sup>3</sup> The Ryrie Study Bible, ©1976, 1978 by The Moody Bible Institute Of Chicago *note on Luke 3:23*; The Life Application Study Bible ©1988, 1989, 1990, 1991 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc and Zondervan Publishing House *note on Luke 3:23*; CSB Study Bible, ©2017 by Broadman & Holman *note on Luke 3:23*; Holman Bible Handbook ©1992 by Holman Bible Publishers, *note on Luke 3:23*; The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament, ©2007 Published by David C Cook, *note on Luke 3:23*

<sup>4</sup> *The first two Greek words of verse 23, kai autos, could also be translated as "yet himself" in the sense of emphasizing something noteworthy (for this use of kai see A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament "BDAG" 2nd Ed. By Bauer, Danker, Arndt & Gingrich, ©1957, 1979 by The University Of Chicago Press, pg. 392 as seen in Mat 3:14 & Rev 3:1) putting emphasis on Jesus' human side in contrast to His divine side of verse 22 explaining His divine and human side how that both were true. But no matter how kai is translated the contrast is still seen between Jesus' divine side and His human side by the close proximity of verse 22 with verse 23 stating the obvious.*

focus is totally Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Bill Mounce in his book, “Basics Of Biblical Greek” says the following quoting I. Howard Marshall: “But sometimes the pronoun is used with a noun to add some kind of stress to it.”<sup>6</sup> There is, then an emphasis on Jesus here saying that Jesus himself was about 30 years old when he began. This is a grammar issue but also a context issue. So then why would the focus be on Jesus, and then shift to the ancestry of Joseph who was his adopted father? This must be especially asked because the text says that he was the son as was supposed of Joseph meaning that he really wasn’t! The ESV adds a parenthesis in the text – (as was supposed). Other English translations also add a parenthesis in this same place.<sup>7</sup> Because of context why could the parenthesis not say (as was supposed of Joseph)? The text could then read this way: “...being the son (as was supposed of Joseph) of Eli...” Why stop short? The New American Commentary writing of this passage even says that this parenthesis extension to include Joseph is a possible translation.<sup>8</sup> Also, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible says that the larger parenthesis is an attractive and possible solution.<sup>9</sup> And Warren Wiersbe in his commentary series says the following: “*Luke 3:23 can be translated: ‘When He began His ministry, Jesus was about thirty years old (being supposedly the son of Joseph), the son of Heli [an ancestor of Mary].’*”<sup>10</sup> If the parenthesis ends before Joseph, then it reads like the list of ancestry is Joseph’s but if it closes after Joseph the following ancestry points back to the focus on the whole verse in the first place, which is Jesus. The word that starts the phrase in the parenthesis is the word “hōs” meaning “as” which is a conjunction and conjunctions are common for connecting phrases.

There is another grammar issue here that points to the larger parenthesis as the correct translation. The article “ho” in NT Greek means “the” and is missing in front of Joseph. This article is very common to have in NT Greek before proper names even though in its absence definiteness is still present.<sup>11</sup> And yet

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<sup>5</sup> Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar, ©1993, 2003, 2009, 2019 (Fourth Edition), by William D. Mounce, pg. 124

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 120

<sup>7</sup> The NET, KJV & NKJV also have the same phrase in parenthesis – “(as was supposed)”

<sup>8</sup> The New American Commentary, ©1992, Robert H. Stein by Broadman & Holman Publishers, says this on Luke 3:23: *So it was thought. This assumes that the reader has read Luke 1–2 and knows of the virginal conception. Luke 3:23 was therefore written after Luke 1–2. The best translation seems to be, “Jesus was the son (supposedly) of Joseph, the son of Heli,” although “Jesus was the son (supposedly of Joseph), of Heli” is possible. as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible software, Feb. 24, 2025*

<sup>9</sup> The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, ©1975, 1976 by The Zondervan Corporation, general editor, Merrill C Tenney, volume 2, pg. 676

<sup>10</sup> The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament, ©2007 Published by David C Cook, pg. 147

<sup>11</sup> Greek Grammar Beyond The Basics ©1996, by Daniel B. Wallace, pg. 246 as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible software, March 1, 2025

the article IS IN FRONT of all the names starting with and including Eli. Even two later Josephs in this list HAS the article in verse 24 and 30. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia talking of this list in Luke 3:23 says that the missing article before Joseph is peculiar in verse 23.<sup>12</sup> Also David Stern in the Jewish New Testament Commentary says that the absence of the article separates Joseph from the genealogical chain quoting F. Reinecker.<sup>13</sup> If Luke was thinking of Joseph's ancestry, then it makes more sense to have the article present than to leave it out as it is in the text.

Yet there is bigger issue regarding the article. The article tou here also shows possession because it is in the genitive case. This is why the phrase "son of" is in front of each name in the list. The ONLY exception is in front of Joseph showing a nuance of difference and underscoring the need to have the longer parenthesis AFTER Joseph especially because of the words "as was supposed" with NO "tou" following and in front of Joseph. But what purpose does Luke have that he shows to focus on Joseph when he has already said that Jesus was the son "as was supposed of Joseph"? Jesus has been the focus and so why would Luke change the focus?

The word "being" (the Greek present participle - ōn) in the phrase "...being the son (as was supposed)..." is interesting since the focus is on Jesus. Why would Luke using that word tell us only what is untrue with no explanation? It makes more sense of the passage and of the grammar, to be telling us what is untrue and at the same time what really is true. The untrue reference begs for that which is true to be told!

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<sup>12</sup> International Standard Bible Encyclopedia by Hendrickson Publishers E-text version ©2002, HeavenWord, Inc. on the genealogy of Jesus as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible software, March 3, 2025

<sup>13</sup> The Jewish New Testament Commentary, ©1992, David H. Stern by Messianic Jewish Publishers says this on Luke 3:23: *A literal translation of the Greek text starting at v. 23 would be: "And Yeshua himself was beginning about thirty years, being son, as was supposed, of Yosef, of the Eli, of the Mattat, of the L'vi," etc. The questions raised here are: What does it mean to be "of" someone? and which person is described as being "of the Eli"?-Yosef or Yeshua? If Yosef is here reported to be the son of Eli, there is an apparent conflict with Mt 1:16, which reads, "Ya'akov was the father of Yosef, the husband of Miryam, from whom was born the Yeshua that was called the Messiah." But the genealogies of both Mattityahu and Luke employ unusual language in connection with Yeshua-and with good reason, since both assert that he had no human father in the ordinary sense of the word, but that the virgin Miryam was caused to bear Yeshua by the Holy Spirit of God in a supernatural way; see Mt 1:16 N. If this is so, what do the genealogies mean? The simplest explanation is that Mattityahu gives the genealogy of Yosef, who, though not Yeshua's physical father, was regarded as his father by people generally (below, 4:22; Yn 1:45, 6:42); while Luke gives the genealogy of Yeshua through his mother Miryam, the daughter of Eli. If so, Yeshua is "of the Eli" in the sense of being his grandson; while Yeshua's relationship with Yosef is portrayed in the words, "son, as supposed"-implying not actually; see numbered paragraph (2) of note on "Son of" at Mt 1:1 N. Luke's language also distinguishes Yosef from Yeshua's direct ancestors by not including the word "the" before "Yosef" in the original Greek. "By the omission of the article, Joseph's name is separated from the genealogical chain and accorded a place of its own" (F. Rienecker, Praktisches Handkommentar Zu Lukas Evangelium) 1930, p. 302, as cited in A Jewish Christian Response by the Messianic Jew Louis Goldberg). as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible software, Feb. 24, 2025*

John Gill, an English Baptist pastor in London in the 1700s, points out in his commentary of Luke 3:23 that since the focus is Jesus that only the word “of” should be in front of every name starting with Heli and on down the line until Adam and even then for God. And that is the way the text actually reads! The word “son” could be left out since the reference is back to Jesus anyway and the word son was already mentioned: “being the son...”. He says that the possessive use of “tou” is all pointing back to Jesus for all generations mentioned and even for when God is mentioned last in the string. In that case, Jesus would be reaffirmed as the Son of God. Again, the only place tou (of) was not used was in front of Joseph meaning that only with him was there no blood kinship.<sup>14</sup> The main point here is that the first tou (of) which is in front of Heli should be referring back to Jesus instead of Joseph. The phrase should go like this: “...Jesus...being the son (as was supposed of Joseph) of Heli...”.

It has also been thought that the ancestry of the passage here in Luke 3 has complications being that of Jesus because Mary was not mentioned.<sup>15</sup> But Mary was mentioned in chapter 1 that the child would be from the Holy Spirit. The original text had no chapters or verses and was meant to be read together as a letter. So, because of context there was no need to mention Mary specifically in the list because she already had been earlier. And women were not normally mentioned in genealogical lists. Also the word son (huios in NT Greek) can mean son or descendant where the phrase starts by saying “...being the son (as was supposed of Joseph)...of Eli...”.<sup>16</sup> See Matt. 1:20 where Joseph is called the son of David by the angel even though there were many generations between Joseph and David. Therefore Eli must be Mary’s father with the scripture as a whole, focus, context and grammar all working together.

Another reason this list in Luke is that of Jesus is that this list does not include the kings of Israel. There was a curse on one of the last kings of Israel named Jeconiah (also Jehoiachin or Coniah) from the Lord which says that nobody from his offspring would ever sit on the throne of the kings of Israel again

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<sup>14</sup> John Gill’s Commentary on Luke 3:23 at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/luke/3.htm>

<sup>15</sup> The New English Translation 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Study Bible, ©2019, study note says this on “as was supposed” at Luke 3:23: *The parenthetical remark as was supposed makes it clear that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. But a question still remains whose genealogy this is. Mary is nowhere mentioned, so this may simply refer to the line of Joseph, who would have functioned as Jesus’ legal father, much like stepchildren can have when they are adopted by a second parent. as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible software, Feb. 24, 2025*

<sup>16</sup> Analytical Greek New Testament (AGNT5) ©2014 by Barbara Aland; Bruce Metzger; Carlo M. Martini; Johannes Karavidopoulos; Kurt Aland by Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible software, Feb. 24, 2025

because of the evil he had done. Jeremiah 22:30 says the following about Coniah *“Thus says the LORD: ‘Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah.’”* But yet scripture says that a descendant of King David WOULD sit on the throne of Israel forever referring to the Messiah. 2 Sam. 7:16 says this: *“And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”* Jesus as the Christ, lives forever and is a descendant of David! The list here in Luke 3 follows the ancestry not through the line of Solomon and the kings that follow him but through another son of David which is Nathan. *(Also read Matt. 22:41-46.)*

But the reason the list would start with Jesus (and not Joseph) and go all the back to Adam, which is the reverse order of Matthew’s list, would be to show that Jesus was connected to everyone! And that being human as well as God, we all ought to pay attention to His sacrifice for us all! The Complete Biblical Library Study Bible points out that in scripture that only a close kin person had the right to redeem as in the case of the story of Ruth and Boaz.<sup>17</sup> (see Ruth 4:4-6, Leviticus 25:25, 47-49 and Jeremiah 32:6-12) Jesus had to be one of us in order to redeem us!

## **Conclusion**

A parenthesis’ presence or absence makes a lot of difference which can change the meaning greatly! Luke already knew of Joseph’s ancestry through Matthew and had written from Mary’s point of view that the child she was to have though a virgin was from the Holy Spirit. Joseph had really nothing to do in this genealogical list other than people THOUGHT he was Jesus’ father. The longer parenthesis should be there for 4 reasons:

- 1) The context. Joseph’s ancestry had already been given in Matthew and Luke would not have directly contradicted Matthew, whose list he knew and was different, when he was trying “...to write an orderly account...that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:3-4)
- 2) The focus. Jesus was the focus in Luke 3:22-23. His deity and his humanity were being shown to be simultaneously true in the person of Jesus!

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<sup>17</sup> The Complete Biblical Library, The New Testament Study Bible Luke, ©1988 by The Complete Biblical Library, pgs. 109

- 3) The scripture. Scripture and the angel Gabriel had already shown the deity and the humanity of Jesus to both be true!
- 4) The grammar. The conjunction “as” with the whole phrase “as was supposed of Joseph” as well as the possessive article that is missing before Joseph but present in all the rest of the names AFTER Joseph is telling us something! We are being told that the reality of Jesus humanity was not through Joseph but through Mary.

*\* All scripture underlines are mine*

**For further reading:**

- The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, ©1975, 1976 by The Zondervan Corporation, general editor, Merrill C Tenney, Volume 2, *article on the Genealogy of Jesus Christ*, pgs. 675-677
- The Complete Biblical Library, The New Testament Study Bible Luke, ©1988 by The Complete Biblical Library, pgs. 105-109
- The Pulpit Commentary on Luke 3:23 at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/luke/3.htm>