

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)

by Craig Cochran

Introduction

I have noticed the way that Luke 3:23 is read in almost all English translations gives the impression that Joseph's genealogy is being discussed.¹ 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,"*. There have been various people / commentaries that believe that Luke's genealogical list is Joseph's.² It is understandable that Joseph's lineage would be thought in Luke because as one writer said the natural flow of the Greek points to Joseph as being the son of Eli and so on.³ But 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 of the Kings of Israel which

¹ 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,"*

² Expositors Greek Testament Commentary ©1967, edited by the Rev. W. Robertson Nicoll, M.A., LL.D. published by George H. Doran Co. accessed using the Bible Hub app commenting on Luke 3:23 accessible at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/egt/luke/3.htm>; also New International Greek Testament Commentary ©1978 by The Paternoster Press LTD and Eerdmans Publishing Company by I. Howard Marshall as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible Study App on Luke 3:23; also Baker Exegetical Commentary On The NT Vol. 1 Luke 1:1 – 9:50 ©1994 by Darrell Bock in the Excursus 5 pgs. 918-923 where it is said that even among the early Christian fathers Eusebius quotes Julius Africanus saying that Luke's list must be talking of the royal ancestry of Jesus while Matthew's is the legal ancestry both ancestries going through Joseph because of a Levirate marriage. That kind of marriage was when a husband dies leaving no children and then a brother of the deceased would marry his sister-in-law and raise kids in his brother's name. (Deut. 25:5-10)

³ Baker Exegetical Commentary On The NT Vol. 1 Luke 1:1 – 9:50 ©1994 by Darrell Bock in the Excursus 5 pgs. 918-923; also Word Biblical Commentary Luke 1:1 - 9:20 Vol. 35a ©2016 by John Nolland published by Zondervan Academic pgs. 166-174

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.⁴ What is of interest at this point is to remember that in the original language there was no punctuation.⁵ So, could it be that we 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

⁴ 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; also Word Biblical Commentary Luke 1:1 - 9:20 Vol. 35a ©2016 by John Nolland published by Zondervan Academic pg. 170

⁵ Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar, ©1993, 2003, 2009, 2019 (Fourth Edition), by William D. Mounce, pg. 14

specifically, he is called a descendant of David by the angel! 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,”* Even Jesus, in Revelation 22:16 says He is a descendant of David. We know that scripture has one Divine Author and therefore that is why it cannot contradict itself! We must not forget that 2 Sam. 7:12-13,16 says that king David would have a son from his body that would set on his throne forever! Listen to that passage (verse 12-13): *“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”* And then verse 16 says this: *“And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”* The Old Testament and the New are saying the same thing!

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

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! The Reformed Expository Commentary says that Luke trusted the reader to understand that the genealogy was that of Mary since the virgin birth had already been discussed in chapter 1.⁶ Many study bibles and commentaries believe this list to be that of Jesus human side anyway!⁷

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 God says the following from heaven: *"...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 (*καὶ* - *kai*) normally translated "and" could also be translated "yet".⁸ What is very interesting in the beginning of this verse of major importance is that the grammar has the pronoun "himself" (*αὐτὸς* - *autos*) in the adjectival intensive in the sentence with "Jesus" emphasizing that the focus is totally Jesus.⁹ 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."¹⁰ There is, then an emphasis

⁶ Reformed Expository Commentary, ©2009 First Edition by Philip Graham Ryken published by P & R Publishing on Luke 3:23 as accessed by the Olive Tree Bible app

⁷ 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*

⁸ *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.*

⁹ Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar, ©1993, 2003, 2009, 2019 (Fourth Edition), by William D. Mounce, pg. 124

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 120

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.¹¹ 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.¹² Also, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible says that the larger parenthesis is an attractive and possible solution.¹³ 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].'"*¹⁴ 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 "as" (ὥς - *hōs*) which is a conjunction and conjunctions are common for connecting words, phrases, or clauses. It can be used as an introduction to short clauses as in this case.¹⁵

There is another grammar issue here that points to the larger parenthesis as the correct translation. The article "the" (ὁ - *ho* in NT Greek) 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.¹⁶ And yet the article IS IN FRONT of all the names starting with and including Eli. Even two later Josephs in

¹¹ The NET, KJV & NKJV also have the same phrase in parenthesis – "(as was supposed)"

¹² 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*

¹³ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, ©1975, 1976 by The Zondervan Corporation, general editor, Merrill C Tenney, volume 2, pg. 676

¹⁴ The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament, ©2007 Published by David C Cook, pg. 147

¹⁵ 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. 897

¹⁶ Greek Grammar Beyond The Basics ©1996, by Daniel B. Wallace, pg. 246 as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible software, March 1, 2025

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 23.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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 "the" that is used here (*τοῦ* - *tou*) also shows possession because it is in the genitive case meaning "of the". 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 because of the words "as was supposed" with NO (*τοῦ* - *tou*) 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 - *ὄν* - *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 only with no explanation? It makes more sense of the passage and of the grammar, to be

¹⁷ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia by James Orr published 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

¹⁸ 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

telling us what is untrue while at the same time what really is true. The untrue reference begs for the true to be told!

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 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 the article (*τοῦ - 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 (*τοῦ - tou*) was not used was in front of Joseph meaning that only with him was there no blood kinship.¹⁹ But the main point here is that the first (*τοῦ - tou*) which is in front of Heli should be referring to Jesus instead of Joseph. The phrase should go like this: “...Jesus...being the son (as was supposed of Joseph) of Eli...”. And the “of” in front of Joseph in English is only there for clarity. In the Greek text the (*τοῦ - tou*) is NOT there. So, the phrase could be the following: “...Jesus...being the son (as was supposed Joseph) of Eli...”. But this makes less sense to us English speakers. The (*τοῦ - tou*) meaning “of” in front of Joseph is missing for a reason.

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.²⁰ 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” (*υἱός - 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...”.²¹ See Matt. 1:20 where Joseph is called the

¹⁹ John Gill's Commentary on Luke 3:23 accessible at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/luke/3.htm>

²⁰ The New English Translation 2nd 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; also Baker Exegetical Commentary On The NT Vol. 1 Luke 1:1 – 9:50 ©1994 by Darrell Bock in the Excursus 5 pgs. 918-923*

²¹ 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

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 whole of scripture, focus, context, and grammar all working together.

A common argument against the longer parenthesis is that the (τοῦ - *tou*) is said to be more in agreement with the preceding name instead of the one after it.²² In that case it is said that the reading is "Joseph, *who was* the son of Eli...". Even though that could be the case grammatically, there are more variables in the mix of things: namely context. My neighbor told me one time that there are a half a dozen ways to build a fence and they are all right. It would seem when there is more than one way to translate a passage, context should be the deciding factor because as has been said, context is king. Another point here has been made that says that if Luke wanted to say what was true after Joseph, he could have said "but really".²³ This means that he could have stated it more clearly. But he had already stated it clearly...in the context of Luke chapter one, Matthew chapter one, and all of scripture.

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 said that nobody from his offspring would ever sit on the throne of the kings of Israel again 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 (from his body) of King David WOULD sit on the throne of Israel forever referring to the Messiah. 2 Sam. 7:12-13 says this: *"When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom 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

²² New International Greek Testament Commentary ©1978 by The Paternoster Press LTD and Eerdmans Publishing Company by I. Howard Marshall as accessed on the Olive Tree Bible Study App on Luke 3:23

²³ Expositors Greek Testament Commentary ©1967, edited by the Rev. W. Robertson Nicoll, M.A., LL.D. published by George H. Doran Co. accessed using the Bible Hub app commenting on Luke 3:23 accessible at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/egt/luke/3.htm>

another son of David which is Nathan. (*Also read Matt. 22:41-46.*) Why would this list be anybody other than Jesus' physical ancestry since it is the only list given that could tie him to a son of David who was NOT through Solomon?

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.²⁴ (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 can clarify the meaning of a sentence. See for example, in the following sentence: *"She told me to go ahead (after talking to him) with the plan."*. Now if the parenthesis is removed what is left is this: *"She told me to go ahead with the plan."*. In this case what is in the parenthesis qualifies WHEN to go ahead with the plan. Parenthesis have been added to other parts of the Biblical text because it has been required for a clear translation.²⁵ 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. 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!

²⁴ The Complete Biblical Library, The New Testament Study Bible Luke, ©1988 by The Complete Biblical Library, pg. 109

²⁵ In the ESV of Romans alone there are at least 6 uses of parenthesis which include Rom. 1:13; 3:5; 4:19; 10:6,7,8. Mark 7:19 is another example.

- 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 Pulpit Commentary on Luke 3:23 at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/luke/3.htm>