

The Apparent Cainan Contradiction in Luke 3.36

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The apparent contradiction

In Luke 3.36 Cainan appears as the father of Sala and the son of Arphaxad. This has been alleged to contradict the Old Testament genealogies of the 'generations of Shem' recorded in Genesis 10.24, 11.12 and 1 Chronicles 1.18 where Salah (or Shelah, in Chronicles) appears as the son of Arphaxad with no intervening Cainan. This difficulty is not confined to the Received Text and the Authorised (King James) Version, but is also found in the Critical Text and the modern versions based upon it (NASB, NIV, ESV, etc.).

For those who do not believe in the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Holy Scriptures, such difficulties as this apparent contradiction may only confirm them in their unbelief. But for those who acknowledge the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures there may be some spiritual profit to be found in the resolution of these difficulties through a deeper understanding of divine revelation.

Two solutions

Two solutions to the apparent contradiction between Luke 3.36 and the genealogies in Genesis and 1 Chronicles have been adopted by Bible-believing scholars. The first is to suppose that Cainan only appears in Luke 3.36 because of a scribal error, but is no genuine part of the verse. The second is that the 'contradiction' is only apparent and that Luke 3.36 correctly includes Cainan, while his omission from the Old Testament genealogies of Genesis and 1 Chronicles is intentional. This brief article maintains that the second solution is more consistent with the doctrine of the divine preservation of the Holy Scriptures and the available evidence.

Among those who have adopted the first solution, that is, that Cainan is no genuine part of Luke 3.36 but only appears in that verse due to a scribal error, are the commentators Matthew Poole and John Gill and, in more recent times, J. Sarfati¹ of Creation Ministries International (CMI). Poole thinks that it is a scribal error imported into Luke from the Septuagint, which includes an intervening Cainan in its genealogies in Genesis 10.24 and 11.13.² Gill, on the

other hand, thinks that it is a copyist error in Luke,³ from whence it found its way into the Septuagint for the purpose of giving authority to Luke's genealogy.⁴ Sarfati takes the same position as Gill and quotes him approvingly.⁵

The scribal error explanation of Cainan at Luke 3.36 is beset with a significant difficulty: the manuscript evidence is clearly opposed to it. The overwhelming majority of manuscripts have the extra Cainan at Luke 3.36 and only a small number of manuscripts (three) lack that name. If the extra Cainan is due to a scribal error, it is remarkable that this 'error' so dominates the manuscript evidence. Sarfati's argument is that since papyrus fragment P75 omits Cainan and is earlier than the majority of manuscripts which contain it, therefore it must be the true reading.⁶ In his view the testimony of the majority of the manuscripts is set aside. But Sarfati's argument is not valid because the age of a manuscript does not necessarily indicate the age of the reading it contains. Later manuscripts may contain the original reading because they lie in the line of the faithful transmission of the text, whereas earlier manuscripts may contain corrupt readings since they stand outside the line of the faithful transmission of the text. It is not the age of the manuscript which is of critical importance, but the age of the reading.

The scribal error explanation of Cainan at Luke 3.36 is at least mildly inconsistent with the doctrine of the divine preservation of the Scriptures. To maintain that the original reading is preserved in only two or three manuscripts while the vast majority contain a corrupt reading, when no hostility toward orthodox doctrine can be supposed to have been the cause,⁷ implicitly impugns the doctrine of the divine preservation of the Scriptures.⁸

As for the theory that there was some collusion between the Septuagint and Luke 3.36, it is merely a theory for which there is no real proof. But some, rather forgetful, tend to treat the theory as if it were an assured fact.⁹ The simplest view is to accept the Septuagint and Luke 3.36 as independent witnesses to genealogical data which was well known at the time and which placed a postdiluvian¹⁰ Cainan between Arphaxad and Sala.

Other evidence of a postdiluvian Cainan

But there is considerable evidence, apart from the Septuagint, for the existence of the postdiluvian Cainan recorded in Luke 3.36. The Book of Jubilees, a greatly expanded and rewritten version of Genesis and Exodus dating from 160–150 BC and ranked among the pseudepigrapha,¹¹ explicitly records a Cainan between Arphaxad and Salah. Jubilees 8.1–5 gives a rather detailed account of this postdiluvian Cainan:

8.1. In the twenty-ninth jubilee, in the first week, in the beginning thereof Arpachshad took to himself a wife and her name was Rasu'eja, the daughter of Susan, the daughter of Elam, and she bare him a son in the third year in this week, and he called his name Kainam.

2. And the son grew, and his father taught him writing, and he went to seek for himself a place where he might seize for himself a city.

3. And he found a writing which former (generations) had carved on the rock, and he read what was thereon, and he transcribed it and sinned owing to it; for it contained the teaching of the Watchers in accordance with which they used to observe the omens of the sun and moon and stars in all the signs of heaven.

4. And he wrote it down and said nothing regarding it; for he was afraid to speak to Noah about it lest he should be angry with him on account of it.

5. And in the thirtieth jubilee, in the second week, in the first year thereof, he took to himself a wife, and her name was Melka, the daughter of Madai, the son of Japheth, and in the fourth year he begat a son, and called his name Shelah; for he said: 'Truly I have been sent'.¹²

This is not just a passing reference to Cainan; considerable detail is given here concerning him. Some dismiss the evidence of the Book of Jubilees as merely a fabricated account, without any solid foundation in fact. It does not need to be insisted upon that all the details of the account are exactly true, but the fulness of this reference to Cainan does suggest that the person actually existed. At least, the account is not so patently false that it deserves a summary dismissal.

Again, some may object that the Book of Jubilees merely copied Cainan from the Septuagint—the Septuagint being somewhat earlier than Jubilees—so that Jubilees cannot be counted as an independent witness to this postdiluvian Cainan. The first answer to that objection must be that this argument is merely conjecture and based upon no definite evidence. Because two documents contain a record of the same man does not necessarily mean that the one borrowed from the other. Unless there is definite evidence of such borrowing, only a strong prejudice against the existence of this Cainan would lead one to such a presumption. Secondly, it could not have been a mere copying since the Septuagint only mentions the name of Cainan, whereas the Book of Jubilees contains detailed information which had to be obtained from elsewhere. The simplest explanation is that the Septuagint and the Book of Jubilees are independent witnesses to the existence of a postdiluvian Cainan.

But these are not the only witnesses. Some early chronographers such as John of Antioch (seventh century AD) and George Syncellus (ninth century AD) also refer to a postdiluvian Cainan. Their accounts differ somewhat from the Book of Jubilees, so they are probably derived from independent sources. John of Antioch records Cainan's discovery of a stele inscribed with astronomical teachings left by the descendants of Seth before the Flood.¹³ George Syncellus records Cainan's 'walking in the field' and discovering the 'writing of the Giants' which he 'hid...for himself'.¹⁴ George Syncellus also repeatedly refers to the error of Eusebius and Africanus in omitting Cainan from their chronologies.¹⁵

There is also indirect evidence of the existence of this postdiluvian Cainan. Berosus, the Chaldean annalist of the third century BC, refers to Abraham as a 'just man and great' who lived 'in the tenth generation after the flood'.¹⁶ Eupolemus, a Hellenistic Jewish historian writing about the middle of the second century BC, also refers to Abraham as being the 'tenth generation' after the flood.¹⁷ But it is presumed from Genesis 11.11–26 and 1 Chronicles 1.24–

27 that Abraham is the ninth generation born after the flood, Arphaxad being the first generation. In Luke 3.34–36, however, with the extra Cainan in the genealogy, Abraham is indeed the tenth generation after the flood.

How is Luke 3.36 to be reconciled with the Old Testament genealogies?

Having established that Cainan in Luke 3.36 is unquestionably genuine, it must be asked how Luke is to be reconciled with the genealogies in Genesis and 1 Chronicles. It should be observed that the Hebrew word ‘begat’ (*yabad*) in Genesis 10.24 and 11.12 is not confined to immediate off spring but may refer to more distant off spring. For example, in Genesis 46.15 Leah is said to bare (*yabad*) ‘thirty and three’ sons to Jacob. Now, Leah only ‘bore’ six immediate sons to Jacob, so the remaining twenty-seven evidently include grandsons and great grandsons; and yet Leah is said to have ‘borne’ (*yabad*) these also. Thus we are not bound to understand Genesis 10.24 and 11.12, ‘And Arphaxad begat Salah’, as necessarily teaching that Salah was the immediate son of Arphaxad; he may have been the grandson. This is consistent with the usage of the word ‘son’ in Hebrew. A ‘son’ may be a ‘grandson’ or even a more distant off spring. For example, in Genesis 46.22 the ‘sons’ of Rachel are said to be ‘fourteen’, whereas her immediate sons are only two, Joseph and Benjamin. The Hebrew word for ‘sons’ can evidently also denote ‘grandsons’ or descendants. When this is understood, the apparent contradiction between Luke 3.36 and the Old Testament genealogies becomes just that, apparent and not real.¹⁸

Why might this postdiluvian Cainan have been omitted from the Old Testament genealogies?

But why might the postdiluvian Cainan have been omitted from the Old Testament genealogies? Jubilees 8.1–5 give a clue to the answer to this question. It is evident that Cainan discovered and revived an idolatry which ‘former generations’ practised before the Flood. Cainan knew that Noah would be angry at him for reviving it, since that idolatry undoubtedly had a large part in procuring the terrible divine judgement of the Flood. After the Flood, the world was like a new creation, with new hope, and Noah, as patriarch, would have trembled at the sight of the old corruptions arising again, especially in the godly line of the descendants of Shem. For this reason, the postdiluvian Cainan does not appear in the godly genealogical line of Shem (Genesis 10.21–31), which stands contrasted in Genesis with the genealogical lines of Japheth (Genesis 10.2–5) and Ham (Genesis 10.6–20).

Genealogies in Scripture are for specific purposes and it is important to understand the purpose in each case. One purpose of the genealogies in Genesis is to trace the fulfilment of the divine promise given after the Fall that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Genesis 3.15), and to distinguish the godly line, from which the promised Saviour would arise, from the ungodly line. Thus Cainan is excluded from the godly genealogical line of Shem because of his idolatry. This principle of exclusion from a genealogical record on the basis of ungodliness is seen elsewhere in Scripture. For example, in Jeremiah 22.30, ‘Thus saith the LORD, Write ye this man childless, a man *that* shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah’.

This was spoken of ungodly King Jeconiah. But does it mean that Jeconiah was absolutely childless? No, since it is apparent from 1 Chronicles 3.17–18 that Jeconiah had eight sons. Moreover, the last part of Jeremiah 22.30 itself implies that Jeconiah will have a seed, but that none of that seed will be on the throne of David and rule in Judah. He is to be written down ‘childless’ because he is ‘childless’ in respect of a royal seed, a seed ‘sitting upon the throne of David’, but not ‘childless’ absolutely. Similarly, the genealogies in Genesis and 1 Chronicles do not record Cainan since their purpose is to trace the godly seed, and Cainan has no part in that genealogy because of his ungodliness. But that does not mean that he did not exist at all, for he is recorded in Luke’s Gospel, as well as the Septuagint, the Book of Jubilees and elsewhere.

So why does Cainan appear in the genealogy in Luke? Should he not also have been excluded from that genealogy for the same reason? No, because the purpose of the genealogy in Luke is different. Luke’s genealogy is given at the outset of the Messiah’s ministry to confirm His credentials for the work set before Him. The purpose is not to distinguish the godly from the ungodly seed, nor to look along that godly line in hope of the Saviour to come, in which case an ungodly member of the line might be shunned as contrary to that hope. Instead, Luke’s aim is to trace a genealogical line to confirm the credentials of a Saviour already come, as ‘son of David’, ‘son of Adam’ and ‘son of God’, for which purpose the godliness or ungodliness of the members of the line was not so important. The purpose is different, so the genealogy is not so selective. ‘The fulness of the time was come’ (Galatians 4.4) and Israel’s Saviour is also to be ‘the Saviour of the world’ (1 John 4.14), so the genealogy is consequently more ‘inclusive’.¹⁹

Conclusion

Luke took pains to produce an accurate account (Luke 1.3,4) and under the guidance of the Holy Ghost made use of genealogical records then available to him. His inspired testimony to a postdiluvian Cainan at Luke 3.36 cannot be doubted. Evidence from the Septuagint, the Book of Jubilees and early chronographers confirms the existence of this Cainan. The genealogies in Holy Scripture are for specific purposes. A postdiluvian Cainan was omitted from the Genesis and 1 Chronicles genealogies because it was not consistent with the purpose of those genealogies to include him.

By not duly considering the purpose of a genealogy we may mark a contradiction where none in fact exists. There is no record of unbelieving Jewish critics in the early ages of the church charging Luke’s genealogy of the Messiah with a fault because of a supposed contradiction with Old Testament genealogies, a fault which they would have been only too eager to find. The genealogical records were simply too well known for any such charge to stick.

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▼ Endnotes

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¹ J. Sarfati, *Can you explain the difference between Luke 3:36 and Genesis 11:12?*
creation.com/cainan-can-you-explain-the-difference-between-luke-336-and-genesis-1112.

² Note on Luke 3.36 in Matthew Poole, *English Annotations on the Holy Bible*, www.studylight.org/com/mpc/view.cgi?bk=41&ch=3, accessed 9 December 2013.

³ This type of copyist error is called ‘homeoteleuton’ (which literally means ‘having the same end’) and supposes that the scribe who was copying the manuscript at verse 36 inadvertently let his eye fall to the end of verse 37, where another Cainan appears, and so added the Cainan from that verse to the end of verse 36. Thus the extra Cainan would appear in verse 36.

⁴ Note on Luke 3.36 in John Gill, *An exposition of the Entire Bible*, e-Sword.<

⁵ Sarfati.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sometimes the true reading may be in the minority of manuscripts if it sets forth an orthodox doctrine which may be supposed to have been assailed by heresy in the early ages of the New Testament church (e.g. 1 John 5.7).

⁸ Not surprisingly, CMI, which holds the scribal error view, does not emphasize the doctrine of the divine preservation of the Scriptures. Though CMI firmly holds to divine inspiration, it specifically limits that inspiration to the autographs. In general, CMI appears to adopt the Critical Text position.

⁹ W. Schneider, *Was Schelach Arpachschad's son or grandson?* www.biblecenter.de/bibel/widerspruch/e-wds20.php.

¹⁰ After the Flood.

¹¹ The Pseudepigrapha are extra canonical Jewish writings, distinct from the Apocrypha in that they are not accepted even by Roman Catholics as inspired Scripture.

¹² The Book of Jubilees, from R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 2.25.

¹³ John of Antioch, fragments 2.16, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum* iv.540

¹⁴ *The Chronography of George Synkellos, A Byzantine Chronicle of Universal History from the Creation*, tr. W. Alder, P. Tuffin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 114.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 49, 57, 75, 113, 140, 164.

¹⁶ Quoted by Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* I.158.

¹⁷ Quoted in Eusebius, *Preparatio Evangelica*, Book IX, Chap. XVII.

¹⁸ CMI opposes this understanding of ‘begat’ and ‘son’ because of the implication that the Old Testament genealogies may contain gaps which make the age of the earth more elastic. But the concern in this case is unfounded since interposing a Cainan between Arphaxad and Salah

in Genesis 11.12 makes no difference to the chronology: Arphaxad still 'begets' Salah at 'five and thirty years', even if there was an intermediate Cainan.

¹⁹ There are other possible reasons for the inclusion of Cainan in Luke's genealogy such as the fact that his inclusion makes up a total of 77 generations, a number that has far more significance Biblically, being a multiple of 7, than 76. However, the short scope of the article necessitates its focus upon what is considered the most significant reason.