

## Part Three Some Controversies

### 11

## The Two Genealogies and Mary's Davidic Credentials

Having followed the biblical account of the birth of the Lord Jesus via God's original plan of salvation in pre-history, through the events of the Nativity up to the return of Joseph and his family from brief exile in Egypt, there remain a number of controversies upon which it is helpful to have a clear view. Each in its way represents a 'battleground' over which, generation after generation, critics of the Bible and of Christianity have sought to undermine the credibility of the biblical accounts. For this reason, if for no other, it is valuable to understand the issues. Besides which, many will consider these controversies as being interesting in their own right.

It is clear, however, that the Bible accounts *taken in themselves* will never provide all the answers which some critics declare are necessary before they will accept the scriptural version of Jesus' birth. But it is equally clear, Christians will argue, that in natural and probable ways, using reasonable inference, the biblical accounts can be examined in detail and many 'difficulties' easily resolved. We will shortly review Mary's *Davidic credentials*, but we begin with what some consider to be a very intractable problem that defies easy resolution. This is the matter of the two genealogies which feature in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Genealogies leave most people uninspired and at first glance we

may wonder why they are provided in the Gospel accounts at all. Do not the claims of Jesus stand up on their own? Why do we need lists of largely unknown people to help us draw close to the Prince of Peace? Actually, there are a number of important issues at stake, which is undoubtedly why these genealogies have proved to be a ‘popular’ area of controversy in the past—and no doubt always will.

### **The difference between the genealogies**

See Appendix 1 for a listing of the names in the two genealogies. These differ in the following important respects:

#### ***In Extent***

The genealogy given by Matthew goes back as far as Abraham; the list in Luke by contrast, traces the Lord’s ancestry back to Adam.

\* Matthew’s list has 41 names, including Jesus.

\* Luke’s list has 74 names including Jesus.

\* Matthew and Luke have 19 names in common, if Matthan and Matthat are the same person, 18 if they are not.

\* Apart from the names common to both lists, Matthew has 23 and Luke 56 names. Luke’s list has 19 names before Matthew’s list begins.

\* Luke’s list has no artificial arrangement, as does Matthew’s (which is divided into sub-lists of fourteen).

\* Matthew’s line is followed from David through Solomon, but Luke’s is followed from David through Nathan. Both were sons of David.

#### ***In Names***

The two genealogies are identical from Abraham to David, but at David the lines diverge, only briefly converging again at the time of Shealtiel and once again (probably) at Mattan. Most scholars are agreed that Matthew traces the family line of David down through Solomon and Luke through Solomon’s younger brother, Nathan.

\* *Rhesa* between 55 and 56 in Luke’s list, is not a proper name, but a Chaldee title which means *prince*. Some early Jewish copyists<sup>1</sup>

mistook this for a name, whereas the title almost certainly should read Zerubbabel Rhesa —or Zerubbabel the prince.

\* Matthew's list begins with Abraham, the father of the Jewish race, whereas Luke's begins with Adam, the father of the human race. Each of these is in keeping with the object and readers which the Gospel writers had in view —the one Jewish and the other Gentile.

\* *Cainan*, between 12 and 13 in Luke's list, is an interpolation in some copies of the Septuagint occurring towards the end of the fourth century AD. Scholars are clear that it should not feature in the list.

\* In Matthew's list Shealtiel (number 29) is said to be the son of Jeconiah, but in Luke's list Shealtiel is identified as the son of Neri. The likely explanation of this is as follows: In Jeremiah 22:24-30 it is predicted that King Jehoiachin (Hebrew Coniah or Jeconiah) would be childless and so he could not have been the father of Shealtiel. It is likely however that he adopted the sons of his relative Neri, the twentieth from David in the line traced through Nathan. In this regard we should bear in mind the so-called *Jehoiachin-Curse prophecy* and the *Zerubbabel-Blessing prophecy*, both of which are discussed below.

\* In Matthew's list Joseph is identified as the son of Jacob, but in Luke as the son of Heli. Some confusion has arisen because of this. Matthew's genealogy is generally reckoned to be that of Joseph, whilst Luke's genealogy is generally thought to be Mary's. In Luke 3:23 we read "Jesus ..... was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli." H. Brash Bonsall comments: "The Greek here simply reads 'Joseph of Heli'. In such a case as this a Greek would supply whatever word the context demanded, it might be son, son-in-law, father, sister, aunt, mother, grandparent. In this case it would be 'son in law'. Heli was Mary's father, and Joseph his son in law." (See *The Person of Christ, op. cit.* p. 42.)

Some sceptics have declared that at worst it is impossible to harmonise the genealogies, or that at best, they can only be harmonised by suppositions which are incapable of proof. We

might quibble about what constitutes ‘proof’ but most reasonable people will accept that providing evidence is examined in natural and probable ways, using reasonable inference, then we are as close to ‘proof’ as we need to be. But why are there *two* genealogies? Three views have been put forward:

1. Both genealogies give the descent of Joseph: Matthew’s the *real* and Luke’s the *legal* descent.
2. Matthew gives Joseph’s legal descent as successor to the throne of David and Luke gives the ‘real’ parentage.
3. Matthew gives the real descent of Joseph, and Luke the real descent of Mary.

In discussing these three hypotheses we need always to bear in mind the fact of the virgin conception. If both genealogies were Joseph’s, as suggested in the first hypothesis, then there would be no evidence of Mary’s Davidic descent, and such evidence is important bearing in mind that Joseph was not Jesus’ natural father, only his adoptive (legal) father.

If it is argued that Luke’s genealogy could not possibly be Mary’s on account of the fact that genealogies of women were never given in the first century, we can refer to the fact that, contrary to this custom, Matthew includes in his genealogy the names of several women, each of whom would have been considered less than wholesome to the minds of a first century Pharisee. There was Tamar, involved in an unholy relationship with her father in law (Genesis chapter 38), Rahab the prostitute (Joshua 6:17; Heb 11:31), Ruth the foreigner and Bathsheba whose husband King David in effect murdered (by putting him into the front of the front line in an impending battle) in order to possess her. So Luke certainly broke with tradition in mentioning women in his genealogy—it might also be inferred that Jesus, the Saviour promised from pre-history, does not disdain those whom society thinks of as outcasts, for it was these very people to whom Jesus came first and foremost (“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” said Jesus—Matthew 9:13). In this sense, then, there is a ‘gospel’ in the genealogy itself, and a revelation of the gracious character of the Christian message!

The third hypothesis above seems, on the basis of our present understanding, the most likely. The Davidic descent of the Lord Jesus was never questioned in his own day —on the contrary, popular opinion was that He was indeed the Son of David (e.g. Matthew 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31 and 21:9, 15). God, in His wisdom, has ensured that there is absolutely no doubt as to Jesus' Davidic credentials. Those who did not accept the virgin conception would nevertheless have to acknowledge that His title was determined by Joseph's line via 'legal' adoption. And those who did accept the virgin conception would have had good reason for believing that Mary was of Davidic descent, thus ensuring a 'blood' line, and not merely a legal line of descent.

It might be added that it is quite clear that the Lord Jesus saw Himself as *the* fulfilment of Davidic prophecy. So, in Matthew 4:12-17, when Jesus began His preaching ministry, he consciously chose to begin it in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (see Isaiah 9:1-7). The Gospel writer Matthew quotes the Isaiah 9:1-2 prophecy. If Jesus viewed beginning His preaching ministry in the Zebulun and Naphtali region as fulfilling the verses from Isaiah, then it follows that He also saw Himself as reigning on David's throne, as the New International Version puts it. Or more prosaically, as "King David's successor" (Isaiah 9:7, Good News Bible).

## **Prophecies concerning the genealogies**

### **The Davidic covenant**

Messianic prophecy, as we saw earlier in these studies, held that the Christ would come from the seed of David. God Himself spoke to David through the prophet Nathan when He said, "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever" (2 Samuel 7:12-13). This prediction looked beyond Solomon to Christ. Frequently in the Prophets, Christ is

said to spring from David (e.g. Isaiah 11:1, where David's father Jesse is described as the root from which a branch will spring; also Jeremiah 30:9; Ezekiel 34:23-4; 37:24 and Hosea 3:5—in each case where Christ is referred to as 'David'). It was from the line of David that Mary came (Luke 3:31) and Nathan's prophecy was clear that the Messiah would come from David's own body. The blood line, it may be repeated, was from Mary, not Joseph.

The promise to David was fulfilled in the following way: his wife Queen Bathsheba, had two sons, Solomon and Nathan. Joseph was descended from Solomon (see Matthew 1:6) but Mary from Nathan (see Luke 3:31). So the angel was able to pronounce in Luke 1:32-3, "The Lord will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever."

### **The Jehoiachin-curse prophecy**

Jehoiachin (in Hebrew Coniah or Jeconiah as we have it in the New International Version) the son of Jehoiakim, was the second to last king of the house of David to sit upon the throne in Judah. During his reign the prophet Jeremiah lived and pronounced God's word against him because of his rebellious ways: "As surely as I live" declares the Lord "even if you Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off. .... This is what the Lord says: "Record this man as childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will sit on the throne of David or rule any more in Judah". (Jeremiah 22: 24 and 30). In spite of the fact that this was pronounced against Jehoiachin, almost straight afterwards we read one of the great messianic prophecies in Jeremiah 23: 5-6 when we are told yet again that God will raise up a righteous Branch for David. The malediction on Jehoiachin came to pass in that Solomon's line effectively died out and was supplanted by Nathan's line.

### **The Zerubbabel prophecy**

The prophecy against Jehoiachin (or Jeconiah of Matthew's genealogy) is lifted in the case of his descendant, Zerubbabel,

who rebuilt the temple at the command of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai 2:23 reads almost as the reverse of Jeremiah's earlier prophecy: "I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel ... and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you" declares the Lord." The signet ring on a Persian king's right hand when impressed on a wax seal affixed to an official document had the effect of giving it the force of law. God in effect gave Zerubbabel the power of attorney for Him. The blessing prophecy came to pass in that Zerubbabel's descendants became the ancestors of the Lord Jesus as Matthew 1:12 and Luke 3:27 both show.

### **Did Mary descend from David?**

Recognising that Mary's Davidic descent is an important part of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, we should not be surprised to find it under attack from anti-Christians. Most of the objections discussed in this study were read by the author on an anti-Christian internet website —a useful source of current, if often erroneous, debate. As suggested previously in this series of studies, we should bear in mind the credentials and motivation of biblical critics. How selective are they in the information they present? It is worth checking Bible references in full, to see that they are correct (some are not!) and also that they have not been taken out of context. The currently popular arguments are summarised as follows:

1. A man 'born of a virgin' can have no human father. As Jesus was therefore not the *biological* son of Joseph (who was a descendant of David) the birth could not have fulfilled the Davidic prophecy unless Mary was a descendant of David.
2. Inerrantists (that's atheist-speak for people who believe the Bible!) reject the 'obvious meaning' of Luke 3:23 – that Heli was Joseph's father – and insist that Mary was the daughter of Heli.
3. Inerrantists claim that as Jesus was not a son of Heli in the normal sense, that He must have been a 'son' in some other sense.
4. Since a virgin-born Jesus could not have had a paternal ancestor,

it follows that Heli must have been a maternal ancestor —this the critics say is an ‘improbable interpretation’ of Luke 3:23. Inerrantists ‘pretend that Luke believed that his future readers would naturally and without difficulty work their way through this logic’.

5. If there had been any suggestion that Jesus traced His lineage back through Mary, the Bible writers would have been ‘laughed out of town’ because in Bible times women ‘did not count in reckoning descent’.

6. If Luke had meant his readers to see Heli as Mary’s father, he would have said so specifically. But he wouldn’t do so because this would involve him in ‘personal ridicule’.

7. Mary *may have been* a Levite, i.e. of the tribe of Levi, not of the tribe of Benjamin or Judah, which were the Davidic tribes. This is because her cousin, Elizabeth, was a descendant of Aaron (Luke 1:5).

Having examined earlier in this series of studies the reliability of the manuscript tradition and the Gospel writers as witnesses,<sup>2</sup> we need to keep in mind that the Gospel writers were honest men who, had they wanted to fabricate a story around the life of Jesus, could have found easier and less controversial ways of doing so. With this in mind it is worth considering these anti-Davidic arguments in turn.

***1. A man ‘born of a virgin’ can have no human father. As Jesus was therefore not the biological son of Joseph (who was a descendant of David) the birth could not have fulfilled the Davidic prophecy unless Mary was a descendant of David.***

This is not correct. Certainly a man born of a virgin can have no human father. But the idea that the birth could not have fulfilled the Davidic prophecy unless Mary was a descendant of David is only true in a biological sense. Joseph’s direct line of descent and his marriage to Mary would enable him legally to confer the line of David through to his firstborn son, even without a biological link. Since the prophecy to David in 2 Samuel 12, however, was that David’s messianic offspring would come from his own body, we are right in looking for a biological connection and this must

logically come through Mary. It should be emphasised, however, that even were there no such link, the Lord Jesus would still be David's son.

We refer now to the earlier comment that 'proof' of these matters sufficient to satisfy some critics is simply not available. We cannot therefore prove that Mary was David's descendant but, given what we know of the Gospel witnesses, the fact that had they wanted to invent a story they surely would have done so in a less controversial manner, and the clear line in Matthew's Gospel to Joseph, it seems a perfectly reasonable inference that Heli was Mary's father and Joseph's *father in law*, as suggested earlier by H. Brash Bonsall. Furthermore, this seems quite consistent with the providence of God in ensuring both a biological and legal line of descent for His Son.

***2. Inerrantists reject the 'obvious meaning' of Luke 3:23 – that Heli was Joseph's father – and insist that Mary was the daughter of Heli.***

This has been dealt with above.

***3. Inerrantists claim that as Jesus was not a son of Heli in the normal sense, that He must have been a 'son' in some other sense.***

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***4. Since a virgin-born Jesus could not have had a paternal ancestor, it follows that Heli must have been a maternal ancestor—an 'improbable interpretation' of Luke 3:23. Inerrantists 'pretend that Luke believed that his future readers would naturally and without difficulty work their way through this logic.'***

As set out above, the maternal ancestry seems both natural and probable, using reasonable inference. It may be that first century readers found this more straightforward, because we may assume that at 'short range', the background to Jesus' birth was better understood because it was so recent, and, as suggested by H. Brash Bonsall, the Greek understanding of Luke's genealogy would have supplied the necessary understanding of what the context required.

***5. If there had been any suggestion that Jesus traced His lineage back through Mary, the Bible writers would have ‘been laughed out of town’ because in Bible times women ‘did not count in reckoning descent.’***

Good! That helps to ‘prove’ that the Bible writers knew what they were talking about and were willing to deal unashamedly with difficulties. We have already seen that several women were mentioned in Matthew’s genealogy, and that in this we see a Gospel message! However, there is no evidence of any of the Gospel writers being ‘laughed’ out of anywhere.

***6. If Luke had meant his readers to see Heli as Mary’s father, he would have said so specifically. But he wouldn’t do so because this would involve him in ‘personal ridicule’.***

This is partly dealt with in the foregoing. We do not know why Luke did not state specifically how Mary figured in the genealogy—it may be that for cultural or stylistic reasons this was not considered appropriate. We may also reflect that, as an inspired writer (not a dictating machine!) Luke gave out only what was given to him.

***7. Mary may have been a Levite i.e. of the tribe of Levi, not of the tribe of Benjamin or Judah which were the Davidic tribes. This is because her cousin, Elizabeth, was a descendant of Aaron (Luke 1:5).***

Here it appears that the Bible critics are ‘straining mightily’ to secure a point! The ‘may’ in ‘Mary may be’ seems a very large one. That Elizabeth was a cousin is without doubt. What sort of a cousin is not explained. Elizabeth is unlikely to have been a very close cousin in view of her age as against Mary’s youth.

### **Davidic descent conferred by the genealogies**

It should by now be apparent that the Lord Jesus has a double-claim to the throne of David—via Mary and Joseph. We may suggest the reason why God inspired two genealogies to be recorded was to demonstrate this double-claim adequately to His people. **Joseph** represents the regal-legal line through Solomon. Had it not been for the absolute and total decline of Israel as a

nation, Joseph would have been king. The reason why Israel went into decline is beyond the scope of this book, but W. Graham Scroggie DD, in his book *A Guide to the Gospels*, suggests that one reason for Matthew dividing his genealogy into three is a comment on Israel's fortunes through its Old Testament history. Its form of government: Judges (theocracy), kings (monarchy) and priests (hierarchy); its fortunes over these periods being respectively growth, then decline, and finally ruin—at the lowest point of which the Saviour was born.

Bishop Paul Barnett comments on this very issue, questioning how Matthew and Luke could have thought of Jesus as the “son of David”, since Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father. A serious question, observes Barnett, the answer to which must be that Joseph was the legal father, if not the biological father. Joseph, Barnett notes, would have acted as the legal father at both the naming and registering of his son (Matt 1:20-21; Luke 2:1-5). Furthermore, the Jewish law of levirate marriage reminds us that biological paternity was not a prerequisite to legal fatherhood. So, according to Deuteronomy 25:5-10, if a man died without a son, his brother was to marry the man’s wife. The first born son of that union was to bear the name of the deceased brother. This boy was truly the son of the deceased in Jewish law, albeit he was the biological offspring of someone else. The laws of levirate marriage help us to understand why neither Matthew nor Luke see any incompatibility between the Lord Jesus’ virgin conception and his descent from David, through Joseph.<sup>3</sup>

Mary also had throne rights as a direct descendant of David. By the so called ‘Daughters of Zelophehad Enactment’ (Numbers 27:1-11) she could receive and transmit to her son inherited rights—and apart from the other reasons we have elsewhere suggested for Mary accompanying Joseph to answer the census call in Bethlehem, it might have been partly to assert or record the specific claims of her descent in the census registration (this would lend further weight to the view that Heli had no son).

### **Mary's Davidic credentials implied genetically**

For this final line of thought the author acknowledges the work of Dr E K Victor Pearce in his helpful book *Prophecy*. He points out that modern science provides clues as to the authenticity of God's statement made to Satan (Genesis 3:15) that the offspring – or “seed” – of the woman would eventually crush Satan's head. Victor Pearce comments that the seed may be understood as the genetic code – the Mitochondrial DNA – passed from one generation to the next exclusively through females and without which human life would not be possible. This discovery has encouraged scientists to the view that the human race is descended from one woman. Victor Pearce writes: “this seed's essential constituency was passed down through the generations from Eve to Mary. It would also be the reason why, in Luke's account, it is Mary's kindred list which is given and not Joseph's ..... in the Old Testament, the mother's names of the kings descending from David are always given, but in contrast they are not for the North Israel Kings ..... This system of reference to the mother is consistently repeated. Only divine inspiration can explain this genetic anticipation, from Eve to Mary the virgin, through the mothers of David's line, through centuries of prophecy.”<sup>24</sup> It is the woman's offspring – Jesus – who will eventually and finally defeat Satan.

### **The importance of the genealogies**

We begin to see the importance of the genealogies. No orthodox Jew today would consider the claim of anyone to be the Messiah unless he could prove his pedigree through David. The genealogies given to us in the Bible demonstrate Jesus' lineage beyond reasonable doubt as the promised King of Israel who, as a direct descendant of David, will reign forever as promised in the many messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

The preservation of the documents from which the genealogies were (presumably) copied by Matthew and Luke demonstrates both the sovereignty and the faithfulness of God. The records were kept in the temple archives in much the same way as the equivalent modern records are held in a municipal Register Office.

## THE TWO GENEALOGIES

The precious temple archives survived the destruction of God's house at Shiloh (1 Samuel 4:11 ff) and the overthrow of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem in 586 BC. They survived the invasion of Alexander the Great in 330 BC, who came perilously close to destroying Jerusalem, and they survived the Jewish civil war ended in 63 BC by the Roman general Pompey. Some of the fighting in this war raged in the temple itself. The precious scrolls survived unharmed through the extraordinarily dangerous decades of the first century AD, until some time in the 'sixties' when Matthew and Luke made reference to them. Only a few years later, on 2 September AD 70, during what the Romans came to call the Jewish War, a Roman soldier hurled a burning torch through a window in the temple that started a conflagration in which the archives were destroyed forever. No imposter could attempt to prove his Davidic descent today.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> It is assumed that Matthew and Luke at different times consulted, or made arrangements for the consultation of, the temple archives in Jerusalem, where these details used to be lodged.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendices 4 and 5 to these studies.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Barnett *Bethlehem to Patmos* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Dr E. K. Victor Pearce *Evidence for Truth* Volume 3: Prophecy (Eagle, 1998), pp. 61f.

