

# Davidic Descent and the Virgin Birth

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Bishop Hollis's question: 'How can Jesus be both born of the Virgin Mary and Son of David?' reminds one of that puzzling question with which Jesus confounded the Rulers of the Jews on that last day of controversy, the last Tuesday before His crucifixion: 'How can David's Lord be David's Son?' Both questions deal essentially with the same issue, and the same answer will be found fitted to both questions. If it be accepted that Mary was a descendant of David, the same as Joseph, immediately the problem is solved. But, that answer is rejected in the article which appeared in the April-June, 1959, issue of *The Indian Journal of Theology*.

The evidence then for Mary's Davidic descent must be considered. No one questions the fact that Joseph's ancestry is traced back through David to Abraham in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel. All agree likewise that Luke's list is radically different from Matthew's, and in inverse order. Matthew begins with Abraham and moves forward to Jesus; Luke begins with Jesus and traces the ancestry backward to Adam. On the face of it, their purposes seem to be different; their methods, different; and, we may suppose, the persons whose ancestries are traced, different.

Basing their interpretation on the custom of Levirate marriage, attempts have been made along two lines to support the theory that both Matthew and Luke give the descent of Joseph. First, some have suggested that the two men referred to, Jacob in Matthew and Heli in Luke, were step-brothers. On the death of Heli, Jacob married his widow in accordance with the law of Levirate marriage, and Joseph was born to this second marriage. In this sense, both Heli and Jacob would be counted as father to Joseph, Heli the legal father and Jacob the real father. So, Joseph's legal descent is traced through Heli in Luke's Gospel, and his real descent is traced through Jacob in Matthew's Gospel. The second explanation just exactly reverses this first one. It is argued by supporters of this theory that Matthew gives Joseph's legal descent as successor to the throne of David while Luke gives Joseph's real parentage. The law of Levirate is brought in for

support here also ; but the position of the two brothers, Heli and Jacob, is reversed.

While there is possibility of support for both of these interpretations, the problems connected with them are great. And one of the chief problems is that raised by Bishop Hollis ; namely, that of reconciling the Davidic Descent of Jesus with His Virgin Birth. Another and more plausible solution suggests that Matthew gives the real descent of Joseph, and Luke the real descent of Mary. This solution in some cases avoids difficulties of interpretation raised by the first two theories, and in other cases provides a fair and balanced means of resolving certain difficulties raised by the first two theories. The list of scholars who have supported this interpretation is impressive ; it includes Eusebius, Luther, Bengel, Olshausen, Lightfoot, Wieseler, Robinson, Alexander, Godet, Weiss, Swete, Andrews, Robertson, and J. McNicol. Six arguments of more or less weight may be presented to support this interpretation :

(1) Matthew uses the term 'begat' all the way from the beginning right down to Joseph, and he closes with the statement, 'Jacob begat Joseph'. Matthew then is very emphatic that Jacob is the real father of Joseph ; but then he turns and just as clearly indicates that Joseph did not 'beget' Jesus, who was born of Mary. (Of course we are following here the major manuscripts and not the heretical Ebionitic manuscript which asserts that Joseph begat Jesus.) When Luke's account is considered it is found that he is just as careful to indicate that Jesus was only 'supposed' to be the son of Joseph. Then, without making it clear whose ancestry he intends to trace, he says that Joseph was 'to Heli'. We ask the question : What was Joseph to Heli ? The explanations mentioned above make him either son or step-son and call in the custom of Levirate marriage to reconcile the seeming discrepancy between Matthew and Luke. Since Matthew says clearly that Jacob begat Joseph, we suggest that the obvious meaning of Luke is that Joseph was son-in-law to Heli, that Heli was the real father of Mary.

(2) In Luke's account there is no article before Joseph, while it is used with every other name in the list. When this is taken account of, it is possible to translate thus : 'Being son (as was supposed of Joseph) of Heli.' Luke had already taken two chapters to give details concerning the manner of Christ's birth, and had stated as clearly as Matthew that His conception was a miraculous act of the Holy Spirit. When giving the genealogy, Luke is concerned with the physical ancestry of Jesus, and declares that He was a son of Heli ; 'son' being frequently used for 'grandson' would express the physical ancestry of Jesus through Heli. Since Matthew has made it clear that Jacob begat Joseph though Joseph did not beget Jesus, His physical ancestry cannot be traced through that line. How do we trace His physical ancestry then ? Luke provides the obvious answer : through Mary, the daughter of Heli.

(3) Although it is not elsewhere explicitly stated that Mary was of Davidic descent, it might be assumed to be thus from the language of the angel in his address to her in Luke's Gospel (1:32) and in her going for the enrolment with Joseph as recorded in Luke's Gospel (2:5). Ancestry through the tribe of Judah and ancestry through the tribe of Levi would thus be combined in Mary, and this would not be unusual, for the Levites took wives from all the other tribes.

(4) The Nativity Narrative in Matthew is recorded throughout from the standpoint of Joseph. In Matthew there is found the annunciation to Joseph of the birth to Jesus; Joseph is the one who is warned in a dream to take the young child and his mother and flee to Egypt; Joseph is the one who is told to bring the young child and his mother back to Palestine. In Luke there is found the annunciation to Mary of the birth of Jesus; here it is Mary's doings, her trip to see Elizabeth, her magnificat, her care for the child at his birth, her ponderings of heart that are recorded. In Luke, the words of Simeon are addressed to Mary the mother, and it is Mary who questions Jesus when they find Him in the temple at the age of twelve. The stories are complementary, and corroborative, not contradictory; but it is a very interesting fact that Matthew seems to be telling the story from the point of view of Joseph, and Luke from the point of view of Mary. This being true, much weight is added to the interpretation which sees Joseph's genealogy in Matthew, and Mary's genealogy in Luke.

(5) It is generally agreed that Matthew wrote for Jews while Luke wrote for Gentiles. This being the case it would seem proper for Matthew to show the legal claim Jesus had to the throne of David and to the Jew this could only be done if descent were traced through Joseph. Since Luke was writing for Gentiles, that is, for all non-Jews, it would be his purpose to trace the real ancestry of Jesus, and since the only real human ancestry He had was through Mary, Luke traced that ancestry through Mary, proving not only that Jesus was a son of David through Mary, but also a son of Adam through Mary. Luke is concerned to show that just as in Adam humanity had its first beginning, in Jesus humanity had a new beginning. Jesus was not only a son of Abraham, through Mary, He was also a son of Adam. The two lines given in Matthew and Luke show their first difference right after David. Matthew traces the royal line of David through Solomon and thus establishes the legal claim of Jesus to the throne of David. Luke traces Mary's ancestry back to Nathan, another son of David, but not one who reigned as king, and thus not only establishes that Jesus is a real son of David, but also goes on to prove His connection not only with Israel, but with all mankind as well.

(6) Another point that is given considerable emphasis by those who follow the literal interpretation of prophecy is found in Matthew's inclusion in his list of the accursed Jechoniah, whose name does not appear in Luke's list at all. Jechoniah had been

the ruling king of Judah at the time of the second Babylonian invasion in 598 B.C., and because of his wickedness Jeremiah had declared: 'None of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah' (22:30). Luke and Matthew both trace the ancestry of Jesus back through David. But, the lines separate before Jechoniah. He is found in Matthew's list, but not in Luke's list. If Jesus had been a real son of Joseph He would have been a real descendant of the accursed Jechoniah, and would have been disqualified from successful enthronement in David's place. Luke's list shows that Jesus was a son of David through Mary, in whose line Jechoniah is not found. So, from the legal point of view of the Jews, Jesus had a claim to Davidic descent and to David's throne through Joseph; and from the point of view of physical ancestry also He had a claim to Davidic descent and to David's throne through Mary, while escaping the curse pronounced on the physical ancestry of Jechoniah.

To be sure, this claim to Davidic descent and to David's throne through birth to the Virgin Mary is not mentioned in the New Testament. But, neither is it specially claimed that it was His descent through Joseph that established such a claim. In later life, on three occasions, He was referred to as the son of Joseph (Luke 4:22; John 1:45; 6:42); but on neither of these occasions was there an implication that because of being the son of Joseph He had a claim to David's throne. It may also be mentioned that on one occasion, in later life, He was referred to as the son of Mary (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3); and here also there was no connection with claim to Davidic descent or David's throne. In this connection it is important to note that Mark's account is a little more explicit than Matthew's. Mark uses the term, 'son of Mary', while Matthew turns it around the other way and refers to Mary as His mother. This is one of the little indications that may be found in Mark's Gospel by which inference may be drawn that Mark knew of the claim to the virgin birth and accepted it. If Mark, like Matthew, had simply referred to Mary as the mother of Jesus, it would have left the door open for assuming that He had a father also like every other human being. But, Mark uses a specific term, 'The son of Mary', and it is possible to see in this some indirect reference to the fact that His birth was different from ordinary human birth; otherwise, the more usual term would be, 'The son of Joseph'. Mark's silence on the virgin birth needs to be interpreted in the light of some such indirect references found in his Gospel. However, the main point we are getting at here is that Davidic descent and claim to David's throne is not referred to in the New Testament as being the result of birth either as the 'son of Joseph', or as the 'son of Mary'. He is claimed to be a son of David through His birth, 'born of the seed of David according to the flesh' (Rom. 1:3). The general assumption has been that this is traced through Joseph. But, if we are going to be strict and specific in giving the meaning of this

claim and at the same time suit our interpretation to all the facts in the case, it seems more reasonable to say that His legal claim to Davidic descent is established through the genealogy of Joseph as found in Matthew and His claim to actual physical ancestry from David is established through the genealogy of Mary as found in Luke. While it may be normal to think of the seed of David through the male line, yet it must be recognized that here we are dealing with a sublime mystery, and even in Genesis in that strange prophecy of the Messiah's birth He is referred to as the 'seed of woman' (3: 15).

Our conclusion would be that it is not impossible to think of Luke as giving the real genealogy of Jesus through Mary. Such an interpretation comes closer to solving our difficulties than the interpretation based upon the custom of Levirate marriage. David's Lord became David's son through being born to a virgin who was descended from David. The mystery of the Davidic Descent of the Virgin Birth of Christ can be resolved if Luke's genealogy be taken as the genealogy of Mary.

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*'It has recently been pointed out by Dr. van Leeuwen of Holland that, following Dr. Hendrik Kraemer's book and the post-Tambram developments in Christian thought concerning evangelism, attention has been focused almost exclusively on the relation of the Biblical view of the revelation of God in Christ and the human quest of non-Christian religions for experience of God-realization. Revelation as from God has been stressed at the expense of revelation to and for the world of men. The act of God's redemption in Christ Jesus is to seek and find this lost world of men. The theological approach has tended to overlook the underlying anthropological concern. Perhaps the time has come now for us to focus attention on the human aspect in God's redemptive act . . . on man as he really is, the creature for whose sake Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead. The burden of our message to the non-Christian world would then relate, in this generation certainly, to the Christian view of man and his destiny.'*

(Dr. P. D. Devanandan in The Gospel and the Hindu Intellectual)

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*In the recent Serampore B.D. and L.Th. examinations, held at Serampore, affiliated colleges and other local centres, the total number of candidates was 419: 303 internal and 116 external. That is, 46 for Preliminary, 170 for L.Th., 202 for B.D., and 1 for Religious Knowledge. The number of languages involved was 22, embracing 17 vernaculars, 4 Biblical and Classical languages, and English.*