

**CALVIN'S COMMENTS
ON
THE GENEALOGIES OF MATTHEW AND LUKE**

As all are not agreed about these two genealogies, which are given by Matthew and Luke, we must first see whether both trace the genealogy of Christ from Joseph, or whether Matthew only traces it from Joseph and Luke from Mary. Those who are of this latter opinion have a plausible ground for their distinction in the diversity of the names. And certainly, at first sight, nothing seems more improbable than that Matthew and Luke, who differ so widely from each other, give one and the same genealogy. For from David to Shealtiel, and again from Zerubbabel till Joseph, the names are totally different.

Again, it is alleged that it would have been idle to bestow so great pains on a thing of no use, in relating a second time the genealogy of Joseph, who after all was not the father of Christ. "Why this repetition," say they, "which proves nothing that contributes much to the edification of faith? If nothing more be known than this, that Joseph was one of the descendants and family of David, the genealogy of Christ will still remain doubtful." In their opinion, therefore, it would have been superfluous that two Evangelists should apply themselves to this subject. They excuse Matthew for laying down the ancestry of Joseph on the ground that he did it for the sake of many persons who were still of the opinion that he was the father of Christ. But it would have been foolish to hold out such an encouragement to a dangerous error; and what follows is at total variance with the supposition. For as soon as he comes to the close of the genealogy, Matthew points out that Christ was conceived in the womb of the virgin, not from the seed of Joseph, but by the secret power of the Spirit. If their argument were good, Matthew might be charged with folly or inadvertence in laboring to no purpose to establish the genealogy of Joseph.

But we have not yet replied to their objection that the ancestry of Joseph has nothing to do with Christ. The common and well-known reply is, that in the person of Joseph the genealogy of Mary also is included, because the law enjoined every man to marry from his own tribe. It is objected, on the other hand, that at almost no period had that law been observed. But the arguments on which that assertion rests are frivolous. They quote the instance of the eleven tribes binding themselves by an oath that they would not give a wife to the Benjamites (Judg. 21:1). If this matter, say they, had been settled by law, there would have been no need for a new enactment. I reply, this extraordinary occurrence is erroneously and ignorantly converted by them into a general rule. For if one tribe had been cut off, the body of the people must have been incomplete if some remedy had not been applied to a case of extreme necessity. We must not, therefore, look to this passage for ascertaining the common law.

Again, it is objected that Mary, the mother of Christ, was Elizabeth's cousin, though Luke has formerly stated that she was of the daughters of Aaron (Luke 1:5). The reply is easy. The daughters of the tribe of Judah, or of any other tribe, were at liberty to marry into the tribe of the priesthood; for they were not prevented by that reason, which is expressed in the law, that no woman should "remove her inheritance" to those who were of a

different tribe from her own (Num. 36:6-9). Thus, the wife of Jehoiada, the high priest, is declared by the sacred historian to have belonged to the royal family--"Jehosheba, the daughter of Jehoram, the wife of Jehoiada the priest" (2 Chron. 22:11). It was, therefore, nothing wonderful [surprising] or uncommon if the mother of Elizabeth were married to a priest. Should anyone allege that this does not enable us to decide with perfect certainty that Mary was of the same tribe with Joseph, because she was his wife, I grant that the bare narrative as it stands would not prove it without the aid of other circumstances.

But, *in the first place*, we must observe that the Evangelists do not speak of events known in their own age. When the ancestry of Joseph had been carried up as far as David, everyone could easily make out the ancestry of Mary. The Evangelists, trusting to what was generally understood in their own day, were, no doubt, less solicitous on that point; for if anyone entertained doubts, the research was neither difficult nor tedious. Besides, they took for granted that Joseph, as a man of good character and behavior, had obeyed the injunction of the law in marrying a wife from his own tribe. That general rule would not, indeed, be sufficient to prove Mary's royal descent; for she might have belonged to the tribe of Judah and yet not have been a descendant of the family of David.

My opinion is this. The Evangelists had in their eye godly persons who entered into no obstinate dispute, but in the person of Joseph acknowledged the descent of Mary; particularly since, as we have said, no doubt was entertained about it in that age. One matter, however, might appear incredible--that this very poor and despised couple belonged to the posterity of David and to that royal seed from which the Redeemer was to spring. If anyone inquire whether or not the genealogy traced by Matthew and Luke proves clearly and beyond controversy that Mary was descended from the family of David, I own that it cannot be inferred with certainty. But as the relationship between Mary and Joseph was at that time well known, the Evangelists were more at ease on that subject. Meanwhile, it was the design of both Evangelists to remove the stumbling-block arising from the fact that both Joseph and Mary were unknown, and despised, and poor, and gave not the slightest indication of royalty.

Again, the supposition that Luke passes by the descent of Joseph and relates that of Mary is easily refuted. For he expressly says that *Jesus was supposed to be the son of Joseph, &c.* Certainly, neither the father nor the grandfather of Christ is mentioned, but the ancestry of Joseph himself is carefully explained. I am well aware of the manner in which they attempt to solve this difficulty. The word *son*, they allege, is put for *son-in-law*, and the interpretation they give to Joseph being called the son of Heli is that he had married Heli's daughter. But this does not agree with the order of nature and is nowhere countenanced by any example in Scripture.

If Solomon is struck out of Mary's genealogy, Christ will no longer be Christ. For all inquiry as to his descent is founded on that solemn promise, "I will set up thy seed after thee; I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (2 Sam. 7:12-14). "The LORD has sworn in truth unto David, he will not turn from it: Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne" (Ps. 132:11). Solomon was, beyond controversy, the type of this eternal King who was promised to David. Nor can the

promise be applied to Christ except insofar as its truth was shadowed out in Solomon (1 Chr. 38:5). Now, if the descent is not traced to him, how, or by what argument, shall he be proved to be "the son of David"? Whoever expunges Solomon from Christ's genealogy does, at the same time, obliterate and destroy those promises by which he must be acknowledged to be the son of David. In what way Luke, tracing the line of descent from Nathan, does not exclude Solomon will afterwards be seen at the proper place.

Not to be too tedious, those two genealogies agree substantially with each other, but we must attend to *four* points of difference. The *first* is: Luke ascends by a retrograde order, from the last to the first, while Matthew begins with the source of the genealogy. The *second* is: Matthew does not carry his narrative beyond the holy and elect race of Abraham, while Luke proceeds as far as Adam. The *third* is: Matthew treats of his *legal* descent and allows himself to make some omissions in the line of ancestors, choosing to assist the reader's memory by arranging them under three fourteens; while Luke follows the *natural* descent with greater exactness. The *fourth* and last is: when they are speaking of the same persons, they sometimes give them different names.

It would be superfluous to say more about the *first* point of difference, for it presents no difficulty. The *second* is not without a very good reason. For as God had chosen for himself the family of Abraham, from which the Redeemer of the world would be born, and as the promise of salvation had been in some sort shut up in that family till the coming of Christ, Matthew does not pass beyond the limits which God had prescribed. We must attend to what Paul says, "that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers" (Rom. 15:8), with which agrees that saying of Christ, "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). Matthew, therefore, presents him to our contemplation as belonging to that holy race to which he had been expressly appointed. In Matthew's catalog we must look at the covenant of God, by which he adopted the seed of Abraham as his people, separating them by a "middle wall of partition" (Eph. 2:14) from the rest of the nations. Luke directed his view to a higher point. For though, from the time that God had made his covenant with Abraham, a Redeemer was promised in a peculiar manner to his seed, yet we know that since the transgression of the first man all needed a Redeemer, and he was accordingly appointed for the whole world. It was by a wonderful purpose of God that Luke exhibited Christ to us as the son of Adam, while Matthew confined him within the single family of Abraham. For it would be of no advantage to us that Christ was given by the Father as "the author of eternal salvation" (Heb. 5:9) unless he had been given indiscriminately to all. Besides, that saying of the Apostle would not be true, that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8), if his power and grace had not reached to all ages from the very creation of the world. Let us know, therefore, that to the whole human race there has been manifested and exhibited salvation through Christ. For not without reason is he called the son of Noah and the son of Adam. But as we must seek him in the word of God, the Spirit wisely directs us through another Evangelist to the holy race of Abraham, to whose hands the treasure of eternal life, along with Christ, was committed for a time (Rom. 3:1).

We come now to the *third* point of difference. Matthew and Luke unquestionably do not

observe the same order. For immediately after David, the one puts Solomon and the other Nathan, which makes it perfectly clear that they follow different lines. This sort of contradiction is reconciled by good and learned interpreters in the following manner. Matthew, departing from the natural lineage, which is followed by Luke, reckons up the legal genealogy. I call it the *legal* genealogy because the right to the throne passed into the hands of Shealtiel. Eusebius, in the first book of his Ecclesiastical History, adopting the opinion of Africanus, prefers applying the epithet *legal* to the genealogy which is traced by Luke. But it amounts to the same thing, for he means nothing more than this--that the kingdom which had been established in the person of Solomon passed in a lawful manner to Shealtiel. But it is more correct and appropriate to say that Matthew has exhibited the legal order; because by naming Solomon immediately after David, he attends not to the persons from whom in a regular line, according to the flesh, Christ derived his birth, but to the manner in which he was descended from Solomon and other kings so as to be their lawful successor, in whose hand God would "stablish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:13).

There is probability in the opinion that at the death of Ahaziah the lineal descent from Solomon was closed. As to the command given by David (for which some persons quote the authority of Jewish Commentators), that should the line from Solomon fail the royal power would pass to the descendants of Nathan, I leave it undetermined, holding this only for certain--that the succession to the kingdom was not confused but regulated by fixed degrees of kindred. Now, as the sacred history relates that after the murder of Ahaziah the throne was occupied, and "all the seed-royal destroyed," by his mother Athaliah (2 Kings 11:1), it is more than probable that this woman, from an eager desire of power, had perpetrated those wicked and horrible murders in order that she might not be reduced to a private rank and see the throne transferred to another. If there had been a son of Ahaziah still alive, the grandmother would willingly have been allowed to reign in peace without envy or danger under the mask of being his tutor. When she proceeds to such enormous crimes as to draw upon herself infamy and hatred, it is a proof of desperation, arising from her being unable any longer to keep the royal authority in her house.

As to Joash being called "the son of Ahaziah" (2 Chr. 22:11), the reason is that he was the nearest relative and was justly considered to be the true and direct heir of the crown. Not to mention that Athaliah (if we shall suppose her to be his grandmother) would gladly have availed herself of her relation to the child, will any person of ordinary understanding think it probable that an actual son of the king could be so concealed by Jehoiada the priest as not to excite the grandmother to more diligent search? If all is carefully weighed, there will be no hesitation in concluding that the next heir of the crown belonged to a different line. And this is the meaning of Jehoiada's words, "Behold, the king's son shall reign as the Lord has said of the sons of David" (2 Chr. 23:3). He considered it to be shameful and intolerable that a woman who was a stranger by blood should violently seize the sceptre which God had commanded to remain in the family of David.

There is no absurdity in supposing that Luke traces the descent of Christ from Nathan; for it is possible that the line of Solomon, so far as relates to the succession of the throne, may have been broken off. It may be objected that Jesus cannot be acknowledged as the

promised Messiah if he be not a descendant of Solomon, who was an undoubted type of *Christ*. But the answer is easy. Though he was not naturally descended from Solomon, yet he was reckoned his son by legal succession, because he was descended from kings.

The *fourth* point of difference is the great diversity of the names. Many look upon this as a great difficulty, for from David till Joseph, with the exception of Shealtiel and Zerubbabel, none of the names are alike in the two Evangelists. The excuse commonly offered, that the diversity arose from its being very customary among the Jews to have two names, appears to many persons not quite satisfactory. But as we are now unacquainted with the method which was followed by Matthew in drawing up and arranging the genealogy, there is no reason to wonder if we are unable to determine how far both of them agree or differ as to individual names. It cannot be doubted that after the Babylonish captivity the same persons are mentioned under different names. In the case of Shealtiel and Zerubbabel, the same names I think were purposely retained on account of the change which had taken place in the nation, because the royal authority was then extinguished. Even while a feeble shadow of power remained a striking change was visible, which warned believers that they ought to expect another and more excellent kingdom than that of Solomon, which had flourished but for a short time.

It is also worthy of remark that the additional number in Luke's catalog to that of Matthew is nothing strange; for the number of persons in the natural line of descent is usually greater than in the legal line. Besides, Matthew chose to divide the genealogy of Christ into three departments, and to make each department to contain fourteen persons. In this way he felt himself at liberty to pass by some names which Luke could not with propriety omit, not having restricted himself by that rule.

Thus have I discussed the genealogy of Christ, as far as it appeared to be generally useful. If anyone is tickled by a keener curiosity, I remember Paul's admonition, and prefer sobriety and modesty to trifling and useless disputes. It is a noted passage in which he enjoins us to avoid excessive keenness in disputing about "genealogies, as unprofitable and vain" (Tit. 3:9).

It now remains to inquire, lastly, why Matthew included the whole genealogy of Christ in *three classes* and assigned to each class fourteen persons. Those who think that he did so in order to aid the memory of his readers state a part of the reason, but not the whole. It is true, indeed, that a catalog divided into three equal numbers is more easily remembered. But it is also evident that this division is intended to point out a threefold condition of the nation, from the time when Christ was promised to Abraham, to "the fulness of the time" (Gal. 4:4) when he was "manifested in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16). Previous to the time of David the tribe of Judah, though it occupied a higher rank than the other tribes, held no power. In David the royal authority burst upon the eyes of all with unexpected splendor and remained till the time of Jeconiah. After that period there still lingered in the tribe of Judah a portion of rank and government which sustained the expectations of the godly till the coming of the Messiah.