

The Role of Nathan, King David's Immediate Heir, in Luke's Genealogy: Proposal and Prediction

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Abstract

One does not have to be a biblical scholar to notice that the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke differ at many points—in particular, the listing of David's immediate heir: Solomon in the former (1:6–11) and Nathan in the latter (3:23–31).¹ Both were *royal* sons; but only one and his dynasty actually *reigned*. I propose that Nathan was one of the King's sons who served as priests (2 Sam 8:18). My educated guess takes its cues from the substantial number of cultic places, practices, and personnel that dominate the early chapters of Luke as well as the allusions to Old Testament figures and events.² I predict that yet-to-be-discovered contemporaneous artifacts—or Second Temple era documents—will show that Jewish tradition (whether Hebrew/Aramaic or Greek) regarded this descendent as such.

Questions

The genealogical phenomena lead one to ask a number of questions about the Third Evangelist's choice of ancestors for Jesus.

1. What was it about Nathan, this third son of four born in Jerusalem

1 Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1964) and Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* [RSV] (New York: United Bible Societies, 1982). Extended genealogical lists available to each Evangelist occur in 1 Chr 1–2:1–15, 3:5–12, and Ruth 4:12–22. It is not (yet) known how much both Evangelists might have drawn on other oral or written traditions.

2 Neither Greek nor Hebrew critical texts show variants with the passages cited in what follows. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* [HB], 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997). Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta*, vol. 2, 7th ed. (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1962). Except where it has been necessary to render the Greek differently, I have relied upon Albert Pietersma, ed., *New English Translation of the Septuagint* [NETS] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Elsewhere, I use the NRSV when not translating myself.

- (2 Sam 5:14, 1 Chr 14:4) by Bathsheba (1 Chr 3:5), that Luke found more worthy of listing than Solomon, David's fourth son by her?³
2. What benefit would accrue from mentioning a line of sons and scions about whom Luke's Scriptures say next to nothing? What was to be gained by highlighting this Nobody and by ignoring a Somebody? Is it not better to go with a known quantity (however problematic) than with a non-entity?
 3. Was the Third Evangelist avoiding rulers who, for the most part, opposed God's way of governing the People to such an extent that it brought about the division of the kingdom into North (Israel) and South (Judah), the destruction of the latter leading to exile in Babylon (Matt 1:7–11)?
 4. If so, what kind of alternative dynasty was he proposing; or (at least) what was its head to be like? Was Luke attempting to identify another kind of royal heir and a different sort of kingship—neither marked by the use of conventional political maneuvering nor characterized by a syncretistic theology?⁴
 5. Might he have had in mind the Deuteronomic ideal for kingship (17:14–20) that involves both negative and positive qualities and practices? Such a native-born ruler is to avoid multiplying horses, wives, and treasure. Nor is he to return the people to Egypt. Rather, this unconventional monarch shall have a copy the Law “written for him *in the presence of the levitical priests*” (v. 18; italics mine), becoming thoroughly acquainted with its contents and completely obedient to its requirements.

The Lukan Context: Cultic Places, Practices, and Personnel

The first two chapters of Luke (L material) are centered around the Temple in

3 It should go without saying that this Nathan is to be distinguished from the prophet of the same name who later confronts David about his affair with Bathsheba and the death of her husband, Uriah (11:27b–12:14). No evidence supports a familial relationship between the King and the Prophet.

4 Raymond Brown asserts that, by making the otherwise unknown Neri the father of Shealtiel (3:27) rather than Jeconiah, the last king of Judah (as in Matt 1:12), Luke made a *theological* point. He avoided “having in Jesus’ ancestry a figure whom Jeremiah cursed.” See *The Birth of the Messiah. A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 94. That prophet had declared, “Record this man as childless (LXX: ἐκκήρυκτον [“banished”]) . . . ; for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah” (22:30). Darrell Bock opines that the accursed Jeconiah forfeited his *legal* right to reign. By adopting Nathan’s dynasty, Luke avoided the charge that Jesus’ ancestry was *not legitimate*. See *Luke 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 348 n.2; 354–57.

Jerusalem.⁵ It is the place where the elderly priest Zechariah fulfills his duties (1:5, 8–10). There, the prophet Anna and the elderly Simeon greet the Holy Family (2:25–38) who had come to circumcise Jesus and to offer the appropriate sacrifices in obedience to Mosaic Law (2:22–24). It is where Jesus’ parents later find him (in his Father’s house) debating with the experts (2:41–52). Furthermore, Elizabeth as well as Zechariah is of priestly stock (1:5)—as is Mary, since she is her kinswoman (1:46). In chapter 3, Luke identifies Annas and Caiaphas as the priests who served in the political environment of Roman Palestine (vv. 1–2). This is the context in which Jesus’ Davidic roots are mentioned: Joseph is the King’s distant heir. He and Mary register in Bethlehem, the City of David (2:4), where the shepherds are to find the newborn child (v. 11).

At his baptism, Jesus—who had been *conceived* as God’s Son—is publicly *declared* as such (3:22). The theme of sonship is emphasized dramatically by listing Jesus’ ancestry backwards to Adam, 77 times: “z” was the son of “y,” who was the son of “x” . . . (3:23–38).⁶ It is at Salathiel/Shealtiel that both genealogies converge (Matt 1:12 and Luke 3:27). They also include his son, Zerubbabel, the post-Exilic governor of Judah. This davidite was accorded quasi-messianic status by the prophet Haggai (2:20–23). However, Zechariah gives equal, if not superior, status to Joshua (עֵיזֶהוּ | Ἰησοῦς) the High Priest (chapters 3 & 4). God declares both to be “sons of oil, the ones serving the Lord of all the earth” (4:14).⁷ The Evangelists’ entries diverge at this point until they converge again at David—but (as we saw) with different sons as his immediate heirs.

Proposal

Given the heavy concentration of priestly persons, personnel, and places early in the Gospel, I propose that Luke regarded Nathan (Great David’s Lesser Son) to have been the most illustrious of the un-named sons who served as priests (כהנים) during the King’s early reign (2 Sam 8:18), whose heirs would mediate God to Israel and Israel to God. It would be a way of restoring the People’s initial, collective identity and role: to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6).⁸ Of course, not all translators and commentators, either ancient or modern, have

5 See also Luke’s second volume, especially the first half of Acts.

6 Although the usual word for “son” (υἱός) is not used throughout (as it was at the beginning of the genealogy in v. 23), the genitive singular of the definite article serves in each case to indicate this familial relationship.

7 Luke 11:50–51 and Matt 23:35 mention another prophet named “Zechariah” who perished in his role.

8 This association of the royal and priestly is related two chapters earlier: the king had worn the ephod when dancing before the Ark (2 Sam 6:14; see also 1 Chr 15:27.). However, not all are agreed on the cultic significance of the ephod in this instance (although priestly associations are prominent throughout the Bible).

rendered כהנים in cultic terms.⁹ The corresponding version in 1 Chr 18:17 reads “the chief officials” (הראשנים).¹⁰ This may reflect the author’s routinely removing from accounts in Samuel–Kings any suggestion that David, Solomon, and “good kings” violated priestly prerogatives. Furthermore, in the immediately preceding verse (2 Sam 8:17), כהנים is used to identify Zadok and Ahimelech—sons of Ahitub and Abiathar, respectively—who were priests (כהנים | ἱερείς).¹¹ Might these suggest an earlier era when the distinction between royal and priestly function was not rigidly enforced,¹² followed by a later more scrupulous tradition (which ancient translations and some modern ones reflect)? This concurs with the view of P. Kyle McCarter, Jr.: “Almost all critics . . . have agreed that the readings of I Chr 18:17 and the versions in II Sam 8:18 are interpretive paraphrases of the reading of MT by scribes who considered it impossible that there should be non-Levitical priests.”¹³ He assumes, “with most interpreters . . . that in the time of David and Solomon (1) there were special priests assigned to the royal household . . . and (2) members of the royal family might serve in this capacity.”¹⁴

Prediction

Prediction is risky business, even at the best of times and with the most favorable circumstances—especially if one is neither a prophet, nor the child of one.¹⁵ With great tentativeness, I predict that, one day, someone will discover a bulla inscribed in paleo-Hebrew that reads the equivalent of “Nathan, son of David, Priest.” Or, one may find the connection in Greek inscriptions or among Second Temple Qumran texts yet to be discovered or deciphered. Earlier tradents, Luke, and his readers would have been aware of such a relationship.

9 The LXX translator rendered the Hebrew ἀρχαῖ, which the NETS translates as “chiefs of the court.” After this phrase, J. Lust et al. parenthetically supply “of the temple?” apparently to suggest a cultic connection. See their *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), 94. The Vulgate has *sacerdotes*. Most English translations (including the NRSV) retain “priests.” The Ukrainian reads, “chiefs of the royal palace” [начальниками царського двору]; but a footnote acknowledges that the Hebrew says “priests” [священниками]: (Kyiv: Ukrainian Bible Society, 1993).

10 LXX: οἱ πρότεροι διάδοχοι (“the foremost deputies”).

11 Of course, the argument from context could cut both ways: that the meaning is “priest” in v. 18 because it is so in v. 17, or that v. 18 is meant to distinguish the sons of David from the others.

12 Perhaps such fluidity allowed the Hasmoneans (who were of priestly stock) to assume the kingship, an association that ended poorly.

13 McCarter, *II Samuel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 255.

14 McCarter, *II Samuel*, 256–57.

15 Although he did not forecast the discovery of papyri 35 years later, the great NT scholar J. B. Lightfoot surmised in 1863 that “if we could only recover letters that ordinary people wrote to each other without any thought of being literary, we should have the greatest possible help for the understanding of the language of the NT generally.” See J. H. Moulton, *Grammar of New Testament Greek. Prolegomenon*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 242. Such correspondence began flooding the academic world resulting from the excavations of Grenfell and Hunt along the Nile at Oxyrhynchus. Their story has been engagingly told by Peter Parsons, *City of the Sharp-nosed Fish. Greek Lives in Roman Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007).