

HOW HISTORIOGRAPHY CREATES (SOME) BODY: JESUS, THE SON OF DAVID – ROYAL STOCK OR SOCIAL CONSTRUCT?

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Abstract

In this study it is argued that the very question of whether Jesus was, indeed, a son of David is the product of a particular historiographical paradigm and that how things were in his life probably did not include royal ancestry. Instead, it is suggested that it is likely that Jesus' biography in Galilee was credited with a royal ancestry in order to acknowledge his social standing. This position is based on an alteration of the historiographical paradigm used, rather than any new data being investigated. In an exercise of how historiographical paradigms shape data into evidence, traditional historiography in Jesus research is compared to anthropological historiography as a new paradigm in historical thinking.

Keywords: Anthropological Historiography, Jesus Son of David, Genealogy, Davidic Descent

Royal Blood Matters

No other royal ancestor in the Israelite tradition is more significant than King David. Therefore, royal Davidic ancestry must have been a significant credential for anyone born in the Israelite nation. There can be little doubt that royal blood mattered also in Jesus' first-century Palestine.

That Jesus was a son of David is attested in two genealogies (Matt 1 and Luke 3), confirmed by Paul (e.g., Rom 1:3-4) and mentioned in several other instances in the gospels where Jesus is called a "son of David" (e.g., Matt 15:22; 20:30-32; Mark 10:47; Luke 18:38-39). In fact, the weight of the evidence, for many scholars, points to the historical possibility of actual Davidic ancestry. But, was he really from a royal family? Was Jesus indeed from Davidic stock? How did royal blood constitute that (some) body? Royal blood matters, but it is not obvious how to deal with blood-matters.

Historical knowledge about and the historiography of Jesus of Nazareth remains one of the fascinating questions in New Testament research. The question of Jesus' Davidic ancestry, therefore, is part of the larger project about historical knowledge. In order to establish the value of historical knowledge in this case, it is necessary to analyse what scholars do because as Tosh (1984, 117) remarks, "the assumptions and attitudes of historians themselves have to be carefully assessed before we can come to any conclusion about the real status of historical knowledge."

No person today can trace her or his ancestry back 55 or even 42 generations. Was it possible 2 000 years ago? If it were not possible, today or then, what does the data point to? The suggestion of this study is that neither new nor more data but a critical analysis of how to treat the existing data, will offer a suggestion in this regard. In fact, it will be suggested that the existing practice of considering whether the data refers to actual Davidic origin or not is

the product of a specific historiographical paradigm and not necessarily attested to by the data. The first step, however, will be to map what historians do and how they do it before it can be asked what New Testament scholars are doing in this regard.

What Historians Do and How They Do It

Historians study the past, write history, generate historical knowledge and often debate about historical knowledge. Therefore, among other things, they are interested in how things were and what the state of affairs was in former periods and convey that to people from their own world. The task of the historian, as Stanford (1986, 74) reminds us, remains “to establish as firmly as possible events and states of affairs in the past; and to find the most appropriate words in which to relate and describe – that is, to communicate – these findings to other people.”

But historians are also concerned with whether specific interpretations are credible and fair. Are representations true to the period and really supported by the evidence? This is partly the product of historians’ relentless efforts to weed out falsifications of the past (see McCullagh 2004).

Both tasks of showing how things were and pointing out misrepresentations of the past presuppose a particular understanding of historiography and of the nature of historical knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the particular view of history and historiography presupposed here. Historians have been asking questions about the past and have created historical knowledge in many different ways. Historiography itself has a history and the nature of historical knowledge depends on how historiography and history are understood.

Different Ways of Engagement with the Past

In his overview of the historiography of the twentieth century, Iggers (1997, 3) shows that it can be presented by means of three phases: Traditional historiography, social science-oriented history and the new cultural history. Since the basic assumptions of the first phase remained intact during the second phase (which challenged traditional historiography on fundamental assumptions, such as, a too narrow focus on individuals and *great men*), only the first and third phases will be briefly discussed.

The scientific basis of traditional historiography emerged during the 19th century and shared the optimism of the sciences that methodologically controlled research makes objective knowledge possible. The basic task of the historian in this paradigm can be described as a “realist factuality” or a “factual recreation or recovery of the past.”

A set of nested assumptions about the past and about access to the past via literary documents characterise this paradigm. Two assumptions which go hand in hand are fundamental to this paradigm, namely, *ontological monism* and the *myth of realism*.

The first is the assumption that what is real is readily available to the scientific historian (such as, to all other scientists) because of the existence of a fixed catalogue of what is *real*. Western thinking, Bernstein (1991, 306) shows, has been caught in an ontological predicament that has haunted it for centuries, “where ontology never gets beyond the problematic of ‘the Same and the Other’ and always seeks to show how the other can be mastered, absorbed, reduced to the same.” Within such a framework, to be referred to as *ontological monism*, other world-views or cultural realities are disallowed the ontological status of “reality” and everything that does not fit the own ontology is regarded as primitive, mythical, fictional or not real. The alternative viewpoint, which has since been

adopted by historians, is that of pluralism or the acknowledgement of multiple realities. Traditional historiography operates with ontological monism and judges past realities in terms of the fixed catalogue of reality.

The second assumption, which Tonkin (1990, 25) refers to as the “myth of realism,” is the viewpoint which assumes the natural veracity of any narrative while historians who use the recollections of others can “just scan them for useful facts to pick out, like currants from a cake.” It uses documents as “transparent narrative or a quarry for facts.” What is absent from this viewpoint is the possibility of discovering an “other” in the pages of documents.

When coupled with ontological monism, which does not pay attention to the possibility that, what the sources contain might belong to a different cultural or reality system, documents and data are treated as if they are readily transparent to the modern researcher. Carr (1961, 16) describes this assumption as the “fetishism of documents... If you find it in the documents, it is so.” In picking out the evidence, it is assumed that the sources reflect historical reality; just read and evaluate the sources and historical factuality becomes apparent. The main task remains to argue whether the data is reliable and sufficient to support a specific claim or not. In New Testament jargon, Malina (2002, 5) refers to it as the belief in *immaculate perception*; it maintains that “the evidence is there for the picking, just read the sources!” But, as will be shown below, engagement with sources from a distant and alien cultural system is much more complex than that.

The third phase in twentieth century historiography saw the rejection and replacement of this “soulless fact-oriented positivism” (Iggers and Von Moltke 1973, xii). One reaction was a postmodern historiography strongly influenced by philosophical idealism which maintained that there is no historical reality except that which is created by the historian. Therefore, historiography in this view is no recreation of any past reality but an imaginative construction by the historian. In the words of Ankersmit (1989, 137): “We no longer have any texts, any past, but just interpretations of them.”

This is not the place to defend the historian’s traditional aims of representing the past against those who claim that the past is only created by the historian. Suffice it to agree with Burke (1992, 129) who points out that it is a pity that the promoters of this version of the postmodern position have not yet seriously engaged with the question whether history is a literary genre or cluster of genres of its own, whether it has its own form of narratives and its own rhetoric, and whether the conventions include (as they sure do) rules about the relation of statements to evidence as well as rules of representation. Ranke, for example, was not writing pure fiction. Documents not only supported his narrative, but constrained the narrator not to make statements for which evidence was lacking.

While this version of postmodern historiography challenges the claims of factuality and the status of historical knowledge as such (in fact, the very existence of traditional historical activities) in two regards, it remains trapped in the nested assumptions of traditional historiography (see Lorenz 1998a, 312-320 for a similar analysis). It offers no tools to deal with multiple realities (in fact, if the historical reality does not exist, why would multiple realities be recognised?) and remains committed to the natural veracity of texts. Once the existence of multiple realities and a variety of world-views are acknowledged, the cultural and contextual embeddedness of texts is discovered with the implication that they are no longer transparent to the outsider (historians included).

Suffice it to point out that while such a postmodern position is well suited for burning down edifices (the constructs of scientific historiography which are all equally rhetorical and preliminary), it is less suited for building up alternative structures (see Stanford 1986, 135; Fay 1998, 4; Evans 2002, 86): “In the end, those who advocate, or practice, history merely as

a form of moral rhetoric have no defence at all against those who disagree with them and practice a moral rhetoric of another kind, one which for example praises Hitler as a friend of the Jews, or damns Churchill as a warmonger and mass murderer” (Evans 2002, 87).

Iggers (1997, 16) shows that the “postmodern critique of traditional science and traditional historiography has offered important correctives to historical thought and practice. However, it has not destroyed the historian’s commitment to recapturing reality or his or her belief in a logic of inquiry, *but it has demonstrated the complexity of both* [italics mine].” Besides the postmodern versions of historiography, several other reactions have developed to traditional historiography.

Anthropological Historiography and Historical Knowledge

The emergence of “the new cultural history,” which developed over the last few decades of the previous century, introduced yet another replacement of positivist historiography and simultaneously introduced a new paradigm in historiography, to be referred to as *anthropological historiography*. Several developments imputed this change – two of which were a widening of the scope of research to include everyday life and the philosophical recognition in historical studies of multiple realities or pluralism. It was realised that the unique can only be understood in a social context and that demands an understanding of that context by means of theoretical constructs and comparative methods.

What historians learned from anthropologists is that “people lead meaningful lives, and that these meanings can only be discovered within the context of those lives, it cannot be imputed to them on the basis of some previously established ideas about the biological or psychological makeup of people” (Cohn 1980, 201). Therefore, anthropological historians recognise that they “must grasp the absolute presuppositions, the unspoken assumptions, of the society under review, in order to understand what has occurred” (Stanford 1986, 93).

In its rejection of traditional historiography, anthropological historiography does not follow the route of rejecting the reality of the past but instead confirms the otherness of the past as an alien other which is not readily transparent to an outside historian. It is based on the affirmation of *realism* – the viewpoint that “reality exists independently of our knowledge thereof; and second, that our scientific statements – including our theories – refer to this independently existing reality” (Lorenz 1998b, 351 and see Stanford 1986, 26). Historians have learned that science and history are both representational but “not a simulacrum of reality” because “no matter how veridical a representation is, it is still a representation: A facsimile of reality and not reality itself...” (Fay 1998, 8).

Anthropological historians approach the documents as narrative constructs themselves of cultural realities and experiences. This is the result of what Iggers (1997, 6) refers to as the “transformation of consciousness” or an expression of a world-view which rejects ontological monism while accepting “the idea that reality is socially and culturally constituted” (Burke 1991, 3). “The other” can no longer be mastered, absorbed or reduced to the same. Instead, as the historian Davis (1982, 275) says: “Anthropology can widen the possibilities, can help us take off our blinders, and give us a new place from which to view the past and discover the strange and surprising in the familiar landscape of historical texts.” In contrast to the myth of realism, it acknowledges the diversity of realities. Historical sources from an alien cultural system cannot be read straight, as it were, in order to pick out the facts.

Anthropological historiography is, therefore, framed by means of at least the following two assumptions. First, in the evaluation of documentary sources, “before anything else can be

achieved, the historian must try to enter the mental world of those who created the sources” (Tosh 1984, 116). This includes accepting that culture is real without being an objective “thing” (see Peacock 1986, 1-20) and that in all cultural systems there are cultural real things which are inherent to that system. Second, for the historian as for the anthropologist, it means a three-phase interpretive process: (a) skillfully and critically distancing themselves from their own ultimate presuppositions and perspectives (see Nipperdey 1978, 12), (b) grasping the otherness in its strongest possible light in order to understand what has occurred or what is referred to and (c) conducting a cross-cultural comparison and interpretation by making “critical discriminations and judgments” because not “all forms of otherness and difference are to be celebrated” (Bernstein 1991, 313). In this view, the historical data has to be engaged in its pastness and otherness as well as in a comparative setting.

This paradigm affirms the traditional task of the historian of showing how things were and what the state of affairs was without adhering to the positivist notions thereof. The recognition of the pastness of the past allows for the formulation of the historian’s task as a dialogue with the past: “To be sure every historical account is a construct, but a construct arising from a dialogue between the historian and the past, one that does not occur in a vacuum but within a community of inquiring minds who share criteria of plausibility” (Iggers 1997, 145). Therefore, “when historians believe a particular fact about the past, they assume it provides accurate information about the world, even though they know (i) it is possible that the purported fact is not true, and (ii) we have no independent access to the world to know whether a particular description of the world is true” (McCullagh 2004, 26). In practice, this philosophical position shifts the task and focus of historians away from the problem of foundations for knowledge to the issue of argumentation of claims to fallible knowledge (see Lorenz 1998b, 350). It is impossible to show that any description of the world is true in the sense of being such as the description, but it is reasonable to believe that it is true when it is part of an excellent explanation of perceptual experiences (see McCullagh 2004, 26).

What Historical Jesus Researchers Do

Current historical Jesus research can easily be described by means of at least two identifiable versions of the same interpretive paradigm, which can be called the *authenticity paradigm*. Each version is a specific configuration of nested assumptions about the texts, about Jesus as historical figure and about the interpretive process. A brief description of this paradigm will be followed by a discussion of how Jesus’ royal Davidic ancestry is treated in this paradigm.

The Design of the Authenticity Paradigm in Jesus Research

The cornerstone of critical Jesus research is the non-biographical presentation in the available documents. Put differently, as a historical figure, Jesus could not have been like the kind of portrayals in the literary texts (the strong version maintains that the Jesus of history was radically different from the Christ of faith portrayed in the texts while a weak version only admits that everything was reported from the perspective of the risen Christ). This viewpoint has dominated and determined critical historical Jesus research for the last two hundred years. Consequently, most of the documents about Jesus of Nazareth resulted either from literary creativity or mythical and theological elaboration and have little or nothing to do with the historical figure (the strong version claims that a small number of units to be extracted from the gospels can take us back to Jesus while the weak version accepts the synoptic gospels, after being cleared of the post-Easter overlay, as basically trustworthy).

The task of the historian in this paradigm is to uncover the historical figure beneath the overlay of tradition and theology. In the strong version, the historical figure is buried in a few authentic nuggets or kernels which reside at the bottom layer of the texts while the weak version rejects everything as theological overlay, except basically the synoptic gospels. Therefore, the central activity in historical Jesus research focuses on *moving back from either the synoptic gospels or the nuggets of identified authentic material to the historical figure*. The interpretive structure of this paradigm is determining authentic, original or reliable material and from that concluding what the state of affairs was or what kind of social type Jesus belonged to (see, for example, the description of this paradigm by Du Toit 2001, 99). A detailed analysis and description of both versions of this paradigm is to be found elsewhere (see Craffert and Botha 2005).

This paradigm not only goes back to the inception of historical Jesus research in the eighteenth century but also carries the hallmarks of the positivistic or traditional historiography of that time. Ontological monism and the myth of realism, two features of traditional historiography, are readily available from this brief overview. This is nowhere clearer than in the fact that the sources are read straight in order to establish whether something really happened as described or not. The absence of any reflection in issues of historicity about the possible ultimate cultural presuppositions and assumptions of the people involved confirms that the sources are read as if they are directly accessible by modern interpreters. Even though some other features of traditional historiography are no longer adhered to (such as a correspondence theory of truth or a picture theory of correspondence and claims about absolute representation), these two continue to dominate this paradigm.

Within this framework it is predictable that because of the available data, scholars will argue about the historical factuality of Jesus' Davidic descent or not.

Jesus' Davidic Descent in Current Jesus Research

Within the authenticity paradigm the data about Jesus as son of David is read as if it provides evidence about his ancestry. As can be expected the question leads to two contrasting answers, a yes and a no, but based on similar readings of the texts.

While certainty is not possible, Brown (1977, 511) admits, "the NT evidence that Jesus was really a Davidic outweighs ... doubts to the contrary." Similarly, Meier (1991, 218) maintains that "Jesus' Davidic sonship should not be so quickly dismissed as a theological insight narrated as a historical fact because there was 'an early and widely attested belief in Jesus' Davidic descent.'" As a matter of fact, most other scholars from the mainline orientation who rely heavily on the reliability of the synoptic tradition are inclined to accept the historical judgment that Jesus was, indeed, a son of David (see e.g., Dunn 2003, 345). As with other elements in the infancy narratives, the traditional canons of deciding about historicity or historical possibility are employed (see Tatum 1999, 14-18).

The strategy to overcome the embarrassment of a truly Davidic descent by those who also accept Jesus' actual virginal conception is to fall back on the cultural tradition that the legal and not the biological father was the real father (see Meier 1991, 217). But that is to shift the problem only one step back to Joseph's Davidic origins.

The additional historical, or should one say quasi-historical, arguments in support of the idea of Jesus' Davidic ancestry are remarkable. Two examples from Brown (1977, 507, 508) will suffice. Was Jesus' family "so indifferent to history as to go along with the pretense of Davidic origins" if this was not actually the case, he asks. The assumption is clear: Nobody would claim family alliance if it were not in fact the case or if it could possibly be

questioned. About Paul he asks a similar question: “Would he have used it if he knew that Jesus was not really descended from David?” In addition to the assumption that if it is found in the documents, it is probably so, these remarks also assume that genealogies and family information functioned in a similar way as in modern literate societies.

All these arguments are based on a counting and weighing of the literary evidence when read *straight*, supplemented by arguments of historical context. But what remains unquestioned are the assumptions that the data can be read straight as about Jesus’ ancestry and that such data (e.g., genealogies) always have the same cultural function, namely, to affirm ancestry or record actual family relationships.

In answering the same question whether Jesus was indeed a son of David, Miller (2003, 187) comes to a different conclusion: “While there are some indications that Jesus was Davidic, the evidence is too slender for us to say that it is historically probable.” Similarly, the Jesus Seminar thinks it is only remotely possible that Jesus was a descendant of David (see Funk and The Jesus Seminar 1998, 501). In these instances the data is not strong enough – with more and better evidence they would probably have to agree with the other side that Jesus was, indeed, from Davidic stock. To be sure, the objection is not about the nature of the data as culturally unique evidence, but about the quality of the transparent data as inadequate. The data suggests Jesus could have been from Davidic stock but doubt remains because there is just not enough reliable data to affirm it.

These examples are representative of two trends in the same paradigm of historical Jesus research where the texts are read as reports of events or evidence for states of affairs in the world, with the aim of establishing how things were but without taking the cultural presuppositions seriously enough. Both those who affirm and those who deny that Jesus was of Davidic stock, read the documents in exactly the same (straight) way in order to decide on historical factuality. The many pages spent on asking and answering the historical question in this way is additional evidence of the dominance of traditional historiography in current historical Jesus research. However, awareness of cultural plurality results in a different interpretive process. There are, as indicated above, new trends of historiography of which anthropological historiography is one instance to be employed. If historiography and historical knowledge are viewed from the perspective of anthropological historiography, a whole new set of interpretive issues are revealed.

Jesus, Son of David in Anthropological-Historiographical Perspective

Let me state the conclusion right at the beginning and then explain how it was reached. The data about Jesus’ apparent Davidic ancestry cannot be taken as genealogical information about his real family but should be read as certificates of status or honour. Therefore, the debate about Jesus’ ancestry based on that data is misguided – it is the result of a particular historiographical paradigm instead of a reflection about what the sources say. Put differently, it is only when read by means of the insights of traditional historiography that the documents are thought to convey information about Jesus’ actual ancestry.

The interpretive strategy of anthropological historiography hinted at above of distancing oneself from one’s own ultimate presuppositions, the grasping of otherness and conducting cross-cultural comparisons, will guide this analysis.

General Truths about Genealogies

As indicated above, within anthropological historiography it is necessary to explicate and then distance oneself from the assumptions and presuppositions of one's own world and consciously adopt those of the other world, if misrepresentation of them is to be avoided. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the nature of genealogies in general in order to establish what can possibly be deduced from them.

The first observation is, as Sanders (1993, 86) points out, that "[n]o one could trace his genealogy for forty-two generations." At the present standard of twenty-five years per generation, it would take one back one thousand and fifty years. While few genealogies today can go beyond 1500 (if they even reach that), it will take fourteen generations to reach 1652, when the first Europeans arrived at the Cape of Good Hope (and few, if any, families in South Africa have sufficient evidence to do that). Genealogies, in the sense of extended family trees, are the product of literate and bureaucratic societies in which meticulous records are kept of births, deaths and marriages. These have to be centralised in large databases in order to make the necessary connecting links.

This is the case for either linear genealogies, which are simply lists of names connecting a specific individual to earlier ancestors by indicating the kinship relationship, or segmented genealogies, which are extended vertically and horizontally to include any number of related kin (see Wilson 1992, 930). In the latter case, it should be obvious that giving the offspring of two people and the possible connections such children might form, already creates an extensive tree in the second and third generations. Keeping all the ends together requires a large and centralised database. The resources do not exist today to offer a family tree going back forty-two generations nor did they in the first century.

Second, actual family trees show most people belonging to a specific race and nation are, in fact, probably related. The following discussion by Bryson (2003, 352) is illuminating:

At twenty generations ago, the number of people procreating on your behalf has risen to 1,048,576. Five generations before that, and there are no fewer than 33,554, 432 men and women on whose devoted couplings your existence depends. By thirty generations ago, your total number of forebears – remember, these aren't cousins and aunts and other incidental relatives, but only parents and parents of parents in a line leading ineluctably to you – is over one billion (1,073,741,824, to be precise). If you go back sixty-four generations, to the time of the Romans, the number of people on whose co-operative efforts your eventual existence depends has risen to approximately 1 million trillion, which is several thousand times the total number of people who have ever lived.

Clearly something has gone wrong with our maths here. The answer, it may interest you to learn, is that your line is not pure. You couldn't be here without a little incest – actually quite a lot of incest – albeit at a genetically discreet remove. With so many millions of ancestors in your background, there will have been many occasions when a relative from your mother's side of the family procreated with some distant cousin from your father's side of the ledger. In fact, you are in a partnership now with someone from your own race and country, the chances are excellent that you are at some level related. Indeed, if you look around you on a bus or in a park or café or any crowded place, *most* of the people you see are very probable relatives. When someone boasts to you that he is descendent from Shakespeare or William the Conqueror, you should answer at once: "Me too!" In the most literal and fundamental sense we are all family.

At 40 generations (two short from Matthew's forty-two generations), the number of boxes in an ancestor chart is over 1000 billion. The total number of people on the planet

today is around six billion, which is about half of all the people that have ever lived – all this to show that people from the same nation are likely to be related and to have connections with significant ancestors. As is the case with the two candidates in the 2004 US presidential election, George W Bush and John Forbes Kerry who are distant cousins – the latter is the ninth cousin once removed from former president GHW Bush, the father of George W Bush. Both Bush and Kerry can also claim family relationships with Brooke Shields and Marilyn Monroe, with Napoleon and Princes Diana, with Charles Darwin and George Orwell (http://familyforest.communication/Kerry_Bush_Cousins.html).

The implication seems obvious: If David was, indeed, a historical figure, not only Jesus of Nazareth but also most of his first Israelite followers would probably have connections to David. This makes the arguments about possible historical inferences rather obsolete. Not only tens of thousands of people, as Miller (2003, 187) says, but most Israelites at the time of Jesus could have claimed some family connection to David. That, in theory, such connections could be claimed along various lines is suggested by the fact that, according to Matthew, Jesus is related to David via the line of Solomon (Matt 1:6) while Luke gives it as the line of Nathan (Luke 3:31). It is known that Rabbi Hillel is attributed Davidic descent on his maternal side (see Brown 1977, 87).

The first conclusion seems to be that not only, Jesus of Nazareth, but most of his Israelite companions could, on the basis of similar connections, claim Davidic ancestry. If they did not, it is not because they could not, but because there was no social need. This finds further support in the cultural role of genealogies in many cultures and particularly in the Israelite tradition.

The Nature of Genealogies in the Biblical World

In modern, literate societies, a genealogy is the record of a person's ancestral descent. In contrast, the specific nature of genealogies in the ancient world should also be highlighted.

First, in the case of pre-literate peasant societies, it should be taken into account that for the purpose of historical reconstruction, "only the last three generations in genealogies are likely to be accurate" (see Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992, 25) because since people could not read, they only provided the three generations of living memory (see Rohrbaugh 1995, 188). Is the example of Jesus' grandfather a case in point where the sources do not even agree two generations back? According to Matthew (1:16), Jesus' paternal grandfather was Jacob but according to Luke (3:23), it was Eli (see Huffman 1992, 258 for other explanations).

Second, a general feature of all genealogies in the biblical record is fluidity. While some differences might be the result of scribal errors, in most cases they probably refer to shifts in social relationships in the sense of alterations of political, social or geographical realignments (see Wilson 1992, 931). It seems apparent that the function of genealogies would be different from today where the focus is on accurate family records.

In anthropological literature it is well known that significant figures, such as shamans, in many cultures often claim an ancestral pedigree going back to the founding fathers or shamans (see e.g., Kalweit 1992, 7-17). This is also the case of ancient Israelite (and Greco-Roman) genealogies which is well known in the literature, namely, that they were not family lists but were employed to establish identity and undergird status (see Brown 1977, 65). The creation of a genealogy for the high priest Zadok in 1 Chr 6:1-8 perfectly illustrates this point that it was designed to offer legitimacy for his priesthood (as high priest he needed an Aaronite pedigree) and was no record of his ancestors (see Brown 1977, 505; Miller 2003, 186). Brown (1977, 85) emphasises that it was possible to have conflicting genealogies of the same person if those genealogies served different functions.

The Function of Genealogies: Certificates of Status

One of the functions of genealogies in Jesus' time was to set out social status and ascribe honour as Malina (2001, 32) suggests. In that society they were testimonies of the male's status as bearer of rights in the community in telling who belonged socially with whom while ascribing a social standing: "The description of the birth and childhood of notable personages always was based on the adult status and roles held by that person. It was believed that personality never changed and that a child was something like a miniature adult... Great personages were seen to have certain characteristics from the very moment of birth, which remained with them throughout life" (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992, 27-28). Or as Brown (1977, 481-482) explains: "It is common instinct in many cultures and literatures to make the boy the father of the man by creating boyhood stories for great figures, stories that anticipate the greatness of the subject." Such genealogies were at best "certificates of status" as Van Aarde (2001, 149) calls them.

This is very much in line with what Van Unnik (1973, 12) says about the history-writing in antiquity in general: "[I]t is beyond doubt that in antiquity history-writing was not an art for its own sake. It was always aimed at something; it wanted to be useful for ethical or political instruction, to give amusement or to enhance the glory of families, towns or individuals." Linear genealogies (as are most of the biblical ones) in particular have one function: "To ground a claim to power, status, rank, office, or inheritance in an earlier ancestor" (Wilson 1992, 931). A detailed comparison of Jesus' two genealogies seems to support this because neither seems to be a historical record of actual ancestors (see Miller 2003, 71-85 for a discussion of the historical problems) and none of the arguments to reconcile them is successful (see Brown 1977, 503-504; Johnson 1999, 48-50).

Despite the fact that they look like modern family lists, biblical genealogies cannot be taken as actual records of ancestral descent. It is almost like using a telephone directory as if it were a family tree. Imagine, Adam, AA the father of Adam, AB the father of Adam, AC, and so forth. It is possible to read it in this way, but is it also appropriate? Is it fair and credible? Human imagination can take us there, but history is more than imagination; it is not imagined reality but a reconstruction of the historical past in a dialectical process with the present. A telephone directory is not a family tree and despite their resemblance to ancestral lists, neither are ancient genealogies true genealogies.

This discussion seems to point in one direction: No one could claim Davidic ancestry definitively (it was and is impossible), but all could claim it potentially (who would do it for what purposes?). It is not surprising that special births or childhood experiences were attributed to significant public figures in the ancient and first-century Mediterranean worlds. Why not also an appropriate genealogy? While Jesus' genealogies and claims of Davidic ancestry cannot be taken as a reflection of his actual descent, they can be read as historical components making up his career and life in Galilee. In a typical shamanic fashion these can be seen as what it was like (what was historical) in the life of such a social personage. It is conceivable that already during his lifetime in Galilee there were cultural processes by means of which claims about his genealogy were credited to his biography.

Neither Paul nor Jesus' own family had the means to determine actual (Davidic) ancestry but once it was used as a certificate of honour, it is easy to see as a cultural event behind these accounts the social legitimization of Jesus by those who were touched by his life and activities. Within the cultural dynamics of such figures' lives certain activities lead to such certificates of legitimation while such certificates contribute to the social success and greatness of the social personage. Seen in this way, they are not reports about his actual ancestors but possible constructions of identity and honour during his life. What it was like

as a social personage in Galilee is not that he was of royal lineage, actually from the house of David, but that he was believed and credited to be that. As a historical feature about his life, it gives content and context to the life of a specific social personage. In fact, if so, it explains some of the references to him being called a son of David, especially by people in need (see e.g., Matt 15:22; 20:30; Mark 10:47; Luke 18:38). His social status and public activities explain the Davidic ascription instead of actual ancestry illuminating his deeds.

Royal Blood Creating a (Cultural) Body

When the data is approached through the paradigm of traditional historiography (read straight with the notion of immaculate perception), it is taken as possible evidence about Jesus' actual royal ancestry. The precondition of cultural historiography is that the starting point for the historian, in order to determine what has happened or what the state of affairs was, is the meaning in and of the data. Or, put differently, an understanding of the documents themselves as cultural artifacts within a specific historical and cultural setting instead of as lists containing raw historical data.

From this point of view it seems as if Jesus, like other social personages in his time and in anthropological literature, could have been called a son of David. But such references (even ten more texts claiming it) do not provide evidence about his actual family descent. In this sense, the historicity of Jesus as son of David is much more complex than ascertaining his actual genealogy. It does not depend on accepting or rejecting his Davidic ancestry or on the quality of the data as genealogical data but instead offers evidence about him as a historical and cultural figure who was socially and publicly constituted as such.

It is clear that royal blood mattered in Jesus' day but it is not the case that it mattered in a modern genetic or genealogical sense. It mattered as a tool for the social construction of social personages and should not be treated as providing information about actual ancestors. That is, if the cultural nature and the ultimate presuppositions of those involved are taken into account.

Both what is possible and plausible today are taken into account in confronting the culturally constituted and historically determined past of the sources in order to establish as well as possible, what the state of affairs could have been back then. Therefore, the question is not whether Jesus really was a son of David but what features were attested about his life (biography) by crediting him with a royal ancestry. As far as this reconstruction goes, it is probably fair to say that the evidence found in the gospels is most likely neither instances of family trees nor reports about family resemblances in any modern sense of the word. The accounts or evidence should rather be seen as cultural attempts at establishing identity and honour and, as such, have nothing to say about genealogy or real ancestry. What they are evidence for is certificates of honour and not royal descent. Royal blood mattered in a way totally different from that assumed in traditional historiography. Yes, Jesus was, indeed, a son of David but not in a direct genealogical sense; rather in a cultural sense in that it added value and substance to his life as a social personage. Royal blood and ancestry constituted his body in a cultural instead of a biological sense.

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