

Jesus Christ, Messiah of Levi?

Joseph Raymond
Author of [Herodian Messiah](#)
October 10, 2010

Abstract

The three gospels record Jesus saying that the Christ is not a son of King David. Further, the genealogy of Jesus found in *Luke* raises the potential that Jesus was a descendant of the Hasmonean kings. *Luke* lists three close ancestors of Jesus as Jannai, Melchi, and Levi. Levi, of course, is the name of the patriarch of the Jewish tribe containing the Levitical priesthood, of which King David was not a member but the Hasmoneans were. Melchi is the Hebrew word for king. Further, Alexander Jannai was the best known Hasmonean king. Several texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls collection describe a messiah of Levi who outranked the messiah of Judah. This article presents the theory that Jesus was a descendant of Hasmonean kings through his mother Mary and claimed to be the messiah of Levi.

Jesus Christ, Messiah of Levi?

It is an axiomatic article of Christian faith that Jesus descended from King David, as Paul put it, “according to the flesh”.¹ By the author’s count, the gospels of the New Testament refer to Jesus as “Son of David” (or equivalent phrases) fifteen times although Jesus himself never utters these words. Against that backdrop, it is with trepidation that one suggests an alternate understanding of the ancestry of Jesus as presented in the New Testament and augmented by extra-biblical sources.

Jesus Says He Is Not A Son of David

Jesus, in his own words, rebukes the suggestion that the Christ is a son of David in three parallel gospel passages, see *Matthew 22:41-45*, *Mark 12:35-37*, and *Luke 20:41-44*. In each case, Jesus quotes *Psalms 110* to support his position. *Luke’s* formulation of Jesus’ reply to the suggestion that he is a son of David reads as follows.

Then Jesus said to them, "How is it that they say the Christ is the Son of David? David himself declares in the Book of Psalms: 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.' David calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"²

Obviously, Jesus speaks here in the third person referring to himself as “the Christ”.

The confusion in this passage centers upon reference to two different lords. The *Book of Psalms* is a collection of wisdom sayings allegedly from the mouth of King David.

Psalms 110 starts with, “The Lord says to my Lord.” The initial “Lord” is clearly God.

Who then is the second lord who God seats at his right hand? It’s not David; he’s

narrating and addresses the individual in question as “my Lord”. Thus, David is subservient to the second lord. Who then is this person?

The only logical conclusion to be drawn from reading the quoted language from *Luke* together with *Psalms 110* is that Jesus identifies the second lord as the Christ or messiah who Jesus equates himself. It’s the only way to make sense of what Jesus is saying. Let’s now rephrase the above passage from *Luke* employing this interpretation.

Then Jesus said to them, “How is it that they say the Christ is the son of David? David himself declares in the *Book of Psalms*: ‘God said to my Lord (the Christ), sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ David calls the Christ, ‘my Lord’. Thus, the Christ is not a son of David.”

It is difficult to conjure a different reading of this passage from *Luke* (and the two parallel passages from *Matthew* and *Mark*); however, accepting the plain meaning of these words opens a Pandora’s box of questions challenging the very foundations of Christian doctrine. Primary among these questions is how Jesus could claim to be the messiah if he was not a son of David? Didn’t God promise the throne of Israel to the seed of David forever?³ A potential solution comes from the Jewish sectarian belief in two messiahs, one from the tribe Judah and the other from Levi, as found in texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection. But before tackling the two messiah concept, let us backtrack and drill down into *Psalms 110* for additional insight on its use by Jesus in the above-quoted passage from *Luke*.

In verse 4 of *Psalms 110*, God tells the second lord, “Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Melchizedek is a shadowy figure appearing only twice in the Old Testament, once each in Genesis and Psalms,⁴ whose name translates as righteous king.⁵ The unique quality of Melchizedek is that he was both a

king and a priest. King David was not a priest as the Jewish priesthood was reserved for the descendants of Levi. Further, *Genesis* identifies Melchizedek as a “priest of God Most High”.⁶ The term “God Most High” is only used in the biblical texts of *Genesis*, *Psalms*, and *Daniel*. Melchizedek is the only individual described in Jewish Rabbinic canon as a priest of the “Most High God.” The *Book of Jubilees* (a book outside the Jewish canon) relates a dream of Levi at Bethel, “Levi dreamed that they had ordained and made him the **priest of the Most High God.**”⁷ Emphasis Added. Melchizedek and Levi are the only individuals recorded in pre-Christian orthodox or sectarian Jewish scripture as “priests of the Most High God.” The second lord discussed in *Psalms 110* who is identified as a priest of the order of Melchizedek is in fact the messiah of Levi, a priest of the Most High God, and the person now known in Christian texts as “the Christ”.

Sectarian Belief In Two Messiahs

Mashiach is the Hebrew word translated into English as messiah. It means "anointed one", denoting one chosen by God. The prophet Samuel anointed David with oil as king of Judah at the direction of God.⁸ This is why Jesus was anointed with costly oil before he entered Jerusalem to claim the throne. The act of anointment signified the messiah and king. The Jewish concept of messiah in the time of Jesus grows nebulous beyond reference to an anointed king. “While messianic doctrine varied in detail from sect to sect, it generally represented a desire for a king who was appointed directly by God to perform supernatural wonders for the Jews. He was to remove from them oppression and injustice, defeat all forces of evil, and usher in the true reign of God.”⁹

During the Hasmonean dynasty (140–37 BCE), sectarian texts emerged expanding the concept of a Jewish king beyond the line of David.

The *Book of Jubilees* is an apocryphal Jewish work that forms an important key for understanding the particular theology used by the Hasmoneans to justify their position on the Jewish throne as priests of the tribe of Levi who were not descendants of King David. Paleographers date the oldest copies of the *Jubilees* found at Qumran to between 125 and 100 BCE.¹⁰ Fragments of fifteen copies of *Jubilees* were found among the *Dead Sea Scrolls* at Qumran making it one of the most numerous texts found at the site. The work obviously held importance for the community that assembled the scrolls at Qumran in antiquity. *Jubilees* rewrote much of the Torah, i.e., the first five books of the Jewish Bible, adding in additional material and characters. It gives a prominent role to the patriarch Jacob. Of particular note for our purposes is *Jubilees* treatment of Jacob's sons Levi and Judah, who take precedence over his other sons. Judah was the progenitor of King David's tribe and Levi, as previously noted, of a priestly tribe by the same name. According to *Jubilees* Jacob took only Levi and Judah from among his twelve sons to visit Jacob's father Isaac while he lay on his deathbed. Levi held his grandfather's right hand and Judah the left while Isaac gave them his blessing. He blessed Levi first thusly, "shall the seed of thy sons be for glory and greatness and holiness, and may [God] make them great unto all the ages. And they shall be judges and princes, and chiefs of all the seed of the sons of Jacob."¹¹ Note that Isaac made Levi "chief and judge" over all Jacob's sons, which implicitly included Judah. Isaac then gave Judah the following blessing, "Then shall the Gentiles fear before thy face. ... And when thou sit on the throne of honor of thy righteousness, there

shall be great peace for all the seed of the sons of the beloved."¹² Isaac's blessing for Judah, although august, sounds more akin to that of a military commander than an all-powerful king. In *Jubilees*, Judah's descendants sat on a throne but Levi's held true power over the Jewish people.

Several other messianic works of this period go further than *Jubilees*, speaking of the salvation of the Lord springing from Levi and Judah.¹³ The *Rule of the Community* and the *Damascus Document* reference the coming of "the messiahs of Aaron and Israel."¹⁴ Aaron was a prominent descendant of Levi whose patrilineal descendants (known as Kohanim) are the highest ranking Levitical priests. The term Israel is thought to refer to Judah. Note that Aaron (Levi) is listed ahead of Israel (Judah) in each instance where these phrases were used in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Hasmoneans, as Kohanim descendants of Levi, claimed to fulfill the prophecies found in these messianic texts. The primacy of Levi in these scriptures formed the foundation for legitimatization of Hasmonean rule yet did not go so far as proclaiming the descendants of Levi as king.

The final step to Levi's kingship came in the *Aramaic Levi Document*, a text also found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

According to ALD, Levi is a pious and even prophetic figure, a person beloved by God and the recipient of two divine visions. "We have magnified you over everyone," an angelic speaker says to him at the conclusion of the second. In addition to being installed as a priest, Levi is also portrayed as a sage and champion of wisdom. Indeed, he says to his children that they will be "chiefs and judges and ... and servants ... even priests and kings ... your kingdom will be ... and will have no end forever ... and will not depart from you until all" (4Q213, frag. 2, 10-18).¹⁵
[Emphasis added.]

This language is striking. "Both royal and priestly characteristics are attributed to Levi. Royal language is used of the priesthood, and verses typical of Judah and the royal messiah are attributed to Levi."¹⁶ *Aramaic Levi Document* dates to at least the Hasmonean period and perhaps older. "The oldest Qumran copy has been dated to the second century BCE."¹⁷

In the two messiah formula, Levi stands above Judah. *Aramaic Levi Document* goes a step further elevating Levi's descendants to the Jewish throne as the lone messiah. Authority for a king from the tribe of Levi is found not just in obscure texts but, also, in the historical record of the Jewish people in the persons of the Hasmonean kings. Thus, the concept of a messianic king from the tribe of Levi was established in both Jewish religious texts and history by the time Jesus launched his public campaign in the first century of the Common Era.

Luke's Genealogy

The New Testament declares two separate and incompatible ancestor lists for Jesus—one in *Matthew* and the other in *Luke*. The Roman Catholic Church and a minority of scholars resolve the difference by concluding that the genealogy found in *Luke* is actually that of Mary the mother of Jesus. Let us proceed under that assumption. Below is the ancestor list from *Luke* (chapter 3) opposite Hasmonean king Mattatayah Antigonus¹⁸, the last Hasmonean king, and his known ancestors.

Table 1, Luke 3 List Versus King Antigonus and Ancestors

Luke, Chapter 3	King Antigonus and Ancestors
Heli	
Matthat	Mattatayah Antigonus
Levi (priest)	Aristobulus II
Melchi (king)	Alexander Jannai
Jannai	John Hyrcanus I
Joseph	Simon Maccabee
Mattathias	Mattathias Maccabee

Source: Hasmonean lineage from Flavius Josephus and 1 Maccabees.¹⁹

As previously stated, Levi is the name of the patriarch of the Jewish priestly tribe. Melchi is the Hebrew name for king. Melchi appears four generation before Jesus in Luke's ancestor list. If we assign 25 years to each generation, we arrive at a rough estimate that Melchi was born one hundred years prior to Jesus or in 104 BCE. That places Melchi (king) of *Luke* into the Hasmonean dynasty. Alexander Jannai, Jewish king from 103 to 76 BCE, was perhaps the best known Hasmonean king who also served as high priest. Summarizing Luke's genealogy, an ancestor of Jesus named Jannai had a son named Melchi (king) and a grandson Levi (priest). Jannai was a rare Jewish name of the period (see Table 2 below) and Luke's Jannai, Melchi and Levi all lived during the Hasmonean dynasty. The only kings from the tribe of Levi were the Hasmoneans. The evidence supports the conclusion that *Luke* lists Hasmonean king Alexander Jannai as an ancestor of Jesus.

Further supporting this conclusion is the evidence that the names Jannai, Melchi, and Levi were uncommon names during the Second Temple period. Table 2 gives the frequency of occurrence of male names in the first century CE in Jerusalem.

Table 2, Frequency of Names Among Jewish Males of the Second Temple Period

Name	Percentage
Simon	21%
Joseph	14%
Judah	10%
Yochanan (John)	10%
Eleazar	10%
Jesus	9%
Jonathan	6%
Matthew	5%
Hanina	3%
Yo-ezer	3%
Ishmael	2.2%
Menachem	2%
Jacob (James)	2%
Hanan	2%
Levi	0.2%

Isaac	0.2%
Gamaliel	0.2%
Hillel	0.2%

Source: Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington III, *The Brother of Jesus: The Dramatic Story & Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus & His Family* (HarperOne, 2003), 56 based on data from Rachel Hachlili, *Names and Nicknames of Jews in Second Temple Times*, *Ezetz-Israel* 17 (Israel Exploration Society, 1894).

Levi comes in at 1/5th of one percent or 1 in 500 Jewish males. Melchi and Jannai don't even make the list, meaning they occur less than 1 in 500.

Moving on to the name Matthat that precedes Levi on the Luke's list, at first blush Matthat appears only similar to Mattatayah Antigonus but the association becomes much stronger in light of the close ancestors given in *Luke*. Mattatayah Antigonus was the grandson of Alexander Jannai. It may be argued that "Matthat" is a Hebrew variant of Matthew or Matthias. But five names down on the list, *Luke* completely writes out the name "Mattathias". This infers Matthat and Mattathias on the *Luke* list represent different although similar names. By naming the immediate ancestors of Matthat as Levi (priest), Melchi (king), and Jannai, the probability becomes high that Matthat of *Luke* is in fact Mattatayah Antigonus, the last Hasmonean king who also served as high priest.

The Heli Issue

Our analysis, to this point, sidesteps discussion of Heli, the first name on the *Luke* ancestor list. Again, this paper works from the premise that the ancestor list found in *Luke* is that of Mary the mother of Jesus. Was Heli her father? The apocryphal text

Protevangelium of James offers potential corroboration by naming Mary's father as Joachim. The name Joakim (a variation of Joachim) is given as interchangeable for Eliakim twice in the Old Testament.²⁰ Jehovah and Eli are alternative Hebrew names for God. Thus, the names Jehoiakim and Eliakim mean the same thing, i.e., one who God has raised up. Substituting Eliakim for Joachim as interchangeable, it is then a simple matter to make the following connection: Eliakim equals Eli equals Heli. By this logic, Heli is shortened version of Eliakim, which is equivalent to Joachim and, thus, the names Joachim and Heli may refer to the same person. Professor James D. Tabor of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte recognized this possible connection in his book, *The Jesus Dynasty*.²¹ Thus, a reasonable argument can be put forth that the *Protevangelium of James* is consistent with *Luke* in naming Mary's father as Joakim / Heli. If the contention that the ancestor list of *Luke*, chapter 3 contains the names of Hasmonean kings is correct, then one would expect Joakim / Heli to have been a Hasmonean prince. The *Protevangelium of James* describes Joachim as "exceedingly rich and he offered his gifts twofold."²² The Hasmonean royal house, prior to its destruction by Herod the Great, was exceedingly rich. A few paragraphs later, the *Protevangelium* says Anna the wife of Joachim was approached by her handmaid who suggests she put on her headband that "hath a mark of royalty."²³ The Hasmoneans were a Jewish royal family. Lastly, the *Protevangelium* relates that Mary was raised in the Temple from the age of three to age twelve. As no person was allowed to be present in the Temple after sundown (except the high priest on the Day of Atonement), this reference should not be read literally. The Hasmoneans, as Kohanim priests of royal blood, were the leading figures in the Temple hierarchy. The *Protevangelium's*

profile of Mary as having been born into a wealthy family, whose mother wore a mark of royalty, and who was raised in the Temple is consistent with the theory that she descended from Hasmonean kings.

One additional potential connection between the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Protoevangelium* exists. After the birth of Jesus, the *Gospel of Luke* records Mary going to the Temple to present her first-born son Jesus to the priests and make the required sacrifices after her 40-day purification period. During this trip to the Temple, *Luke* relates an encounter by Mary with a prophetess.

And there was a prophetess, **Anna** the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Ashe. She was advanced in years * * *. And she never left the Temple, serving night and day with fasting and prayer.²⁴ [Emphasis added.]

The Jewish Tanach records seven female prophetesses from the period of the judges, a period that ended well before the birth of Jesus. If the age of Jewish prophetesses ended before the time of Jesus, who then was Anna the prophetess and what connection has she to Mary and the baby Jesus? The scene described in *Luke* makes more sense if Anna the prophetess is one in the same with Anna the mother of Mary described in the *Protoevangelium*. If so, then the passage quoted from *Luke* relates Mary presenting her first-born son Jesus to her elderly, widowed mother at the Temple.

The histories of Flavius Josephus present a stumbling block to the contention that the ancestor of Jesus named Matthat in *Luke*, chapter 3 is in fact Hasmonean king Mattatayah Antigonus. At face value, the association of Luke's Matthat with King Antigonus requires Joakim / Heli to be the son of Antigonus; however, Josephus states that Herod exterminated the family of Antigonus. This point bears further explanation. Just before capturing Jerusalem with Roman backing, Herod married Hasmonean

Mariamne bat Alexander, the niece of king Antigonus. After gaining control of the Jewish kingdom in 37 BCE, Josephus records Herod executing a long list of Hasmoneans both inside and outside of his family. Below is a summary of the Hasmoneans Josephus records Herod caused to be executed or assassinated.

- King Antigonus²⁵
- “Forty-five of the principal men of Antigonus’s party”²⁶
- Alexander II (brother-in-law of Herod)²⁷
- Hyrcanus II (grandfather of Herod’s wife)²⁸
- Mariamne bat Alexander (Herod’s wife)²⁹
- Alexandria (Herod’s mother-in-law)³⁰
- Alexander and Aristobulus (sons)³¹
- “sons of Babas”³²

Josephus tells the reader that after the sons of Babas were executed, “there were none at all left to the kindred of Hyrcanus.”³³ The Hyrcanus referenced in this passage is Hyrcanus II, former Hasmonean king and high priest who Herod executed prior to the sons of Babas. Thus, Josephus appears to say that all members of the Hasmonean royal family were now dead. We know this was not literally true because Herod’s Hasmonean sons Alexander and Aristobulus had children before they died and their two Hasmonean sisters (i.e., Salampsio and Cypros) were never executed by Herod. The better reading of this statement by Josephus is that he claims all Hasmoneans of royal blood who were not descendants of Herod were now dead. Despite the ambiguity, it is clear Josephus asserts no son of King Antigonus survived the Hasmonean slaughter

conducted by Herod. Therefore, Heli of *Luke*, chapter 3 cannot be the son of King Antigonus.

However, Josephus does make one cryptic reference to a daughter of King Antigonus, saying she was married to Crown Prince Antipater ben Herod and attended his trial before Governor Varus in Jerusalem during the last year of Herod's reign in 4 BCE.³⁴ Herod executed his eldest son Antipater five days before his own death.³⁵ This reference by Josephus to the daughter of King Antigonus is puzzling on several levels. First, it comes after an earlier statement that all the relatives of Hyrcanus had died. Second, Josephus mentions her only once in his histories failing to even give her name. Let us assume for a moment that this daughter of King Antigonus mentioned by Josephus was in fact Mary the mother of Jesus. The only way to mate this fact pattern with the ancestry of *Luke*, chapter 3 is if Heli was the adoptive father of Mary and not her biologic father. The *Protoevangelium* describes miraculous circumstances under which an older couple without children (i.e., Joakim and Anna) came to be the parents of Mary. Perhaps there was nothing miraculous about the event but, rather, King Antigonus gave his infant daughter to the couple just prior to Jerusalem falling to Herod and the Romans in 37 BCE.

The author acknowledges that the evidence for the specific theory that Jesus was the grandson of King Antigonus is weaker than generally connecting Jesus to the Hasmoneans.

Letter to the Hebrews

The theory presented herein that Jesus presented himself as the messiah of Levi holds together with manageable contrary evidence if one only tests it against the gospels of the New Testament. Those calling Jesus “son of David” in the New Testament gospels are variously described as blind men, the crowd, children at the Temple, beggars, and angels. The same cannot be said for the *Letter to the Hebrews* also found in the New Testament. It directly assaults the theory of this paper.

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. **For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah**, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."³⁶ [Emphasis added.]

The text of *Hebrews* does not identify the author. "Many modern scholars * * * claim that so many of the characteristic Pauline themes are missing [from *Hebrews*] and so much of what is present is unparalleled in Paul (e.g. the high priest theme), that it is most reasonable to suppose that Paul was not the author."³⁷ Paul of Tarsus began his letters with, "Paul, a bond-servant to Christ Jesus."

Putting aside the issue of authorship, the reasoning contained in the quoted passage is faulty. Melchizedek lived in the time of Abraham. Levi came along several generations later and Aaron was one of his descendants. The Jewish priesthood was reserved for descendants of Levi while the most sacred duties at the Temple were

reserved for a further subgroup of Levi, the sons of Aaron (known as Kohanim). The author of *Hebrews* suggests that in order for Jesus to overturn the laws of Moses, that a new priesthood must emerge outside of the priesthood established by Moses. Perhaps the author of *Hebrews* never read the *Gospel of Matthew*, which quotes Jesus thusly, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”³⁸ Jesus interprets the laws of Moses but he never claims they are invalid or lack authority.

Continuing the analysis of *Hebrews*, how is the “order of Melchizedek” a new priesthood if it existed in the ancient time of Abraham? The priesthood of Melchizedek was obviously very ancient and not a new innovation, strike two. The author of *Hebrews* then says the tribe of Judah never served at the altar under Mosaic Law yet, somehow, God chose the descendants of David from the tribe of Judah for his new priesthood naming them priests of the order of Melchizedek. One can only assume the author of *Hebrews* based this leap in conclusory reasoning on *Psalms 110*, the only passage cited by the New Testament gospels connecting Jesus with Melchizedek. Remember that Jesus referred to *Psalms 110* while rebuking people for calling him a son of David. Further, Levi was a priest of the order of Melchizedek according to *Book of Jubilees*, not David. The author of *Hebrews* identification of King David as a priest of the order of Melchizedek is unsubstantiated by *Psalms 110* or any other biblical source. The entire twisted logic found in *Hebrews* regarding Melchizedek is necessitated by the assertion that Jesus was a priest and king yet still a descendant of David. If one instead accepts the position that Jesus was the descendant of Hasmonean kings, we

immediately overcome the necessity for disavowing the Levitical priesthood as somehow invalidated by God in the person of Jesus Christ.³⁹

One last point on the discussion in *Hebrews* of a priesthood of Judah. An apocryphal text known as the *Testament of Levi* does speak of a priesthood of Judah.

And they [angels who spoke to Levi in a dream] said to me, Levi, thy seed shall be divided into three branches, for a sign of the glory of the Lord who is to come; and first shall he be that hath been faithful; no portion shall be greater than his. The second shall be in the priesthood. The third—a new name shall be called over Him, because He shall arise as King from Judah, and shall **establish a new priesthood, after the fashion of the Gentiles, to all the Gentiles.**⁴⁰ [Emphasis Added.]

Interesting similarities exist between this section from the *Testament of Levi* and *Hebrews*; however, the individual who the angels prophesy to Levi as the “King of Judah” who shall establish a new priesthood is a descendant of Levi (who presumably married into the tribe of Judah). In the *Testament of Levi*, the descendants of Levi essentially take over leadership of Judah. This hybrid figure is a priest-king who starts a new priesthood relegated to gentile ministry. Jesus clearly did not relegate his ministry to the gentiles. If one reads the entire section in *Testament of Levi* containing the above-quoted language, it is clear this new priesthood does not supplant or do away with the Levitical priest but merely serves as an auxiliary priesthood meant for gentiles only. If *Hebrews* borrowed from the *Testament of Levi* in arguing Jesus was the messiah of Judah who established a new priesthood, then it implicitly means Jesus was also a priestly descendant of Levi.

Paul of Tarsus On The Ancestry of Jesus

Paul contends in two of his letters found in the New Testament that Jesus descended from King David.⁴¹ Paul removes the possibility of arguing that he refers to adoption of Jesus by Joseph, who the *Gospel of Matthew* identifies as a descendant of David. In *Romans*, Paul declares Jesus “was born of a descendant of David **according to the flesh.**”⁴² Emphasis added. It’s tempting to try and downplay his words on the basis that Paul joined the Jesus movement after the crucifixion and, therefore, may have lacked direct knowledge of the ancestry of Jesus. This defense supposes Paul merely repeated what he had been told by others (i.e., hearsay). The New Testament tells us Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, an official of the Sanhedrin, and a leader of anti-Nazarene forces before his conversion. *Acts of the Apostles* records Paul meeting James, the brother of Jesus, on several occasions. With those credentials, it is unlikely in the author’s view that Paul of Tarsus lacked knowledge of the ancestry of Jesus.

The tension between the statement of Paul that Jesus descended bodily from David and the evidence of a Levi heritage on his mother’s side is resolved if the father of Jesus was a descendant of David. However, such a view contradicts the Christian doctrine of the virgin birth holding that Mary was fertilized directly by God. Putting the doctrine of the virgin birth aside, evidence on the issue of who may have been the father of Jesus is speculative and not proper for further discussion in this paper.

Jesus As Hasmonean Prince

Reading the New Testament and Nag Hammadi texts from the view-point of Jesus as a Hasmonean prince leads one to potentially new understandings of certain

passages. For instance, the Synoptic Gospels record a saying of Jesus thusly: “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”⁴³ The *Gospel of Thomas* from the Nag Hammadi collection contains a slight twist on this saying: “Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, give unto God the things that are God’s, and give unto me that which is mine.”⁴⁴ Emphasis added. Jesus is famous for owning little to no material possessions. “[T]hat which is mine” also does not appear to be something of the spiritual realm because those should fall under the heading of that which belongs to God. One possible interpretation is that Jesus refers to the Hasmonean throne, which Herod unjustly usurped in 37 BCE, as “that which is mine”.

Jesus’s Parable of the Minas⁴⁵ tells the story of a “certain nobleman” who goes to a distant country to claim a kingdom for himself. The bulk of the parable gives a variation of the “to whom much is given” teaching found elsewhere in *Luke*; however, the last sentence of the Parable of the Minas departs from that theme.⁴⁶ It reads, “But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.”⁴⁷ Jesus had traveled from Galilee and was nearing Jerusalem for the final time when he told this parable. An alternate interpretation is that Jesus is himself the nobleman on a journey to claim a kingdom and the last line of the parable constitutes a not so veiled threat to his enemies of the punishment that awaits them once he becomes king of the Jews.

The accepted biography of Jesus as the adopted son of a Galilean carpenter conflicts with details of the final days of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. Specifically, Pilate regarded Jesus as a rightful king.

Pilate therefore said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this reason I have been born, and for

this reason I have come into the world, that I should testify to the truth." * * *
* [Pilate] went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no guilt in him."⁴⁸ [Emphasis added.]

The logical conclusion to be drawn from this Gospel passage is that Jesus claimed to be a king and Pilate agreed he was a legitimate Jewish king. Moreover, Pilate recorded on a board nailed to the cross the following words--"Iesvs Nazarenvs Rex Iudaeorvm",⁴⁹ which translates as Jesus Nazarene King Jews. Further, the chief priests protested against this inscription but Pilate refused to change it.

So the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews'; but that He said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."⁵⁰

How could it be that a carpenter's son raised in a tiny village of Galilee came to be regarded by the Roman prefect as a true Jewish king? If Jesus were the grandson of the last Hasmonean king as opposed to an obscure carpenter's son, the actions of Pontius Pilate appear more reasonable.

Orthodox Christianity responds with the claim that Jesus was a descendant of King David allegedly making him of royal blood. This fact (even if true) would not have held much value for advancing the political career of Jesus when placed in context of the historical fortunes of the House of David in the first century of Common Era. At that time, a descendant of David had not sat on the Jewish throne for over 600 years. The entire extended Jewish royal family was deported to Babylon by the invading Chaldeans in 586 BCE. The Davidic princes stayed in Babylon never returning to Jerusalem even though the Persians overthrew the Chaldean dynasty fifty years later and their king (Cyrus the Great) granted permission to the Jews to return home. The Persians appointed a royal descendant of King David to the office of Exilarch as ruler over the

exiled Jewish community and allowed them to populate their own towns. The Jews essentially formed an autonomous region inside Babylon where the Davidic royal family settled in as potentates. History records but a very small number of Jews said to descend from David returning from Babylonian captivity and taking up positions of authority in Jerusalem. None of these individuals made claims upon the Jewish throne; however, Davidic princes did serve in the Sanhedrin as president. Rabbi Hillel the Elder who lived during the time of Herod is such an example. The voluminous histories of Josephus lack a single reference to descendants of David opposing the rule of Herod the Great, his descendants, nor Roman rule of the Jewish kingdom.

Conclusion

At a minimum, the ancestry of Jesus given in *Luke* raises questions regarding the connection of Jesus to the Hasmonean dynasty. The author is hopeful academics give the issue further study, regardless of the conclusions they ultimately reach.

¹ *Romans 1:3* (New American Standard Version).

² *Luke 20:41-44* (New International Version).

³ *2 Samuel 7:12-13*.

⁴ *Genesis 14:18* and *Psalms 110:4*.

⁵ Fred L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 59.

⁶ *Genesis 14:18*.

⁷ *Jubilees 32:1*.

⁸ *1 Samuel 16:1-13*.

- ⁹ Stephen M. Wyles, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus* (Paulist Press, 1996), 25.
- ¹⁰ James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 17-19.
- ¹¹ *Jubilees*, 31:14-15.
- ¹² *Jubilees*, 31:18-20.
- ¹³ See *Testament of Dan*, *Testament of Naphtali*, and *Testament of Joseph*; See also Michael Stone, *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Fortress Press, 1984), 338.
- ¹⁴ See James H. Charlesworth, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Gerbern S. Oegema, *Qumran-Messianism: Studies on the Messianic Expectations in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 9-11.
- ¹⁵ James L. Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 153.
- ¹⁶ Esther Eshel, *The Aramaic Levi: Edition, Translation, Commentary* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 20.
- ¹⁷ James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 571.
- ¹⁸ Josephus referred to this Hasmonean king simply as Antigonus; however, we know he also used the name Mattatayah because he struck coins during his reign that survive to this day containing a double-sided inscription: one side in Hebrew reads "Mattatayah the High Priest" and the reverse side in Greek, "King Antigonus". See Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (Yale University Press, 2007), 202.
- ¹⁹ The authority for each father-son identification is as follows: (a) Antigonus son of Aristobulus II--Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIV 4:5; (b) Aristobulus II son of Alexander Jannai--Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, I 5:1; (c) Alexander Jannai son of Hyrcanus I--Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIII 12:1; Hyrcanus I son of Simon Maccabee--*ibid* XIII 7:4; (e) Simon Maccabee son of Mattathias Maccabee--*1 Maccabees* 2:3.
- ²⁰ *2 Kings* 23:34 and *2 Chronicles* 36:4.
- ²¹ James D. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), 52.
- ²² *Protoevangelium* I.1. See *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, Translation by M.R. James, Edited by J.K. Elliott (Oxford University Press, 1994), 48.
- ²³ *Protoevangelium* II.2.
- ²⁴ *Luke* 2:36-37.
- ²⁵ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIV 16:4 (488-91) and *Antiquities of the Jews*, XV 1:2 (8-10).
- ²⁶ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XV 1:2 (6).
- ²⁷ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XV 3:3 (56).
- ²⁸ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XV 6:2 (173).
- ²⁹ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XV 7:4 (231).
- ³⁰ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XV 7:8 (251).
- ³¹ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVI 11:7 (394).
- ³² *Antiquities of the Jews*, XV 7:10 (266).
- ³³ *Ibid*.
- ³⁴ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVII 5:2 (92).
- ³⁵ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVII 8:1 (191).
- ³⁶ *Hebrews* 7:11-17 (New International Version).
- ³⁷ *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, The Letter to the Hebrews*, Leon Morris, General Editor, Donald Guthrie, Introduction and commentary (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 20.
- ³⁸ *Matthew* 5:17.
- ³⁹ One caveat is required here, the analysis of this paper only supports the theory that Jesus descended from Hasmonean kings and Levitical priests on his mother's side but not his father's. Status as a Levitical priest is only passed from father to son and cannot be obtained through the mother's lineage.
- ⁴⁰ *Testament of Levi* 8:14.
- ⁴¹ *Romans* 1:3 and *2 Timothy* 2:8.
- ⁴² *Romans* 1:3.
- ⁴³ *Luke* 20:25 (New American Standard Version).
- ⁴⁴ *Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 100 as translated by Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Doubleday, 1987), 397.
- ⁴⁵ *Luke* 19:11-27.

⁴⁶ *Luke 12:48.*

⁴⁷ *Luke 19:27.*

⁴⁸ *John 18:37; See also Luke 23:3-4.*

⁴⁹ *Luke 23:38.*

⁵⁰ *John 19:21-22 (New American Standard Bible).*