THE DAVIDIC DYNASTY IN POST-EXILIC PALESTINE

In his *Life of Jesus* Renan makes a statement about the Saviour's ancestry which provokes thought. He says :

"The title of 'Son of David' was the first which he accepted, probably without being concerned in the innocent frauds by which it was sought to secure it to him. The family of David had, as it seems, been long extinct ; neither the Asmoneans, of priestly origin, nor Herod, nor the Romans dreamt for a moment that any representative whatever of the ancient dynasty was living in their midst." [1]

Apart from his aprioristic assumption—a characteristic of the author—that the family of David was extinct, Renan does pose a problem which is hardly ever mentioned and less often discussed : what explanation is there for historical silence regarding this most important of Jewish families ? The question is especially pertinent in any consideration of Maccabean times, for then, if ever, we might expect to see the national dynasty rising from political obscurity to the forefront of Jewish history. The undisputed leadership of the Asmoneans is indeed, as Renan insinuates, a serious objection to the continued existence of the family of David in Palestine.

The post-exilic history of the Jews is not completely silent about their royal family. We know that in Sassabasar and Zorobabel we have two authentic princes of the Davidic dynasty, one a son and the other a grandson of Jeconiah (Joachin). Their part in the return from exile is too well known to need retelling here.[2] Not known at all, however, are the circumstances which led to the cessation of Zorobabel's power as Governor of the newly returned Jewish community. It has been plausibly conjectured that he fell under the suspicion of the Persian government because of the nationalistic sentiment which the Jewish prophets Haggai and Zechariah were concentrating on him at the time of the rebellions in the Persian empire which followed the accession of Darius Hystaspes in 522 B.C.[3] He may well have been sent back to Persia ; he certainly seems to have been removed from a position of authority. Persian trust in the Davidic dynasty did not die with these suspicions of Zorobabel's loyalty. Nehemiah, who was sent by Artaxerxes to give Jerusalem its second start subsequent to the exile, was undoubtedly a prince of the house of David. His own reference

[1] E. Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (Eng. tr., London 1927), p. 141.
[2] *Cf.* Esdr., I–VI.
[3] W. F. Albright, "A Brief History of Judah from the days of Josiah to Alexander the Great", in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, IX, 1 (1946), pp. 1–16.

to the graves of his forefathers at Jerusalem indicate Davidic descent, for Jerusalem was particularly the burying-ground of the kings.[1] Moreover, this royal descent of Nehemiah would add point to Sanballat's accusation that he (Nehemiah) was plotting rebellion against King Artaxerxes (Neh. II.19) and setting himself up as King of Judah (VI.6, 7).[2] The brother of Nehemiah, Hananiah, seems also to have been employed by the Persians in an official capacity; specifically as Persian legate to the Jews at Elephantine [3] and as substitute governor for his brother at Jerusalem.[4] With these men the Old Testament completes its records of the deeds of members of the royal family. The first book of *Paralipomenon* gives us a genealogical account of the descendants of David, reaching perhaps well into the Greek period, but we cannot be sure of the number of generations intended [5] and, in any case, nothing is said of these men beyond listing their names. Subsequent facts tend to indicate that the family died out on Palestinian soil. Perhaps the influence it enjoyed under the Persian monarchs made it a collective *persona non grata* to the Greeks; and dynasties often wither under neglect. It is worth noting that in the two Synoptic genealogies of Our Lord, Matthew lists not a single name of a descendant of Zorobabel common with those in the line given by the Chronicler, and Luke gives but one or, at most, two, and in very different order.

It is the extinction of the Davidic dynasty on Palestinian soil which accounts for the unchallenged leadership of the Maccabees and which lends such likelihood to the ingenious theory of Winckler regarding the Tobiad dynasty. Winckler's theory never received the publicity it deserves, but it was never, to my knowledge, refuted, and he has worked it out with such care and detail that refutation would, in fact, be very difficult, if possible at all. Briefly, Winckler sets out to demonstrate that the Tobias known to us from the book of Nehemiah (Neh. II–VI) and his descendants, about whom we are notified in the works of Flavius Josephus and in recent papyrus discoveries,[6] were pretenders to the dignity of first family of the land. They called

[1] L. W. Batten, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (I.C.C., Edinburgh 1913, 2nd edn. 1949), p. 192. L. E. Browne, *Early Judaism* (Cambridge 1929), pp. 143–4.

[2] Browne, *op. cit., ibid.* [3] *Idem.* pp. 163–4.

[4] Albright, *op. cit., ibid.* *Cf.* Neh. VII.2.

[5] 1 Paralip. III. It has been well said of these genealogies that "the whole framework is so loose, the grouping so unreliable, and the marks of kinship either so often omitted or used in so general a sense, that it is highly probable that the exact relationship of many of the individuals named was a matter of uncertainty even in the chronicler's day and that the compiler could do no more than group names which belonged somewhere in the family tree in question". W. R. Harvey-Jellie, *Chronicles* (Century Bible), pp. 51–2.

[6] Ricciotti gives an interesting account of this family—without, unfortunately, any reference to Winckler—in his *Storia D'Israele*, VOL. II (Turin 1950), nn. 218–24.

themselves the bne Peres, or descendants of Judah through his son Peres. With the extinction of the line of David in Palestine, these adventurers—for they were not genuine aristocrats—put forward their claims to recognition, and, indeed, went further by attempting to discredit the origin of the Davidic dynasty so as to give their own a prior title.[1] According to Winckler, Alcimos, the High-Priest and leader of the Hellenistic party at the time of Judas Maccabeus, was a member of this family and the author of the book of *Ecclesiastes* which, of course, claims royal blood for its author.[2] If Winckler's elaborately defended theory is true, it unquestionably settles the question as to the existence of a family descended from David in Palestine at that time. It would be unthinkable that such members of the old dynasty would allow the pretensions of the Tobiads to go unchallenged, just as it would have been impossible for the latter to make their claims while any member of the senior line still lived in their midst. By the second century B.C., then, we may conclude it not unlikely that the family of David had disappeared from Palestinian soil.

This in no way means that the Davidic dynasty had become extinct, and this is precisely where Renan erred. We have abundant evidence to prove that this family flourished in Persia and that numerous male descendants of Jeconiah existed well into the Middle Ages.[3] Josephus does not tell us of these princes, but as one modern authority on Judaism remarks :

"Josephus' failure to mention the very existence of princes of captivity may be explained by his extreme apologetic preoccupation with Western political affairs. Certainly such silence is by itself not sufficient reason to deny the deep-rooted tradition, acknowledged by the rivalling Palestinian patriarchs themselves, about the unbroken continuity of the exilarchic regime since the ancient royal exile, Jehoiachin."[4]

Realising this, there is no special difficulty in accounting for the Davidic descent of Jesus. The grandparents of Joseph and Mary were probably emigrants from Persia returning to the land of their ancestors like Zorobabel and Nehemiah before them, though in much humbler circumstances. Certainly the other members of the Lord's family had no doubt about their royal descent, as we learn from Hegesippus, and did not fear to confess it before the power-mad Domitian.[5] In fact it was probably only the destruction of Jerusalem in the years between

[1] H. Winckler, "Die Tobiaden" in *Altorientalische Forschungen*, Series II (Leipzig 1901), pp. 503 ff. Also "Nehemias Reform", *ibid.*, p. 232.

[2] Winckler, "Zeit und verfasser des Kohelet", *ibid.*, p. 154.

[3] *Cf.* D. Sassoon, *A History of the Jews in Baghdad* (Letchworth 1949), p. 16. Article "Exilarch", in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, pp. 290–1.

[4] S. Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York 1950) VOL II, pp. 195–6.

[5] Eusebii, *Hist. Eccles*, III, XIX–XX (Migne, Patrologia Graeca, VOL. XX, pp. 251–4).

A.D. 69 and 135 which put an end to a Davidic dynasty sitting on the episcopal throne of that city. The hereditary succession in the Lord's family to this first of Christian sees was no doubt looked upon as part of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy by the Judaizing members of the early Church.[1]

The importance of this question has its own place in our own day. Renan is generally considered out-dated, but others have denied the Davidic ancestry of Jesus within recent years.[2] Genealogy is not the most popular interest of the modern world and its "democratic" pre-occupations, but the genealogy of Our Lord is an essential element in the substantiation of His Messianic dignity.

J. EDGAR BRUNS, S.T.D., S.S.L.

Old St Peter's,
New York City

[1] T. G. Jalland, *The Church and the Papacy* (London 1944), p. 61.
[2] e.g. Klausner in his *Jesus de Nazareth* (1933). *Cf.* Bonsirven, *Les Juifs et Jesus* (Paris 1937), p. 40.