

Jesus and Jeconiah

by Ra McLaughlin

According to a number of non-Christian interpreters, Jesus' genealogy found in Matthew 1:1-17 disqualifies him from being the Christ because it demonstrates that he was Jeconiah's descendant (Matt. 1:11-12). This argument appeals to Jeremiah 22:24-30, which presumably teaches that no descendant of Jeconiah will ever be king in Judah or sit on David's throne. Many modern evangelicals agree with this interpretation of Jeremiah 22:24-30, but argue that this curse did not apply to Jesus because Jesus did not biologically descend from Jeconiah. As alluring as this defense may be, it ultimately fails by creating an equally bad problem. Specifically, according to Matthew, Jesus' claim to the Davidic throne runs through Jeconiah. If Jesus is not really Jeconiah's descendant, then he has no claim to David's throne. The solution to the problem of Jeconiah's curse ought rather to be sought in the interpretation of Jeremiah 22:24-30 — the passage which threatens Jesus' kingship. Rightly understood, the curse does not permanently exclude all Jeconiah's posterity, and therefore does not prohibit Jesus' messiahship.

Many of those evangelicals who agree that Jeremiah 22:24-30 bars Jeconiah's descendants from the throne adhere to a dispensational prophetic hermeneutic, including well-known writers Charles Ryrie and Josh McDowell. According to Ryrie, "Had our Lord been the natural son of Joseph, He could not have been successful on the throne of David because of this curse. But since He came through Mary's lineage, He was not affected by this curse" (Ryrie, p. 7). To bypass this difficulty, Ryrie appealed to Jesus' claim to the Davidic throne through Mary's lineage. Similarly, McDowell argued that the virgin birth validates Jesus' claim to the Davidic throne:

“If Jesus had been sired by Joseph, He would not have been able to claim the legal rights to the throne of David. According to the prophecy of Jeremiah 22:28-30, there could be no king in Israel who was a descendant of King Jeconiah, and Matthew 1:12 relates that Joseph was from the line of Jeconiah. Jesus would have been of the cursed lineage” (McDowell, p. 188).

Feinberg implicitly agreed with this thinking, noting that “Matthew’s genealogy includes Jehoiachin but shows only who Jesus’ legal father was, not his natural one” (Feinberg, p. 516).

Non-Christians complain that Mary’s lineage cannot solve the dilemma for two reasons. First, per some interpretations of Numbers 1:18, Jewish tribal affiliation was determined only through the father, not the mother. Modern Jewish apologists do admit, however, that “Jewishness” is determined by one’s mother, based on Nehemiah’s rejection of the children of foreign wives (Neh. 13:23-39). Second, neither Luke’s nor Matthew’s account of Jesus’ genealogy traces through Mary, but both explicitly chart Joseph’s ancestry (Matt. 1:16; Luke 3:23).

The first non-Christian objection may not present an insurmountable obstacle to the typical Evangelical position. It might be countered, for instance, that Numbers 1:18 merely demonstrates an example of tribal affiliation traced through fathers rather than establishes a permanent decree that genealogies be traced this way. Still, Numbers 1:18 does demonstrate a continuation of Israel’s traditional patriarchy, and it may well be true that tradition traced tribal affiliation in this manner. The non-Evangelical reading of Nehemiah 13 also lacks credibility, particularly because the text explains that the children of foreign wives were put away because they did not speak the language of Judah (Neh. 13:24), not because their mothers were foreign.

The second non-Evangelical argument, though, is worthy of acceptance — both Luke and Matthew undoubtedly present genealogies that appear to trace Jesus' lineage through Joseph, not through Mary. More importantly, even if Luke's genealogy actually accounts Mary's heritage, Matthew's Gospel explicitly claims to trace Joseph's family: *!akwb de; egegnhsen ton !lws hf* ("and Jacob begot Joseph," Matt. 1:16). Matthew traced Jesus' line through Joseph in order to prove that Jesus had a proper claim to David's throne. To argue that Jesus cannot be barred from the throne because he is not really descended from Jeconiah is also to argue that Matthew was wrong about Jesus' claim to the throne. If Jesus is not descended from Jeconiah, not only is he not victim to Jeconiah's curse, but neither is he heir to Jeconiah's Davidic throne. Clearly, Matthew did not think Jeconiah's presence among Jesus' ancestors was something to be explained (after all, Matthew did not explain it). Rather, he saw it as something to be asserted as proof of Jesus' messiahship.

This raises another question: Why did Matthew believe the Christ could be Jeconiah's descendant? In answering this question, it is worth noting that not all evangelicals have followed the path of Ryrie and McDowell. For instance, Calvin argued that the curse against Jeconiah contradicted the promise to David that his seed would sit on the throne forever. To resolve this tension, Calvin suggested that the curse was "to be confined to a temporary punishment, and extend only to the coming of Christ" (Calvin, p. 127). Calvin evidently thought the curse was perpetual, but did not conclude from this that it had to be permanent. Instead, he thought it lasted only until the Messiah came. This interpretation fits the context of Jeremiah 22 rather nicely, as Jeremiah 22:24-30 is immediately followed by Jeremiah 23:1-8 which promises restoration from exile and the raising up of the messianic Branch of David.

Keil and Delitzsch suggested that Jeconiah's curse may be summarized:

“Although there is many a sympathising heart in the land that bitterly laments the hard fate of the dear young king, who along with his infant children has been (? will be) dragged away, yet it is God’s unchangeable decree that neither he nor any of his sons shall ascend the throne of David” (Keil, vol. 8, p. 214).

While they appear to agree that the curse is unchangeable, they do not clearly state that the curse applies to all future generations descended from Jeconiah, but explicitly apply the curse only to Jeconiah and those children immediately fathered by him. Whether or not Keil and Delitzsch would actually assert this, it may be the best way to read the verses, given the context. If this interpretation is correct — if the curse applied strictly only to Jeconiah and his immediate children — it would explain Matthew’s freedom to trace Jesus to David through Jeconiah.

Most of the aforementioned scholars’ arguments, except perhaps Keil and Delitzsch’s, have assumed that the curse was at least perpetual, if not absolutely permanent. However, a look at the text of Jeremiah 22:24-30 suggests otherwise. Verse 30a says that Jeconiah will not prosper “in his days” (wymyB). The yK (“for”) which introduces 30b appears to signal a clarification of the nature of the non-prosperity, while the remaining words extend the curse against Jeconiah to his seed. That is, the curse is laid upon Jeconiah for his whole life, and takes a form which affects his children, also for the duration of Jeconiah’s life. Thus, as long as Jeconiah lived, neither he nor his descendants would sit on David’s throne or rule in Judah.

Further, the same curse that prohibited Jeconiah and his descendants from sitting on the throne also exiled them from the land (Jer. 22:27-28). However, Jeconiah’s descendant Zerubbabel eventually did return to the land. If the curse had been unconditional and permanent, Zerubbabel would not have been able to return. The fact that

Zerubbabel did return proves that the curse did not permanently ban all Jeconiah's posterity.

The curse against Jeconiah has been interpreted as unconditional by most commentators, but this is probably unwarranted given both the general tenor of prophesy and the context of Jeremiah 22. It should not be forgotten that, only four chapters prior to this, God revealed to Jeremiah some basic prophetic presuppositions:

“At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it” (Jer. 18:7-10 NASB).

As God himself explained, the fundamental assumption is that prophecy is conditioned upon human behavior; negative prophecies can be averted by repentance, positive ones can be negated by disobedience.

Likewise, even Jeremiah 22 begins with a prophecy to the king of Judah which is explicitly conditional and which covers the same ground as that made to Jeconiah later in the chapter:

““For if you men will indeed perform this thing, then kings will enter the gates of this house, sitting in David's place on his throne, riding in chariots and on horses, even the king himself and his servants and his people. But if you will not obey these words, I swear by Myself,' declares the Lord, 'that this house will become a desolation’” (Jer. 22:4-5 NASB).

Of course, it should also be recognized that the curse in Jeremiah 22:24-30 begins with the phrase *hwhy-! an yna-yj*, indicating God's heightened determination to carry out his threat (compare Num. 14:28; Isa. 49:18; Zeph. 2:9). In fact, this formula probably indicates that the thing prophesied certainly will take place. Still, it would run contrary to Jeremiah 18:7-10 to interpret this as an indication that the condition no longer existed. Rather, the phrase likely signifies that the condition certainly will be fulfilled.

In keeping with this, history reveals that Jeconiah indeed failed to repent, and that the resultant curse continued throughout his life. As stated above, however, the curse did not inhibit Jeconiah's descendant Zerubbabel, who did not follow in Jeconiah's evil ways, from returning to the land or from being potentially offered the throne of the "Davidic monarchy" (Keil, vol. 10, p. 497): "'On that day,' declares the Lord of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, My servant,' declares the Lord, 'and I will make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the Lord of hosts" (Hag. 2:23).

This interpretation of Jeremiah 22:24-30 closely parallels the Davidic covenant itself, which was explicitly conditional: "You shall not lack a man to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your sons take heed to their way, to walk in My law as you have walked before Me" (2 Chr. 6:16). Viewed in this way, Jeremiah's prophecy against Jeconiah looks more like a prosecution of the Davidic covenant than it does a personal vendetta against a rogue king.

In light of all these considerations, it makes perfect sense that Matthew would have appealed to Jeconiah as Jesus' forefather. As long as the king and nation rebelled against God, no king would be restored to the throne. Even after Jeconiah died, this rebellious situation continued, and Israel and Judah had no king until the time of Christ when God himself began to gather the remnant of his flock (Jer. 23:3), raised up the Branch of David, Jesus Christ, and inaugurated the

kingdom (Jer. 23:5). The promised Messiah kept covenant and therefore did not fall under the curse. Instead, he received all the promised blessings of the Davidic covenant. This understanding of Jeremiah 22:24-30 allows evangelicals to embrace Matthew's genealogy of Christ as given, rather than compels them to make excuses for it.

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