

# Kinship and the Question of the “Chosen People”<sup>1</sup>

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Among the central truths of the Gospel message is that God chose to send his eternal Word to the virgin Mary in order to become a human being by the power of God’s Spirit, and that human being was a man from a small town in Palestine called Nazareth who was born around 2000 years ago. There are many parts of the world and civilizations into which God could have sent his Word, but only one of them was chosen.

Out of all of the hundreds of important and diverse cultures on our planet, God’s choice was Eastern culture, specifically the Middle East. Kinship in this culture is reckoned on the basis of a paternal line stretching far back in time. Some cultures reckon one’s roots through fathers and mothers equally, and in still others, through mothers only. The Lord Christ (his peace be upon us) grew up in the care of the ancient Palestinian civilization that determined one’s lineage on the basis of the male line. Civilizations that do this place a great deal of importance on the line of male ancestors, since only males are seen to impart their essence and identity to their children. Many people in this culture are able to name their grandfather’s grandfather, but it is not possible for them to name their grandmother’s grandmother.

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The concept of kinship or blood relationships is fundamental to civilizations and peoples that share a set of beliefs, customs and traditions. Some beliefs or traditions are shared by everyone in the whole world. For example, all peoples recognize the institution of marriage in some form. Other beliefs or traditions are not shared by all peoples – for example people in the Arab world use henna as a body decoration associated with weddings, while henna in another part of the world might not have any meaning at all, because it isn't a part of those people's customs and traditions.

The study of the bonds of kinship and how they are organized constitutes a large field of study in the field of anthropology, which recognizes that different peoples and civilizations are organized under different kinship systems, in that the system of family ties differs from one culture to another in a way that assigns different meaning to roles found in each group, as with other aspects of family life. The field of kinship studies asks questions such as: What individuals comprise “the family” in this people? How do families pass on inherited goods and identity categories? How does one receive membership in a family, and how is membership passed on? Where does a newly married couple live according to the traditions of this people or tribe?

The peoples and civilizations in which identity is passed only through fathers are different from peoples in other parts of the world. For in some peoples and civilizations, a child may inherit his identity from both parents or from the mother alone. There are a few systems that are very elaborate, in which the child receives different identity categories from each parent, may inherit from aunts and/or uncles, etc. In the Middle East, a person may feel very close to their mother, but the mother's identity, such as her nationality or religion, for example, cannot be

passed on to her child. Therefore, since identity must be passed from father to child, a person can only enter a particular identity group if his father is part of that group. For example, how do most people become part of a tribe? The answer: By being born to a father who is a member of that tribe. How does one become a member of the nobility? Through one's father. How does one enter a religious category? Through the father.

In the same way, it may seem to us that patrilineal relationships are fixed and immovable. For example, the people who spent time with the Lord Christ (his peace be upon us) and heard his words were from a patrilineal culture just like we find across the Middle East today, so we can speak of a continuity that has endured 2000 years, from the time of the Lord Christ to the present. But even though Christ lived in a society that passes identity only through the male line, he demonstrated his opposition to some of the negative aspects of the kinship system that he lived under. Therefore, our understanding of the Lord Christ's approach to the kinship system he lived in can help us to understand his call to his followers both ancient and modern. For even before the Lord Christ began his preaching, he was preceded by the prophet John son of Zechariah (peace be upon him), who was his cousin, and he began to confront people who thought that one's genealogy was the most important thing in defining his spiritual life. The prophet John's role was to inform people of the coming of the Lord Christ and the new order he was bringing. For he addressed the people who came to him to be purified in water, saying, "Repent to God, and let your repentance be visible in your good deeds, and do not say secretly to yourselves that you are safe from God's wrath, as in your words: "We are descendants of the line of the prophet Abraham, and God's chosen people." This will do you no good at all, for God is able to replace you with stones which he will make into sons for Abraham! So then know that God's wrath will certainly come

down like an axe tearing the trees up from their roots, and you are these trees without fruit! And those besides you like these trees which God will root up and cast into the fire of hell!" (Luke 3: 8-9). These people must have had an idea of a family tree, just like today.

These words spoken by the prophet John son of Zechariah (peace be upon him) were a very strong challenge to those who were proud of being descended from the prophet Abraham (peace be upon him), as he told them with all boldness that their "fruit," that is, their good works that were evidence of repentance, mattered much more than descent from an honorable lineage! The meaning we can derive from this is that the Lord Christ represents a new era in which repentance and obedience to God matter much more than physical descent and tribal, ethnic or religious identity in terms of determining who belongs to God's community.

Indeed, the Lord Christ ushered in a new family system for God's new community, where belonging to the people or community of God is not determined by a family tree, but instead through commitment to doing what pleases God. Such a commitment allows a person to enter God's eternal kingdom which he promised to his ancient prophets. But how does one become a part of God's community living under his rule? Previously the Lord Christ answered this question when a leading Jewish religious leader asked him about the same issue, and he said, "Your spirits must be renewed." (John 3:7). Just as humanity consists of men and women born into a specific family, the new community is made up of those who receive new life from God. But unlike their first birth in which they had no choice, they have the ability to choose their new birth by entering into this community. And just as people inherit physical identity and characteristics from their fathers, believers in the Lord Christ have become distinctive spiritually through belonging to God, who

has given them the opportunity through their faith in the Lord Christ to express many of the characteristics found in God's essence and the depth of his reality.

The Lord Christ knew that sometimes his followers would run into a number of problems because of their material physical obligations to family versus their obligations to their new spiritual family. Therefore, he made it clear (his peace be upon us) that someone who chooses to follow him might come into conflict with other members of his family because of his decision. Once when he was teaching a crowd about God, his family came to take him home. But he clarified to them that his loyalty to his biological family came in second place to his loyalty to God's new community. For Christ (his peace be upon us) wanted his followers to give first place to belonging to God's community. He said: "Do not think that I came to establish peace between believers and non-believers on earth at the price of truth. Rather I have come with the message of truth that is like the edge of a sword to divide between them! And so my invitation will provoke division between a son and his father, a daughter and her mother, and the wife of a son and her mother-in-law, and the enemies of a person will be from the people of his household. And I tell you whoever loves his parents or children more than me is not deserving of me." (Matthew 10: 34-37).

The Lord Christ's heritage and his identity therefore were a matter that preoccupied people throughout his life. We usually refer to the Lord Christ as "the son of Mary" in recognition of what is found in the Holy Scriptures that state that he lived under the care of Joseph who was not his birth father. Some Jews even spoke evil words attacking his lineage and considered him to be illegitimate! This was because he did not have a biological father, and because they were uncomfortable that he did not come from a wealthy or famous family. However,

the Jews who were criticizing Christ were ignorant of God's plan. For we find in the noble Gospel in the very first verse that is recorded by the apostle Matthew, that the Lord Christ is the "Heir of the throne of the prophet David." This is a royal title meaning that Christ is in the line of descent of the kings of the Sons of Jacob, and that he is a "descendant of the prophet Abraham" which was the most important marker of identity for the Sons of Jacob. But how can the Lord Christ be a descendent of the prophet Abraham and a descendent of the prophet David if he did not have a human father? God gave Joseph, as the husband of Mary the mother of Christ, the right to be the foster father of the Lord Christ, even to give him a name and to raise him. The genealogy that Matthew records is Joseph's genealogy, and is meant to show that the Lord Christ has the right to claim the throne of the king the prophet David as the awaited Messiah, but it is not actually a genealogy of the Lord Christ's ancestors. This shows that the Lord Christ's identity and spiritual relationship was far more important than his physical descent.

Many generations before Christ's birth, the prophet David had prophesied about the awaited Messiah, "God has made an oath and will not break it: We have made you a priest forever, according to the order of King Sadeq" (Psalm 110:4). King Sadeq was a worshipper of God who lived during the time of the prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) and he was from another nation. His genealogy was not recorded like the genealogies of the priests of the Sons of Jacob, and so he came to represent someone whose right to be a leader before God comes from God himself, and not from his patrilineal descent. This is the exact situation with the Lord Christ, who has the right and legitimacy from God, and not from belonging to a tribe or his descent.

The Lord Christ's identity comes from his righteousness and uprightness, not from belonging to any lineage. Just as he called his followers to place their loyalty to him and to God's kingdom above human loyalties, he also showed with his life, and his miraculous birth, that his identity as the saviour and the king came from God. For in God's new community Christ shows us that our loyalty to him is more important than any ethnic identity. Those who follow his call no longer see people with a point of view determined by genealogical belonging, for there is no longer any consideration of the difference between Jew or non-Jew, male and female, and there is no longer any consideration of kinship ties. The community of God now includes all persons who have responded to Christ's invitation to repentance and righteousness through him. No wonder that the Lord Christ described this change as being born a second time!