Letter to John the Stylite on the genealogy of the Virgin Mary

Jacob of Edessa (c. AD 633–708)

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[Translated by F. Nau. Englished by Roger Pearse, 2011] From the same to the same : James to John. 1. The divine apostle Paul when he wrote to men like those today, who were interpreting with great difficulty the mysterious words of the Gospel of Christ, said with wisdom and profundity: If there are men for whom our gospel is hidden, it is so for those who are perishing, for the unbelievers whose minds the god of this world has clouded, so that they do not see shining the light of the Gospel of the glory of the Messiah who is the image of God . — But all of us, he said, who behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same shape, that is to say into the same image , from glory to glory, when we believe without hesitation in the words of the Gospel as (coming) from the Lord who is the Spirit . So your Fraternity will know that, if someone interprets with great difficulty, finds obscure the words of the Gospel and does not believe it, or wants to oppose it with insidious and treacherous subtleties, this is one of those for whom the Gospel is hidden, one of those who are perishing, and one of those whom God has abandoned and, so that their minds are darkened by the shadows of the god of this world, and that the light of his Gospel does not shine in their eyes, because they are not worthy of being saved, because of their disbelief and the lack of rectitude of their spirit.

2. For we who — in the words of the apostle who knew and taught the mysteries of the Messiah — see and look at the words of the holy book as in a mirror , there is nothing in the Gospel that lends to difficulty or disbelief, but we are informed by the mysterious words it contains; we look at these words like one who looks at his reflection in a mirror, and they show clearly the picture of the truth. We learn from it that the Messiah has truly come, and we say that if he has truly come he was born, in the flesh, of the seed of David, as the prophets said of him; if he came and if he was born of the seed of David, he must necessarily also come at his time; if he came and he came at his time, and if he is born in the flesh of the seed of

David, then the woman who gave birth is also by absolute necessity of the seed of David, as all these things depend on each other and are attached like (the rings) of a chain; they are combined and established by a necessary sequence of ideas and there is no (possible) hesitation on this subject.

That the Messiah is the seed of David is what everyone professes: the Jews, the Mohammedans, and also all the Christians who confess that he was incarnate and made man in his human nature. This fact that the Messiah, in the flesh, is the seed of David — as the holy prophets wrote in advance, is confessed by all, and to them is like (a) fundamental (dogma), to Jews as well as to Mohammedans and to Christians. I have said that it is (a) fundamental (dogma) recognized by the Jews, although they deny the true Messiah who came in truth, (because they acknowledge it) at least for the misleading Messiah that they expect, they say and say absolutely of him that he is of the seed of David and that he will be born of it. The Mohammedans also — although they do not recognize as God and as son of God the true Messiah who came and who is recognized by the Christians — they all confess without hesitation that he is the true Messiah who was to come and who was predicted by the prophets; they have on this subject, no controversy with us, but rather with the Jews; they set against them, by force of argument, by thought and word, that which I said earlier, and which was announced by the prophets: namely that the Messiah will be born (of the seed) of David and even that the Messiah who must come is to be born of Mary;

this is firmly confessed by the Mohammedans and no one among them will deny it, as they say to all and always that Jesus, son of Mary, is indeed the Messiah; they also call him the Word of God, as do the holy books, and they add in their ignorance that he is the Spirit of God because they fail to distinguish the Word from the Spirit, even they do not accept calling the Messiah God and Son of God.

If all this is acknowledged by us and by the Mohammedans, that the Messiah is born of the seed of David, as stated by the prophets, and that the Messiah is born of Mary, and also that the one born of Mary is the true Messiah and not the one whom the Jews are waiting for, it follows that we and the Mohammedans must confess that he came in his time. Based on these facts acknowledged on both sides, who would hesitate, or search, or find only difficulties when it is necessary to respond to this question: ”Is Mary of the seed of David, or not?” It is clear indeed, and without any discussion, that if the prophets said the Messiah will come from the seed of David, and if we confess that the son of Mary is the Messiah, Mary, of whom he is the son, necessarily belongs to the family of David, although this is not written in the holy books, neither in the Old nor the New (Testament), and even though we can not make for her a genealogy from David and even though we do not know from whom she is descended, and we know neither her father nor her mother. For the holy books do not give the genealogy of women, but only that of men . Also the

holy apostles were fishermen and simple men and not learned, they did not take care or think to tell us from whose seed came the Blessed Virgin, but (they busied themselves) only in preaching to us the gospel of Christ, and teaching us what the Messiah, who sent them, commanded them to teach us ; he who said: Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

3. So by a firm and conclusive syllogism we must show to a Christian or Arab interlocutor that the Blessed Virgin Mary and Mother of God is of the seed of David, although this is not shown by the (holy) Books. This cannot be demonstrated by providing "evidence" from strange and superfluous stories that are brought forward by many and is written and read, but are not part of the holy books. Know indeed, O friend of truth, that I know the stories written by men of zeal, based on their own ideas without any testimony of the (holy) books. The Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of the Messiah, is the daughter of Anne and the just Joachim; the latter, according to the authors of these stories, was the son of Panthir, and Panthir was the brother of Melchi (Μελχί) ; the latter was the son of Iani (Ἰαννάί), who was descended through his family from the tribe of Levi. They were based in Galilee, near the place where Tiberias was built .

As I said earlier, I do not want to demonstrate the matter with a superfluous demonstration taken from strange things, but using this firm and conclusive syllogism as I did earlier, O friend of God and the truth, that I want the truth to be upheld and not using words (learned) from superfluous stories; whoever the man may be who speaks with you and asks you or presses you on this issue, whether a Christian or a Mohammedan, if he is intelligent and has a reasonable soul, he will understand what the syllogism from which he will understand and will gladly testify to the truth without discussion. What I have said is enough to show clearly to a Christian or to a Mohammedan who talks about this subject, that the Blessed Virgin Mary is of the seed of David . 4. I must now quote for you the words of the prophets. They will show you evidence that the Messiah is, in the flesh, of the seed of David; it will then be shown you, in order to refute the Jews, that the Messiah has come in his time as it was written about him. Thus the expectation (of the Jews) is pointless, for because of their wickedness and blindness of heart, they were led to believe in a lie and not in the truth. The (holy) Spirit (by the) psalmist, testifies to you that the Messiah comes from David, when he says:

I have found David my servant and I have anointed him with my holiness (with my holy oil) ; and speaking of the Messiah who is to come from him, he adds further: I will make his seed eternal, and his throne like the days of heaven . The prophet Micah said: And you Bethlehem, house of Ephrata, you're are not the (most) little among the thousands (the major cities) of Judah, because from you I will make come a ruler, who will command over Israel, and his outgoing (his origin is) from

the beginning of the days of the world . — Isaiah said: And I'll make with you an eternal covenant: the holy things (the virtues) promised to David . — Jeremiah said: Behold, the days come, says the Lord, and I will raise unto David a just offspring, and a King shall reign and be wise; he will make judgement and justice on the earth. In his days (during his reign) Judah will be saved, and Israel shall dwell with confidence and the name that the Lord will give it will be: our righteousness .

— And after something else: I will break the yoke on their necks and I will cut their chains, and foreigners shall not subjugate them any more, but they will serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom he has established . — And further on again: Thus says the Lord: If you can make pointless my covenant that I have made with the day and my covenant that I have made with the night, so that day and night no longer have a place in time, then my covenant that I made with David my servant also will be pointless, and he shall have no son to reign on his throne . — Ezekiel says in the name of the Lord: I will make a covenant together with David, I will kill every wicked animal on earth. By "animal" he means, in my opinion, the devil . — And further on:

I will purify them and they shall be my people, and I will be their God; and my servant David shall be their king and they shall have only one shepherd . — And again: My servant (David) will be their leader forever . These are the testimonies of the prophets, to show you that the Messiah is descended from the seed of David, and there are others like them. 5. You will also recognize without hesitation that the Messiah has come and the expectation of the Jews is pointless; because if the arrival of the Messiah means that he will control all peoples, that he will rule as far as the ends of the earth, and he will bring all peoples to know and worship the God of Israel, pulling them out of the error of the worship of demons, then this Messiah who has come has done and has completed all this in reality; so it is evident that the true Messiah who was to come has already come and the expectation of the blind and deceived Jews is pointless. You may know clearly, and it will be demonstrated (to you), that the coming of the Messiah took place in his time, as it had been decided before the creation of this world, for the refutation of the error of the Jews, by these mysterious words that the angel Gabriel said to the prophet Daniel, when he prayed to God about the captivity of Israel after the completion of the seventy years of the prophecy of Jeremiah, in the second year of Darius, fourth king of the Persians; these are his words:

Daniel, I am come to make you understand; at the beginning of your prayer a word came forth, and I have come to you to make (it) known to you, because you are a man of (curious) desires. Be attentive to the words and understand the vision: seventy weeks were fixed for your people and for the holy city, so that iniquity would be abolished and forgotten, so that the sin would be ended, so that the sins are sealed, so that eventually the illegal would end, so that iniquity would be

purified; then will come the eternal justice, the vision and the prophecy will be sealed, the holy of holies will be anointed. So you'll know and you will understand that, from the promulgation of the response to build Jerusalem until the Messiah, (there will be) seven weeks and sixty-two weeks, and they will return, and the place and the wall will be built and the times will be completed. And after the sixty-two weeks the anointing will cease, and there will be no more judgement (justice)

hese words show that the Messiah came at the period which had been set in advance, and the words of Gabriel are not misleading. He said that seventy weeks of years were awarded to Jerusalem after the reconstruction that followed the return from captivity, after which the Messianic anointing, in which there was justice and power, would stop: the weeks are four hundred and ninety years. So if you count from the second year of Darius, during which this dream took place, and add four hundred ninety years, you find that this word (prophecy) was completed in fact in the year when Herod the Ascalonite reigned over the Jews ; there were no more since then appointed (over the Jews) as chief and judge. Then the Messiah was born, in the thirty-third year of Herod, which is the three hundred and ninth year of the computation of the Greeks or of the Edessenians. It follows that the Messiah foretold by the prophets has come, that he came in his time, and that he has accomplished everything that was written about him and everything he had do and accomplish, and therefore the expectation of the Jews is in vain.

6. If, according to their bold vanity and eloquence, they go so far as to dare to declare and say that these seventy weeks spoken of the prophet are double weeks, as they are accustomed to say because of what the angel added at the end of his speech: after seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. Even so, shame because of their error covers the faces of the Jews for their pointless insistence; because if we go along and accept their argument, and say, following the opinion of inept fools , that these seventy weeks were double, we still find that the time of the Messiah is past and we find the double end of these weeks came around the time of Zeno and Anastasius, the Roman emperors. For if to the year three hundred and nine, the year of the birth of the Messiah, we add four hundred and ninety years, years which derive from the double weeks wildly imagined by the Jews, we find the year seven hundred and ninety-nine of the computation of the Greeks, which is about the fifteenth year of the Emperor Zeno of Romans; the first year of the Emperor Anastasius his successor is roughly the eight hundred and first year of the computation of the Greeks. Thus, even according to the ineptitude imagined by the impudence of the Jews, the Messiah has already come and it is demonstrated to everyone that their expectation is pointless and useless, because even accepting double weeks, the word of (Daniel) would have been completed in the time of the emperor Anastasius, and the foolish Jews have not seen arrive this Messiah for whom they were waiting in vain.

So now, everyone: the true Christians and the bold heretics, the Muslims and the Jews in spite of themselves, all confess truly and necessarily that the Messiah has indeed come, that he came in his time, and he is descended from the seed of David, and if all these things are necessarily satisfied (are linked), Mary, the Blessed Virgin who gave birth to him, is also descended from David, although that is not explicitly written in the Holy Book, and that we are not able to produce what is not written. Because that which the truth (the reasoning) states, without allowing anything to be added or subtracted, shows much better the truth to our spirit and to our faith than if we were gathering superfluous words which are not written (in the Bible) and that we can not demonstrate from the sacred books. 7. This is what I have thought (good) to reply to your Fraternity about what you have asked the limited learning of my Humility to write to you; I prepared and I wrote all this with great pain and weakness of body and soul, for I have no one — like a weak old woman has other people who weave what she has worked and prepared in her old age — to take and weave what I have prepared, and make it into a garment, and so help my Humility; but when I have prepared, unraveled, twisted and turned the vestment, I am then obliged, when I cannot do so, to weave , cut, finish, sew, assemble and make a garment or outfit for the friendly spirit of science which has need of it .

Read it, and pray for my Humility; beware of making or writing something that would hurt me, just write to me again now as you always wrote to me, not calling me doctor, and so imagining that I would thus take more care to enliven you (enlighten you). You'll be preserved (remain) wise and in good health always, body, soul and intelligence, through the prayers of the saints. Amen. [Footnotes - material in square brackets is added for the online edition] 1. (1) 2 Cor. 4. [2 Corinthians 4:3-4] 2. (1) This phrase must be a gloss by James of Edessa. 3. (2) 2 Cor. 3:18. 4. (3) 1 Cor. 13:12. [or perhaps 2 Cor. 3:18] 5. (1) This idea is found again in Dionysius bar Salibi (d. 1171). 6. (2) James of Edessa thus makes the father of Joachim the brother of Melchi instead of connecting him to Matthat. From this we can see that he omits Matthat and Levi, and so is following Julius Africanus and Eusebius.

7. (3) The father of Melchi. Cf. Luke 3:24. 8. (4) Dionysius Bar Salibi quotes this passage as follows: "James of Edessa says that the stories say that Mary was the daughter of Joachim, was of the tribe of Judah, Joachim was the son of Esther — the manuscript says "of Panthir" —and Esther was the brother of Melchi, son of Neri (Νηρί) — the manuscript says: the latter of Neri — who was descended in genealogy from Nathan and through a woman, from the race of Levi, and lived in Galilee in the place where was built the city of Tiberias." Note that the manuscript of Dionysius read "Panthir" like ours, and that Dionysius has replaced the word by "Esther". His manuscript also said: "the latter of Neri" where ours says "the latter was son of Iani". The differences between these two texts are also numerous. All these names, except Esther and Panthir, are included in the list given by St. Luke.

Dionysius introduced Esther because, in one of his lists, a woman of that name married successively Ματθάν (Matt. 1:15) and Ματθάτ (Luke, 3:24) and because he could not find a word that was closer to [Syriac].

9. (1) Dionysius takes the same approach: ”We say that in mentioning Joseph (as a descendant of David) it is known thereby that the Virgin is descended from David like him. Because people from one tribe married within their tribe, although there were some exceptions.” He then discusses this reason at length. 10. (2) Ps. 89:21. [Perhaps Psalm 89:20 (English/Masoretic) or Psalm 88:21 (LXX/Vulgate)?] 11. (3) Ibid. 89:30. This is the text of the Peshitta. [Perhaps Psalm 89:29 (if we follow the English numbering) or Psalm 88:30 (if we follow the LXX numbering)] 12. (1) Micaiah 5:2. The masoretic Hebrew, the Peshitta and the Greek of codex Vaticanus read: ”You are (too) small to be (counted) among the thousand (the principal towns) of Judah. The text of James of Edessa corresponds to a different Greek version. Cf. Matth. 2:6. 13. (2) Isaiah 55:3. The translation of this passage differs among the versions.

14. (3) Jeremiah 23:5-6. 15. (4) Jer. 30:8-9. 16. (5) Jer. 33:20-21. These verses are missing in the most ancient manuscripts of the LXX, in Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus. 17. (6) Ezechiel 34:25. Instead of ” I will make with David ” the Hebrew, the Vulgate and Peshitta read : ” I will make with them ” 18. (7) Ezechiel 36:23-24. [Perhaps Ezekiel 37:23-24] 19. (8) Ezechiel 36:25. [Perhaps Ezekiel 37:25] 20. (1) Daniel 9:22-26. The Syriac text differs from the Peshitta and still more from the revision of James of Edessa, as we have said in the introduction. 21. (1) Such language appears readily in oriental argumentation, and we should not be astonished at these expressions. 22. (1) This word paraphrases three analogous terms. 23. (2) James of Edessa seems to be very old, tired and left to himself. Probably the composition of this letter belongs to the period when, expelled from Edessa, he took refuge at the monastery of Teleda. At that time he was about 70 years old. John the Stylite was younger, because James died in 708 and there is a letter addressed to John the Stylite and dated to the year 718 (1029), in Georgs des Araberbischofs Gedichte und Briefe, Leipzig, 1891, p. 72-9.

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