



131. The Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The glorious Virgin Mary took her origin from the tribe of Judah and the royal stock of David. Matthew and Luke do not set forth the lineage of Mary but that of Joseph—who had nothing to do with the conception of Christ—because the usage of the sacred writers is said to have been to weave the series of generations of males, not of females. It is perfectly true, nevertheless, that the Blessed Virgin descended from the lineage of David: this is obvious because, as Scripture often testifies, Christ was born of the seed of David. Since, therefore,

Christ was born of the Virgin alone, it is plain that the Virgin herself was born of David, through the line of Nathan.

Among David's sons there were two, Nathan and Solomon. Of the line of Nathan, son of David, as John of Damascus testifies, Levi begot Melchi and Panthar, Panthar begot Barpanthar, Barpanthar begot Joachim, and Joachim was the father of the Virgin Mary. Nathan took a wife from the line of Solomon, and of her begot Jacob. When Nathan died, Melchi of the tribe of Nathan, son of Levi and brother of Panthar, married the deceased Nathan's wife, the mother of Jacob, and of her begot Heli. Thus Jacob and Heli were brothers born of the same mother, Jacob being of the tribe of Solomon and Heli of the tribe of Nathan. Heli of the tribe of Nathan died without issues, and Jacob his brother, who was of the tribe of Solomon, took Heli's wife and raised up seed to his brother,¹ begetting Joseph. Joseph therefore was by birth the son of Jacob of the line of Solomon, and by law the son of Heli of the line of Nathan: in other words, the son born according to nature was the son of the father who begot him, but, according to the law, the son of the deceased.² Thus John Damas-cenus.

We also find, in the *Ecclesiastical History* and in Bede's *Chronicle*, that all the genealogies of Hebrews and aliens were kept in the Temple's secret archives. Herod ordered the burning of these records, thinking that he might be able to pass himself off for a noble if, in the absence of proof to the contrary, he was thought to be Israelite by race. There were also some who were called *dominici* ("men of the Lord") because they were closely related to Christ and were from Nazareth. These *dominici* worked out, as well as they could, the order of Christ's human ancestry, partly from what they had learned from their forefathers and partly from some books that they had at home.

Joachim took a wife named Anna, who had a sister named Hismeria. This Hismeria was the mother of Elizabeth and Eliud, and Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptist. Eliud was the father of Eminen, and Eminen the father of Saint Servatius, whose body is in the town of Maastricht on the Meuse, in the diocese of Liege. Anna is said to have had three husbands, Joachim, Cleophas, and Salome. Of Joachim, her first husband, she gave birth to one daughter, Mary, the mother of the Lord, whom she gave in marriage to Joseph, and who bore and brought forth Christ the Lord. Joachim died and Anna married Cleophas, Joseph's brother, and of him had another daughter, whom she likewise called Mary and who was married to Alpheus. This Mary bore her husband four sons, namely, James the Less, Joseph the Just also called Barsabas, Simon, and Jude. After the death of her second husband Anna took a third, namely, Salome, of whom she had another daughter, whom she also called Mary and whom she gave as wife to Zebedee. This Mary had two sons by her husband, namely, James the Greater and John the Evangelist. All this is summed up in the following verses:

Anna solet dici tres concepisse Marias, Quas genuere viri Joachim, Cleophas,
Salomeque. Has duxere viri Joseph, Alpheus, Zebedaeus. Prima parit Christum,
Jacobum secunda minorem, Et Joseph justum peperit cum Simone Judam, Tertia
majorem Jacobum volucremque Joannem.³

¹ Cf. Mark 12: 19.

² I.e., the deceased first husband of the mother. Part of the confusion in this genealogy is due to its failure to include Mathan or Matthan, described in Matt. 1:15 as the father of Jacob. Our author identifies this Mathan with one of the Nathans he cites. This point does not entirely dispel the confusion, though it helps to achieve the purpose of the genealogy, which is to confirm the Davidic ancestry of Mary and Jesus.

³ Anna is usually said to have conceived three Marys, / Whom [her] husbands, Joachim, Cleophas, and Salome, begot. / The Marys were taken in marriage by Joseph, Alpheus, Zebedee. / The first Mary bore Christ, the second, James the Less, / Joseph the Just with Simon and Jude, / the third, James the Greater and John the Winged.

But now a question arises: how could Mary be a cousin of Elizabeth, as has been said elsewhere? It is clear that Elizabeth was the wife of Zachary, who was of the tribe of Levi, and according to the Law a man had to choose a wife from his own tribe and family, but Luke testifies that Elizabeth was of the daughters of Aaron.⁴ According to Jerome, Anna was from Bethlehem, which belonged to the tribe of Judah, but keep in mind that both Aaron and Joiada the high priest took wives of the tribe of Judah, which proves that the priestly and kingly tribes were always joined to each other by ties of blood. It may be, as Bede says, that this sort of relationship, by which women were given in marriage from one tribe to another, developed in later times, so that it would be manifest that Mary, who descended from the royal tribe, had a bond of kinship with the priestly tribe. Therefore blessed Mary was of both tribes. God willed that these privileged tribes should be mingled with each other by reason of the mystery, because the Lord Christ was to be born of them, and Christ, king and priest, would offer himself for us, would rule his followers as they struggled amid the evils of this life, and would crown them after they had won the fight. This is also suggested by the name of Christ, which means anointed, because in the Old Law only priests, kings, and prophets were anointed. Hence we are called Christians after Christ, and are also called a chosen generation and a kingly priesthood.⁵ And when it was said that women should be wedded only to men of their own tribe, it is clear that this was ordered so as not to upset the distribution of the land by lot. Since the tribe of Levi had no share in this distribution among the other tribes, the women of that tribe could marry whomever they wished.

Blessed Jerome says in the Prologue to his *History of the Birth of the Virgin* that in his early youth he had read the story in some book, and many years later was asked to put it in writing, so he wrote it down as he remembered it from his early reading. Joachim, a Galilean from the town of Nazareth, took Saint Anna, a native of Bethlehem, as his wife. They were both righteous and walked without reproach in all the commandments of the Lord. They divided all their goods into three parts, one part being reserved for the Temple and its ministers, one for transient strangers and the poor, and the third for their own needs and those of their household. They lived for twenty years without offspring and made a vow to the Lord that if he granted them a child, they would dedicate it to the service of God. With this in mind they went up to Jerusalem for the three principal feasts. Once, when Joachim and his kinsmen traveled to Jerusalem for the feast of the Dedication, he went with the others to the altar to make his offering. When the priest saw him, he angrily ordered him away and upbraided him for presuming to approach the altar of God, declaring that it was not proper for one who was subject to the Law's curse to offer sacrifice to the Lord of the Law, nor for a sterile man, who made no increase to the people of God, to stand among men who begot sons.

Joachim, seeing himself thus rejected, was ashamed to go home and face the contempt of his kinsmen, who had heard the priest's denunciation. Instead he went and lived with his shepherds. Then one day an angel appeared with great brilliance to him when he was alone. He was disturbed by the apparition, but the angel told him not to be afraid and said: "I am an angel of the Lord, sent to announce to you that your prayers have been heard and your alms have ascended in the sight of the Lord. I have seen how you were put to shame, and heard the reproach of childlessness wrongly put upon you. God punishes not nature but sin, and therefore, when he closes a woman's womb, he does this in order to open it miraculously later on, and to make it known that what is born is not the fruit of carnal desire but of the divine generosity. Did not the first mother of your race suffer the shame of childlessness until she was ninety years old, and yet bore Isaac, to whom was promised the blessing of all nations? Was not Rachel barren for a long time and yet bore Joseph, who had power over all Egypt? Who was stronger than Samson or holier than Samuel? Yet they both had sterile mothers. Believe these reasons and examples, which show that delayed conceptions and infertile childbearing are usually all the more wonderful! So then, your wife will bear you a daughter and you will call her Mary. As you have vowed, she will be consecrated to the Lord from infancy and filled with the Holy Spirit from her mother's

⁴ Luke 1: 5.

⁵ | Peter 2: 9.

womb. She will not live outside among the common people but will abide in the Temple at all times, lest any sinister suspicion be aroused about her. And, as she will be born of an unfruitful mother, so, miraculously, the Son of the Most High will be born of her. His name will be Jesus, and through him all nations will be saved. And let this be a sign to you: when you arrive at the Golden Gate of Jerusalem, Anna your wife will be there waiting for you. She has been worried because you were so late and will be glad at the sight of you." With these words the angel left him.

Meanwhile Anna was weeping bitterly, not knowing where her husband had gone, when the same angel appeared to her, revealed to her the same things he had told Joachim, and added that, for a sign, she should go to Jerusalem's Golden Gate, where she would meet her husband as he returned. So they met as the angel had predicted, and were happy to see each other and to be sure they were to have a child. They adored God and went to their home, joyfully awaiting the fulfillment of the divine promise. Anna conceived and brought forth a daughter, and they called her name Mary. When she was weaned at the age of three, the parents brought her to the Lord's Temple with offerings. Around the Temple there were fifteen steps, corresponding to the fifteen Gradual Psalms, and because the Temple was built on a hill, there was no way to go to the altar of holocaust, which stood in the open, except by climbing the steps. The virgin child was set down at the lowest step and mounted to the top without help from anyone, as if she were already fully grown up.

Having made their offering, Joachim and Anna left their daughter in the Temple with the other virgins and went home. Mary advanced steadily in all holiness. Angels visited her every day, and she enjoyed the vision of God daily.

In a letter to Chromatius and Heliodorus, Jerome says that the Blessed Virgin had made a rule for herself: the time from dawn to the third hour she devoted to prayer, from the third to the ninth hour she worked at weaving, and from the ninth hour on she prayed without stopping until an angel appeared and brought her food.

When Mary was in her fourteenth year, the high priest publicly announced that the maidens who were reared in the Temple and had come of age should return to their homes and be legally joined with their husbands. The other girls obeyed this edict. Only the Blessed Virgin Mary answered that she could not do so, both because her parents had dedicated her to the service of the Lord and because she herself had vowed her virginity to God. The high priest was perplexed: he did not intend, by impeding the fulfillment of a vow, to go against the Scripture that says: "Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them,"⁶ nor did he dare to introduce a custom not usual in the nation. A feast of the Jews was imminent, and he called the elders together to consult them. They were unanimous in their decision that in so doubtful a matter the counsel of the Lord should be sought. They prayed earnestly, and the high priest went inside to consult the Lord. Presently a voice sounded from the Holies for all to hear. It said: "Each unmarried but marriageable man of the house of David is to bring a branch to the altar. One of these branches will bloom and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove will perch upon its tip, according to the prophecy of Isaiah. The man to whom this branch belongs is, beyond all doubt, the one who is to be the virgin's spouse."

Joseph, of the house of David, was among the other men, but it seemed incongruous to him that a man of his advanced age should take so tender a young woman to wife, and he alone withheld his branch when the others placed theirs on the altar. So it was that nothing happened as the divine voice had predicted, and the high priest thought to consult the Lord a second time. The voice responded that the only man who had not brought his branch was the one to whom the virgin was to be espoused. Therefore Joseph brought his branch forward, it flowered at once, and a dove came from heaven and perched upon it. So it was clear to all that Joseph was to be Mary's husband.

Once the espousals were accomplished, Joseph went back to his home city of Bethlehem to get his house ready and to make the necessary arrangements for the wedding. Mary, on the other hand, returned to her parents' home in Nazareth, together with seven virgins of her

⁶ Ps. 75: 12 (76: II).

own age and breeding, whom the high priest had assigned to her because of what the miracle had shown. And in those days the angel Gabriel appeared to her as she prayed, and announced to her that she was to be the mother of the Son of God.

The day of the Blessed Virgin's birth was unknown to the faithful for a long time. Then, as John Beleth tells it, there was a holy man, diligent in the practice of contemplation, who, every year on the eighth day of September, heard, as he prayed, the joyous choirs of angels chanting solemn paeans. He devoutly prayed to know why he heard this annually on this day and on no other. He received a response from God, that on this day the glorious Virgin Mary had been born to the world, and that he should make this known to the children of Holy Church so that they might join the court of heaven in celebrating her birthday. He passed this knowledge on to the supreme pontiff and others, and they, fasting and praying and searching the Scriptures and ancient documents to ascertain the truth, decreed that this day should be celebrated throughout the world in honor of holy Mary's birth.

There was a time when the octave of Mary's birth was not solemnized, but Pope Innocent, a native of Genoa, instituted its celebration, for the following reason. After the death of Pope Gregory, the Romans locked all the cardinals in a conclave so that they would elect a successor more quickly. But when they had not reached an agreement after several weeks, and had to endure many abuses inflicted by the Romans, they made a vow to the Queen of heaven that if by her intercession they agreed on a choice and would be free to go home, they would decree that the long-neglected octave of her birthday should be celebrated from then on. So they elected the lord Celestin and were set free. Celestin, however, died in less than a month, and their vow was translated into law by the lord Innocent.

Note that the Church solemnizes only three birthdays, namely, those of Christ, of holy Mary, and of John the Baptist. These three birthdays mark three spiritual births, for we are reborn in water with John, in penance with Mary, and in glory with Christ. Since the rebirth of baptism in adults must be preceded by contrition, as must the rebirth in glory, these two birthdays rightly have vigils, but penance is itself a vigil, and therefore our rebirth in penance does not call for a vigil. All three, however, have octaves, because they all look forward to the octave of the resurrection.

There was a knight who was dauntless in combat and also fervently devoted to the Blessed Virgin. On his way to a tournament he came to a monastery built in honor of the Virgin and went in to hear mass; but one mass succeeded another, and for the Virgin's honor he did not want to miss any of them. Finally he left the monastery and rode as fast as he could toward the field of the tourney. And behold, he was met by knights coming back from the field, and they congratulated him for jousting so well. All who had been there said the same, and all applauded his mastery in the lists. There were also some who said he had captured them, and they surrendered to him forthwith. The knight, a man of discernment, saw that the courtly Queen had honored him in a courtly way. He explained what had happened, returned to the monastery, and thereafter soldiered for the Son of the Virgin.

A certain bishop, who held Blessed Mary in the highest reverence and piety, was on his way in the middle of the night to a church of the Virgin, to make a visit of devotion. And lo! the Virgin of virgins, accompanied by a great chorus of virgins, came to meet the bishop, received him with high honor, and began to lead him toward the church to which he was going. Two of the maidens from the choir led the chant, and sang:

Cantemus Domino, sociae, cantemus honorem, Dulcis amor Christi
resonet ore pio.⁷

The whole chorus of virgins took up the chant, repeating the verses, while the two leaders sang the next two in time:

⁷ Let us sing to the Lord, dear companions, let us carol his honor; / Let the sweet love of Christ resound in pious song.

Primus ad ima ruit magna de luce superbus, Sic homo cum tumuit,
primus ad ima ruit.⁸

Thus they led the man of God in procession to the church, the two leaders always intoning the verse and the rest responding.

A woman who had lost her husband had her only son, whom she loved tenderly, for consolation. It happened, however, that the son was captured by enemies and imprisoned in chains. When she heard this, she wept inconsolably, and prayed incessantly to the Blessed Virgin, to whom she was much devoted, to obtain her son's liberation. Then, seeing that her prayers were not answered, she went alone into a church where there was a sculptured image of Blessed Mary, and, standing in front of the image, she addressed it in these terms: "O Virgin blessed, I have often asked you for the liberation of my son, and so far you have not come to the aid of this pitiable mother. I have sought your patronage for my son and see no return for my prayers. Therefore, as my son has been taken away from me, I will take your Son away from you and hold him in custody as a hostage for mine." She then went up and took the image of the Child from the Virgin's lap, went home with it, wrapped it in spotless cloths, and hid it in a cupboard, which she locked carefully. Thus she could rejoice at having a good hostage for her son and guarded it closely.

The following night the Blessed Virgin appeared to the young man and opened the door of the prison. She told him to get up and leave, and said: "Son, you will tell your mother to give my Son back to me as I have given hers back to her." The youth walked out, went to his mother, and told her how the Virgin had set him free. Overjoyed, she took the image of the Child, went to the church, and returned her Son to Mary, saying: "I thank you, my lady, for restoring my only son to me, and now I return your Son to you, because I acknowledge that I have received my own."

There was a thief who committed many robberies, but had deep devotion to Blessed Mary and often greeted her with prayers. Once, however, he was caught in a robbery and sentenced to be hanged. When he was hanged, the Virgin was immediately at his side, and for three days, as it seemed to him, she held him up as he hung, so that he sustained no injury. But then the men who had hanged him, passing by and finding him alive and cheery of mien, thought that they had not adjusted the noose properly and prepared to finish him off with the sword, but the Blessed Virgin held back the swordsman's weapon and they could do the criminal no harm. They learned from him how Blessed Mary had come to his aid. Wondering, they took him down and, for love of the Virgin, let him go free. He went off and entered a monastery, where he spent his remaining years in the service of the mother of God.

There was a cleric who loved the Blessed Virgin devotedly and recited her hours faithfully. When his parents died, having no other offspring they left their whole estate to him. His friends then pressed him to take a wife and manage his heritage. On the appointed day he was on the way to his wedding and was passing a church, when he remembered his service to Mary, went into the church, and began to say her hours. The Blessed Virgin appeared to him and, as if angry said: "O foolish, unfaithful man! Why are you leaving me, your friend and spouse, for another woman?" The cleric was filled with remorse at this, but he returned to his companions, hiding his distress, and went through with the wedding. At midnight, however, he left everything behind and fled from his house, entered a monastery, and devoted himself to Mary's service.

The priest of a certain parish, a man of virtuous life, knew no other mass than the mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which he celebrated day after day in her honor. This was brought to the bishop's attention, and he called the priest in immediately. The priest told him that he did not know any other mass. The bishop scolded him harshly, called him an impostor, suspended him from his parish duties, and forbade him to celebrate Mary's mass. The following night Blessed Mary appeared to the bishop, rebuked him severely, and asked why

⁸ As [Lucifer] the proud one fell first from the great light into the depths, / so the first man, when he was swollen with pride, fell into the abyss.

he had treated her servant so badly. She added that he would die within thirty days unless he reinstated the priest in his parish. The bishop, shaken, summoned the priest, begged his pardon, and ordered him to celebrate no other mass than the one he knew, the mass of the Virgin Mary.

There was a cleric who was vain and dissolute, yet loved the mother of God devotedly and recited her office piously and promptly. One night, in a vision, he saw himself standing before God's judgment seat and heard the Lord saying to those present: "It is yours to decide what judgment the man who is looking at you deserves. I have tolerated his conduct for a long time and to this day have seen no sign of amendment in him." Then the Lord, with unanimous approval, pronounced a sentence of damnation upon the cleric. But now he saw the Blessed Virgin rise and say to her Son: "Loving Son, I ask your clemency for this man. Mitigate his sentence of damnation, and, as a favor to me, let him live, although what he really deserves is death." "I grant your petition," the Lord answered, "on condition that from now on I see him amend his ways." The Virgin turned to the man and said: "Go and sin no more, that nothing worse befall you!" The man awoke, changed his way of living, became a religious, and spent the rest of his life in good works.

In Sicily, in the year a.d. 537, as we have the story from Fulbert of Chartres, there was a man named Theophilus, who served a bishop as his administrator. Theophilus managed the Church's affairs so ably that when the bishop died, the whole populace acclaimed him as worthy of the episcopate. He was content to remain as administrator, however, and preferred to have someone else ordained as bishop. But in time this new bishop deprived Theophilus, all unwilling, of his office, and Theophilus fell into such despair that, in order to regain his honorable post, he sought the advice of a Jewish sorcerer. The sorcerer summoned the devil, who came immediately. Thereupon Theophilus, at the demon's command, renounced Christ and his mother, repudiated the Christian faith, wrote a statement of his renunciation and repudiation in his own blood, signed and sealed the script, and gave it to the demon, thus pledging himself to his service. The next day, by the devil's manipulation, Theophilus was taken back into the bishop's good graces and reinstated in his dignities of office.

In time, however, the good man came to his senses and regretted what he had done, and, with all the devotion of his heart, had recourse to the glorious Virgin. At a certain moment Blessed Mary appeared to him, upbraided him for his impiety, ordered him to renounce the devil, and made him confess his faith in her and in Christ, the Son of God, and in the whole Christian doctrine. So she brought him back into her favor and her Son's, and, in token of the forgiveness granted him, appeared to him again and returned the scroll he had given to the devil, placing it on his breast as a sign that he need not fear he might still be in the demon's service, and that through her intervention he was a free man. Theophilus, having received this gift, was overcome with joy. He went before the bishop and the whole populace, and gave a full account of the above events. All were filled with admiration and gave praise to the glorious Virgin, and Theophilus, three days later, fell asleep in the peace of the Lord.

A man and his wife had an only daughter whom they gave in marriage to a young man, and, for love of their daughter, brought the son-in-law into their house along with his wife. The girl's mother, for love of her daughter, cared for the young man so kindly that the bride's love for her husband was no greater than the mother-in-law's for her son-in-law. That being the situation, evil-minded people began to say that the woman was not doing this for her daughter's sake but was trying to take her daughter's place in the young man's affections. This false rumor unsettled the woman's mind, and, fearing it would turn into a public scandal, she parleyed with two countrymen, promising to pay each of them twenty sols if they would secretly strangle the son-in-law.

One day, therefore, she hid the two in the cellar of her house, sent her husband out on some business or other, and dispatched her daughter on some other errand. Then she asked the young man to go to the cellar and bring up some wine, and he was strangled by the two malefactors. The mother-in-law laid him out in her daughter's bed and covered him up as if he were sleeping. The husband and the daughter came home and were seated at the dinner

table, and the mother told her daughter to awaken her husband and call him to dinner. When the young wife found the dead body, she raised an outcry, the whole family fell to lamenting, and the murderess feigned to lament with the others. But in time she grieved over the crime she had committed and confessed the whole story to a priest. Sometime later a dispute arose between the woman and the priest, and he accused her of the murder of her son-in-law. When the young man's parents learned of this, they had her brought to justice, and the judge condemned her to die by fire. The woman, considering the fact that her end was near, had recourse to the mother of Christ, went to the Virgin's church, and prostrated herself in tears and prayer. In a short time she was forced to come out and was thrown into a blazing fire, and all saw her standing in the middle of the flames unhurt and unharmed. The dead man's kinsmen thought the fire was not big enough and fetched wood to throw on it, but, seeing that the woman was still unscathed, attacked her with lances and spears. The judge was stupefied at what was going on and checked their assaults, but, examining her carefully, he found no sign of the fire on the woman, or other mark except the wounds from the lances. Her own people then carried her back to her house and revived her with salves and baths. But it was not God's will that she should suffer suspicion and disgrace any longer, and after she had persevered for three days in praising the Virgin, God called her forth from this life.