

THE BIRTH OF JESUS IN THE GOSPELS

Only Matthew and Luke offer stories of the birth of Jesus. Mark's gospel begins with his baptism by John as an adult, and John's gospel begins with Jesus as the Word of God with God from before the creation of the world.

Matthew's and Luke's accounts are complementary but different. That they would be different on details is understandable. They are re-telling events that would have taken place 70-80 years earlier. The details, however, do matter. They are interpreted as part of the divine plan for Jesus. They reveal Jesus' identity in relation to God and his mission as the future messiah.

Matthew 1-2

1: 1-17 – Jesus' Genealogy

Genealogies have a purpose, and especially when they come at the beginning of a story. Jesus' pedigree is important. It's about his identity and qualifications as messiah. Right at the outset we are told that Jesus is the messiah, promised of old. His lineage goes back to Abraham, who first received the promise that he would be a father of a nation, Israel, and through Israel would bring blessing and salvation to all people. Jesus, the messiah, is taking the role of Israel.

Second, Jesus' lineage passes through the line of king David. Prophecies about the messiah were a bit all over the place. But they had in common the belief that there would be descent from David the greatest king Israel ever had. The messiah would be king, and a king descended from David, destined to bring all God's plans to fulfillment for Israel and the world.

The world beyond Israel is also represented in Jesus' lineage. In particular, Ruth and Rahab are listed. Both are non-Jews and both use their womanly charms to fulfill their purposes. God works in mysterious ways.

And God's plans are also fulfilled even through the moral flaws of people. A good example is the mention of Tamar who bore the child of Judah who was her father-in-law.

Finally, the number of names are important. There are 6 groups of 7 names, 7 being the most powerful symbolic number of God's activity. Jesus is the 7th 7. There is destiny marked all over him.

GENEALOGIES: Matthew 1: 1-17 compared to Luke 3: 23-38

In Matthew the key purpose of including a genealogy of Jesus is to link him to king David, as this is part of the prophecy about the messiah, namely, that he will emerge out of the lineage of David. Also, the link to Abraham is important, as he is the father of the Jewish people to whom the great promises of God were given, namely, that through Israel the world would be saved. Also, in the lineage are some less-than-desirable characters morally and racially (e.g. Rahab the prostitute, Ruth the Moabite, etc). Moreover, they are women rather than men, which would imply lesser authority. This gives us a further sense that God acts in ways that are different than human action and God makes possible things that would confound us humans. God also uses the most unlikely people, and this reminds us that God sees possibilities we do not see in people. In Luke, the David connection is there, but the other key link is Adam who is the father of all humankind. Hence, in Luke's gospel there is a concern to focus on Jesus' openness to non-Jews and the universal goal of the gospel for all peoples.

1: 18-25 – The Birth of Jesus

This account of Jesus' birth is presented to us from the point of view of Joseph (in Luke it is from Mary's). But in both Joseph and Mary there is a similar response to the angel's message. There is fear and perplexity, but there is also receptivity and trust. Without it, there would be no family for Jesus to grow up in. The trouble they must have gone through in that time and place cannot be underestimated. Both in the gospels as well as records outside the gospels, there are allusions to accusations of Jesus being illegitimate. This does not dissuade Joseph from choosing to marry Mary and become a father to Jesus. The names Jesus is given are also important pointers to his purpose and destiny. "Jesus" because he will be a saviour to his people and the world. "Emmanuel" because God's way of saving is by coming close and sharing the human journey in all its possibilities and tribulations. The unusual birth (from a virgin) also fulfills prophecy, another pointer to Jesus' divine destiny.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS: Matthew 1: 18-25 compared to Luke 1: 26-38

Matthew tells the story from Joseph's perspective and Luke tells it from Mary's perspective. Luke generally tends to focus on the importance of women in the ministry of Jesus.

In Matthew, Joseph and Mary are already living in Bethlehem, and the birth is in a house. Once Herod is hunting the infant, Joseph takes his family to Egypt until Herod dies. Since Herod's son takes over his father's throne in Judea (where Bethlehem is), Joseph doesn't return there, but goes north and settles in the village of Nazareth in Galilee.

In Luke, Mary and Joseph are already in Nazareth and only travel to Bethlehem because that is where Joseph was born and that is where they must go to be registered for tax purposes. Once they arrive, they realize there is not enough room in the inns, so they take up space in the stable of one inn. After the birth they stay in Bethlehem 8 days, until Jesus is ceremoniously circumcised in the temple (Bethlehem is just outside

Jerusalem). There they also encounter Simeon and Anna, who give remarkable testimony about Jesus. Then they return home to Nazareth.

Even though the details vary, the key elements that are central are:

- 1) Bethlehem is important for the birth, since Old Testament prophecy claims Bethlehem as the birthplace of the messiah.
- 2) Jesus grew up in Nazareth, so he must end up there somehow. The birth in Bethlehem and the family settling in Nazareth are the key elements.
- 3) But also, a key element is the miraculous nature of the birth and all the remarkable events that attend it, giving witness to the special nature of this child possessing a unique mission of God for the world.

Matthew 2: 1-12 – The Magi visit Jesus

Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other 3 times in 7 BC. Since Jupiter was the “royal” or kingly planet and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was obvious: a new king of the Jews was about to be born. This may account for the journey of astrologers/astronomers from the east. Clearly, they were wealthy to be able to make the Journey. Clearly, they represented some royalty from where they came, explaining the welcome they receive from Herod as well as the concern. There are many messages in this remarkable story, but the most important one is this: Herod is not the true king, but Jesus is. Herod is a false king, and this will be shown again and again through his actions as well as those of his children who succeed him. Jesus is the true king. The gifts the Magi offer him are the kinds of gifts one would give to a king.

There are all kinds of allusions to the story of Moses' birth through the wise men. Astrology was big business in Egypt and popular tradition believed that Pharaoh's astrologers predicted the birth of Moses as the source of Pharaoh's downfall.

Even more significantly, the wise men from the east receive God's light through their own religious persuasion, while the religious leaders of Israel, who have the law and the prophets, cannot and will not accept Jesus as God's messiah. The Jewish king (Herod) wants to kill him as a threat to his power, whereas these wise men (who had royal blood) travel a great distance to worship the baby Jesus as king.

The gifts are significant – Gold represents royalty (Jesus is king/Lord), Frankincense represents repentance (Israel will be called to return to God according to Jesus leadership), and Myrrh represents mourning (Jesus will be rejected and killed, and this will spell dire consequences for Israel as a whole).

Matthew 2: 13-23 – Travels to Egypt

Jesus is such a threat, that the most powerful man in the Jewish world, Herod, kills a whole village full of other babies to get rid of him. The shadow of the cross falls over Jesus early on. But Herod's actions also reveal who Jesus truly is. Jesus' travels to Egypt are not just practical (to get away from Herod). They point to the story of Israel's slavery and liberation. They also point to the connection of Moses and Jesus. To understand Jesus' role is also to look to Moses who will lead the people out of slavery and teach them the law of God. Jesus will be the new and greater Moses. The Jewish people may have been liberated, given the law, and the land. But once they were exiled, they never got their freedom back. And even though there were pockets of time where they inhabited and controlled their land, they were constantly invaded, overrun and ruled by foreigners. The Romans were the last of a long line of foreign invaders and rulers. Clearly, there were popular expectations of liberation that any would be Messiah would have to fulfill. Clearly, Jesus' mission as Messiah would have to address the theme of liberation/salvation from slavery.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus return not to Bethlehem, where they began, but go north to Nazareth in Galilee, far away from Herod's children. Both in going to Egypt and in growing up in Nazareth, Jesus is fulfilling prophecy. Make way for the king.

LUKE 1-2

In these opening chapters, Luke tells of the Holy Spirit's invasion into the lives of an elderly couple (Zechariah and Elizabeth), a young Girl (Mary), lowly shepherds, an old man of prayer (Simeon), and a prophetess (Anna).

God's great plan to save the world is revealed to the most humble and lowly of God's people. The fact that women are recipients of this revelation equally with men also contributes to the message that God comes to the humble, not the proud and important according to the world's measure. With humility comes a greater openness, and both humility and openness are essential foundations of faith. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to raise simple, common lives into channels of God's majesty and grace.

Luke 1: 5-24

Zechariah experiences a divine visitation while he is in the temple, (the innermost section of the temple called "the Holy of holies"), fulfilling his duty as priest. An angel of the Lord appears (Gabriel) and tells him that he and his wife will have a child in their old age. The Holy Spirit will be involved in this. The child's role will be to prepare the way. He will have the spirit and power of Elijah (It was popular belief that Elijah, the first great prophet of Israel, would re-appear to proclaim the coming of the Messiah). Because Zechariah questions the possibility of this happening he is struck with muteness, until the child is actually born.

Luke 1: 26-38

The angel Gabriel then appears to Mary, a young teenager living in the northern Galilean town of Nazareth. Why is she chosen? Her response to the dream says it all: she was believing, receptive and accepting. She didn't know what it would all mean, but she was open, ready and willing to play her role, whatever it would be.

Luke 1: 39-56

Mary and Elizabeth (John's mother) are relatives. This means Jesus and John are cousins, something we only come to know in this gospel account. The relationship between John and Jesus starts even in conception, when John acknowledges Jesus, begins to bear witness and prepare the way.

Mary's song (the *Magnificat*) is beautiful. But it speaks as if God has already accomplished a reversal of fortunes where the rich and powerful will be dislodged from their tyrannous rule, and those who are destitute and down-trodden will be vindicated and refreshed. Perhaps it is intended to be read like the Lord's prayer: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Perhaps it is a glimpse of God's future invading the present. If the rich and powerful believed Mary's vision, they would change their ways in anticipation of God changing it in time.

Mary receives a prophetic vision not unlike Hannah in the Old Testament (the mother of the prophet/priest Samuel). God's plan for salvation will involve the reversal of fortunes. Those who are well off and powerful in an unjust world order will lose what they have, while those who are ground down and unjustly treated will be vindicated and comforted. Let us remember that this is a world where there are a few rich and the many poor with no middle-class. The rich make their money on the backs of the poor and they have to ignore vast human misery to hold on to their wealth. There is grave injustice here. Jesus' mission as messiah will involve a reversal of fortunes, which means judgment and condemnation for the rich and vindication and relief for the poor in God's kingdom. The question is: will God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, or will those who hold power by force reject God's kingdom way? We know how the story goes.

Mary's vision, like the prophetic visions in the Old Testament, does not distinguish between Jesus' first and second coming. In Jesus' first coming, the reversal of fortunes happens in principle, not in fact. At the end of the current world order all will stand before the judgment seat of God. Only then will there will be divine accountability. This is what the second coming is about.

Luke 1: 57-80

John is born, Zechariah receives his speech back, and he proclaims a beautiful prophecy about John and the messiah to come.

Luke 2: 1-20

Mary and Joseph make the trip to Bethlehem while Mary is pregnant. The reason is for taxation purposes. Bethlehem is Joseph's hometown and it is the town of King David. The candidate for messiah must be of the lineage of David and Joseph serves that purpose as Jesus' official father.

Not only is Jesus born to poor parents and under impoverished circumstances, but the fact that God's revelation through angels comes to shepherds also reinforces the theme already articulated in the *Magnificat*. God is working through the lowly, not the powerful, those who are humble and are looking for hope, not those who are self-satisfied, comfortable and not interested in changing the order of things. Shepherds are low-class workers, just the kind of people God chooses to fulfill the divine plan.

The shepherds, like Jesus parents who have no money to get a good room in Bethlehem, come from poor stock. But this is whom God chooses to testify and shepherd the divine plan to save the world. The condemnation on the powers of the world is already given in these choices. For those in power, Jesus is simply a threat. There is no honest yearning for a messiah. The shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and even Simeon and Anna, represent a different Israel, those who are "looking for the redemption of Israel." (2:25) To such as these is the kingdom of God revealed.

Luke 2: 22-28

Both Simeon and Anna represent humble, vulnerable Israelites who are looking for the 'consolation of Israel.' (25) Upon seeing the child Simeon praises God singing what has been called the *Benedictus* (master, now you are 'dismissing' your servant in peace...). The prophecy points not only to Jesus role as Messiah and savior, but also to his rejection by the rulers of Israel and the suffering to come. Anna also praises God and starts telling people around about him. Both Simeon and Anna, like John in Elizabeth's womb, angels and shepherds, are all witnesses of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' identity.

LUKE 2: 21-52

2:21-24 – Whereas in Matthew's account, Joseph takes Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt to escape Herod, in Luke's account the family remain in Bethlehem until the 8th day when they make the trip to the temple in Jerusalem, to have Jesus circumcised according to tradition. Joseph and Mary are good Jews and Jesus grows up a good Jew. Why is this important? Not only does it fulfill prophecy in that Jesus continues to be an eligible candidate for Messiah, but it accentuates the injustice of the religious authorities who will be against him. As we have already discerned from the *Magnificat* (1:46-55), God has chosen to side with with humble, downtrodden Israel, over against the powerful and wealthy (which include religious authorities who are sold to the greed and power of Rome). They care to retain their own control and privilege rather than justice and compassion. The religious authorities are supposed to steward the faith entrusted to them not use it as a hammer to keep the people under control through guilt, shame and the threat of final judgment and eternal damnation.

2:25-35 – Simeon, like Mary and Joseph, also represents humble Israel. His hope and prayers are for the 'consolation of Israel'. Simeon recognizes in Jesus God's promise of deliverance and we are told it is the Holy Spirit that gives him the insight to recognize Jesus as the Christ (Messiah). He offers his poetic prophecy (known as the '*Benedictus*' in Christian tradition) which speaks of hope to be fulfilled in Jesus. This hope is not just for Israel but for the whole world. Luke is interested in those aspects of the story of Jesus that point to universal fulfillment beyond the Jewish nation. Clearly this gospel is aimed at a gentile audience.

But Simeon also offers more words to Mary in vs 33ff. He speaks about the trouble and opposition Jesus will face and how all this will cause pain in Mary's heart. Clearly this gospel account is taking care to tell the story from Mary's point of view.

2: 36-38 – Anna is named as another devout, humble Jew, a prophetess. She also recognizes in Jesus God's salvation and deliverance, and she begins to tell others about him.

2:39-40 – The family return to their home in Nazareth and Jesus grows up a good Jewish boy.

2: 41-52 – Here we encounter Jesus as a 12 year old boy as he comes with his parents to Jerusalem and the temple during some religious festival. He gets so immersed in discussion with religious teachers in the temple that his parents forget about him and begin their trip back north to Nazareth without him. They are probably part of a convoy of travelers and so it would be easy to miss Jesus. They return to find him still in the temple. Why is this story here? Clearly, Jesus' rebuke of his parents, even at 12, that he must be 'in his Father's house', already foreshadows his self-understanding as being connected with God in a personal and unique way. It could be interpreted as an arrogant and inconsiderate statement to his parents who are rightly concerned about his welfare, unless, of course, he is someone unique and special.

JESUS AS THE WORD OF GOD John 1: 1-18

From the very beginning, John's gospel makes it clear that the gospel is not intended to be a simple narration of Jesus' life but, rather, a reflection of the absolute importance of Jesus for life eternal. The opening poem (vs 1-18) already anticipates a number of central themes within the gospel as a whole: the relationship of Jesus with God; the sharp division between those who believe and those who do not (light and darkness); the revelation of glory that was the life of Jesus; the importance of the incarnation as an event in history; the rejection of Jesus that is the indication of the darkness that has enveloped humanity; and the special role that testimony and evidence play in persuading the reader to believe in Jesus.

The meaning of the poem is clear: Jesus Christ is not just a prophet or a saviour, but the very incarnation of the Word of God, the active power of God involved in creating the world and bringing life in all its fullness.

The flow of the poem begins with the Word, the Word which is a person, a person who is life and light come to a world of darkness and death. The Word incarnate comes into a world, but a world that will reject him. Nonetheless, there will be those few who will be open to the light and as a result will be born again by God. This Word made flesh is identified with Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, Jesus has the supreme role of being the revelation of God ('No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' V.18)