

The Birth of the Messiah

UPDATED EDITION



THE BIRTH *of the* MESSIAH

*A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the
Gospels of Matthew and Luke*

RAYMOND E. BROWN

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Introduction

- The gospels of Matthew and Luke differ from the Mark and John by beginning with stories of Jesus' conception and birth
 - Mark never mentions Joseph
 - John never gives the name of Jesus' mother

Introduction

- To understand these infancy narratives, we must remember:
 - The gospels were not intended be historical biographies, but rather proclamations of the good news of salvation in the life of Jesus
 - All gospel material was colored by the faith and experience of the Church of the first century

Introduction

- The origin and historical accuracy of the birth stories are unknown
 - The stories in Matthew and Luke
 - Agree in only a few details
 - Contradict each other in other details
 - There is no good historical record of public events mentioned in the birth stories (a new star, a worldwide census)
 - Unlike what Jesus said and did during his ministry, no one claims apostolic witness to the events at Bethlehem

**So why did Matthew and Luke
begin their gospels (the good
news of Jesus) with these
birth stories?**

Introduction

Reason for the Birth Stories

To make the “Christological”
declaration that
Jesus was God at his birth

Introduction

Early Church's Understanding of Jesus

- Church's understanding of who Jesus was grew during the first century
- Oldest part of the gospel was the Passion narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Some ancient preaching suggested Jesus' exaltation as God occurred at his resurrection:
 - Acts 2:32; 2:36; 5:31; 13:33
 - Romans 1:4 (by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus was designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness)

Introduction

Early Church's Understanding of Jesus

- Mark's gospel (the earliest gospel) begins his account of the good news of Jesus Christ at Jesus' baptism
 - At the moment of his baptism, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus who is revealed as God's Son
- Matthew and Luke (later gospels), through the infancy narratives, make clear Jesus was God's Son *at his birth*

The Birth of the Messiah

Matthew 2:1-23

The Meaning of the Magi; the Significance of the Star

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

Matt 2:1-2 NRSV

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”’

Matt 2:3-6 NRSV

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage

Matt 2:7-8 NRSV

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Matt 2:13-15 NRSV

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’

Matt 2:16-18 NRSV

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’

Matt 2:19-23 NRSV

Old Testament Imagery

- Annunciation to Joseph in Matthew 1 follows pattern similar to:
 - Birth of Isaac (Gen 17:15-21)
 - Birth of Samuel (Judges 13)
- Portrait of Joseph with revelations through dreams (1:20; 2:13, 19) who goes to Egypt is similar to portrait of Joseph in the Old Testament (“the master of dreams Gen 37:19) who went down to Egypt (Gen 37:28)

Old Testament Imagery

- Jesus' escape from Herod is like Moses' escape from Pharaoh. From Philo and Josephus:
 - Pharaoh forewarned through scribes of a child to be born who would threaten his crown
 - He decides to kill all Hebrew male children
 - In a dream, it is revealed to Moses' father that his wife, then pregnant, would bear a child who would save Israel
 - Moses flees to Sinai; returns only when "All those who are seeking your life are dead (Ex 4:19 cf Matt 2:20)

Old Testament Imagery

- Story of the Magi echoes story of Moses' encounter with Balaam in Num 22-24
 - Moses on the way to promised land encounters Balak, the wicked king of Moab
 - Balak summons a non-Israelite, the famous seer (practicer of enchantment = magi) Balaam *from the East* (Num 23:7)
 - Balaam and two servants arrive (Num 22:22). Instead of cursing Moses, Balaam declares:

Old Testament Imagery

There shall come a man out of Israel's seed, and he shall rule many nations...
I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not close; *a star shall rise* from Jacob, and a man [scepter] shall come forth from Israel

- Num 24:7; 17; partially the Greek Septuagint: LXX

Old Testament Imagery

- This statement of Balaam:
 - Refers to the emergence of the Davidic monarchy. David was the star who would be given the scepter over the United Kingdom of Judah and Israel
 - In later Judaism, passage taken refer to the Messiah, the anointed king of Davidic descent

Old Testament Imagery

- Herod reminiscent of:
 - Pharaoh who tried to destroy baby Moses
 - King Balak of Moab who tried to destroy Moses with the Magus Balaam from the East
- Just as the magus Balaam saw the star of David rise, Matthew's magi see the star of the King of the Jews rise

Gospel in Miniature

- The story of the Magi and the Star in Matthew is also a story about the fate of the proclamation good news of salvation
 - The good news draws believers – the magi, Gentiles
 - God reveals himself to the Gentiles through nature – the birth star
 - This revelation is imperfect; true meaning must come from the special revelation of God to Israel in Scripture

Gospel in Miniature

- Yet those who know the Scripture – the Jews – refuse to worship the newborn King
- Instead, the king, chief priests, and scribes conspire against the Messiah. The wicked king decrees his death
- But God spares Jesus and brings him back from another land

Gospel in Miniature

- In other words, the stories reminiscent of Old Testament Joseph, Moses, and Balaam are also an anticipation of the story of the passion and resurrection of Jesus
 - Pilate, the chief priest and scribe conspire against Jesus
 - God makes Jesus victorious by bringing him back

Gospel in Miniature

- Those who have the Scripture reject Jesus, but the Gentiles come and with the help of the Scripture, find and adore him
 - Magi become the anticipation of all those who would come to worship Jesus
 - Magi (like Balaam), see the star of the King of the Jews at its rising, see (but not now) the one whose kingship will not be clear historically until his death and resurrection

The Birth of the Messiah

Luke 2:1-21

The Meaning of the Manger; the Significance of the Shepherds

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

Luke 2:1-4 NRSV

He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:5-7 NRSV

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’

Luke 2:8-12 NRSV

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’

Luke 2:13-15 NRSV

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:16-20 NRSV

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke 2:21 NRSV

Parallel Structure

Luke and Matthew

- Annunciation to one parent
 - Matthew: to Joseph
 - Luke: to Mary
- Brief reference to birth of child in Bethlehem
- Divine proclamation of the messianic birth to an audience
 - Matthew: Gentile Magi via the star
 - Luke: Jewish shepherds

Parallel Structure

Luke and Matthew

- Each group guided by revelation to Bethlehem
 - Magi pay homage, bring gifts
 - Shepherds praise God
- Both groups return to where they had come

Caesar and Christ

- Center of Luke's narrative: the proclamation to the Shepherds and their reaction
 - Verses 1-5: census brings Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem
 - Verses 6-7: Mary gives birth to Jesus, swaddled him and laid him in a manger

Caesar and Christ

- Luke needs the census to explain why Mary and Joseph traveled from home in Nazareth to Bethlehem
- Major historical problems with Luke's census:
 - There was never a single census of the Roman Empire under Caesar Augustus
 - Herod the Great died 4 BC; Quirinius was governor of Syria and conducted a census of Judea (not Galilee) in 6-7 AD

Caesar and Christ

- In evoking Augustus, Luke gives the birth of Jesus a solemn setting and hints at its cosmic significance
- Age of Augustus propagandized as a glorious age of rule over a world made peaceful by virtue, in fulfillment of Virgil's dream in the *Fourth Eclogue*

Caesar and Christ

- Great altar to the peace of Augustus (*Ara Pacis Augustae*) erected in 13-9 BC
- Greek cities of Asia Minor had adopted Sep. 23, birthday of Augustus, as first day of the New Year
 - Hailed at Halicarnassus as “savior of the whole world”
 - Priene inscription: “The birthday of the god marked the beginning of the good news for the world.”

Caesar and Christ

- Luke contradicts this propaganda by having an edict of Augustus serve as a setting for the birth of Jesus
- A heavenly chorus proclaims the *pax Christi*: **“On earth, peace to those favored by God.”** (2:14)
- The “good news” does not begin with the birthday of Augustus, but with the angels’ cry: **“I announce to you the good news of a great joy which will be for the whole people. To you this day there is born in the city of David a Savior who is Messiah and Lord”** (2:10-11)

Old Testament Imagery

Census

- Luke's census may be intended as that foretold in the Psalm 87:6 "In the census of the peoples, this one will be born there."

Old Testament Imagery

Manger

- Speculations about “no room in the inn” or the hardship of impoverished parents detract from Luke’s purpose
- Luke’s purpose is the symbolism of the manger in God’s complaint against Israel in Isaiah 1:3 **“The ox knows its owner and the donkey knows the *manger of its lord*; but Israel has not known me, and my people have not understood me.”**

Old Testament Imagery

Manger

- Luke wants to proclaim that this Isaian dictum has at last been repealed!
 - The good news of the birth of their LORD has been proclaimed to the shepherds
 - They have found the baby Jesus in the manger and have begun to praise God
 - God's people have at last begun to know the manger of their LORD

Old Testament Imagery

Shepherds and Their Flock

- Intended to evoke the memory of David as a shepherd in Bethlehem
 - Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, called the “city of David”

Old Testament Imagery

Shepherds and Their Flock

- Mention of their flocks may be intended to evoke memories of the Migdal Eder, “Tower of the Flock,”
 - in Micah, identified as where the kingdom would be restored and fulfilled (Micah identifies it with Jerusalem)
 - In Targum Pseudo-Jonathan translation of Genesis 35:21, identified as where the King Messiah will be revealed at the end of day”
- Luke may be trying to identify the Tower of the Flock with Bethlehem

Old Testament Imagery

The Gloria in Excelsis Canticle

- Four poetic canticles in Luke's infancy narrative:
 - 1. Gloria in Excelsis (2:13-14) **Glory in the highest heavens to God, and on peace to those favored by Him**
 - 2. Magnificat
 - 3. Benedictus
 - 4. Nunc Dimittis

Old Testament Imagery

The Gloria in Excelsis Canticle

- Jewish scholars have noted the similarity between the Gloria, and the Sanctus sung by the seraphim to the Lord of Hosts in the Jerusalem temple (Isaiah 6:3)
 - In Jewish prayer tradition, the “holy, holy, holy” expanded to “Holy in the highest heaven; ... holy on earth, ...”

Old Testament Imagery

The Gloria in Excelsis Canticle

- Luke may again be moving focus from Jerusalem to Bethlehem
- The hosts of angels have moved from the Holy of Holies in the Temple to the presence of the LORD in Bethlehem

Reaction to the Proclamation

- Shepherds hear the word, believe and praise God
 - Symbolize an Israel that has at least recognized its Lord (know at last the manger of their Lord)
- Hearers who are astonished at the news (2:18)
 - Astonishment not necessarily belief
 - Like those in the Parable of the Seed (Luke 8:13) who “hear the word, receive it with joy, but have no root.”

Reaction to the Proclamation

- Reaction of Mary: “kept with concern all these events, interpreting them in her heart” (2:19)
 - In the Parable of the Seed (8:15): “Those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart.”

References

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