

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 Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

Luke 2:22-40

Nativity Stories:

Luke vs. Matthew

- Thematic similarities in the Nativity stories of Luke and Mark:
 - Both proclaim the “good news” that Jesus was the Son of God at his birth
 - News proclaimed to a group not present at the birth:
 - By a star to the magi
 - By an angel to the shepherds
 - Each group comes to Bethlehem to believe and worship
 - Each group goes back to where they came from

Nativity Stories:

Luke vs. Matthew

- Matthew's aftermath:
 - modeled after Pharaoh's attempt to kill infant Moses
 - King Herod orders the slaughter of male infants to kill Jesus
 - Escape to Egypt
 - Return (but to Nazareth) after Herod dies

Nativity Stories:

Luke vs. Matthew

- Luke's aftermath:
 - Peaceful presentation of Jesus in the Jerusalem temple
 - Greeted by Simeon and Anna
 - Modeled after Hannah's presentation of the boy Samuel in the shrine at Shiloh, where he is accepted by priest Eli (1 Samuel 1-2)

Nativity Stories:

Luke vs. Matthew

- Matthew's story:
 - “passion” narrative shift to infancy: themes of persecution and opposition introduced
- Luke's story:
 - Also introduces theme of persecution and opposition: Simeon identifies Jesus as a:
 - sign that will be contradicted
 - occasion for the fall of many in Israel
 - occasion for a sword passing through the soul (Luke 2:34-35)

Nativity Stories: Luke vs. Matthew

- Matthew and Luke:
 - Both introduce a motif of passion and suffering into the aftermath of the birth story
 - Writing fifty years later, both know that the good news of Jesus will be accepted by many, but also rejected and vigorously opposed

**The particular message of
Luke's account of the
Presentation in the Temple:
"The Law and the Prophets"**

The Law and the Prophets

- To get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, Luke introduces the census – with historical problems
- To get the family from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, Luke introduces the purification and presentation – again with historical problems

The Law and the Prophets

- Luke seems confused by two different Jewish customs:
 - Purification of the mother at the sanctuary (Temple) after the birth of a child
 - Mother offered two young pigeons or doves (Lev 12:1-8)
 - Presentation of the first male child to the Lord
 - Parents would pay 5 shekels at the sanctuary to “buy him back”

The Law and the Prophets

- Problems with Luke's account: Luke seems to think that:
 - both parents must be purified (2:22)
 - child had to be brought to Jerusalem for the presentation (2:22b-23)
 - The offering of two young pigeons was related to presentation of the child
- Luke was a Gentile convert and likely had only book knowledge of Jewish customs

The Law and the Prophets

The Law

- Luke's focus is on the Presentation
- Stresses the action was according to the **Law of the Lord** (5 times 2:22, 23, 24, 27, and 29)
 - Also had reminded us (2:21) Jesus circumcised on the 8th day
- Earlier he portrayed Jesus' parents obedient to the *Roman edict* of the census; now he portrays them obedient to *Jewish custom*
- Jesus' origins were an offense to neither Rome nor to Israel

The Law and the Prophets

The Prophets

- In the temple, Jesus met by Simeon and Anna
 - Anna: prophetess (2:36)
 - Simeon moved by the Spirit to prophecy about Jesus' future (2:34-35)
- Just a “Law” is mentioned in three consecutive verses (22, 23, 24), so Spirit is mentioned in three consecutive verses (25, 26, 27)
- “the Law and the prophets,” the heritage of Israel, are the context for the beginning of Jesus' career

Zechariah / Elizabeth :: Simeon / Anna

- At earlier level of composition, Luke's narrative may have ended with the Presentation story, giving it perfect correspondence between beginning and end
- *Beginning*: Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:5-7) proclaim in the temple the good news of John the Baptist
- *End*: Simeon and Anna proclaim the good news about Jesus (2:38)

Zechariah / Elizabeth :: Simeon / Anna

- *Beginning: Zechariah filled with the Holy Spirit to utter Benedictus*
 - Honoring John the Baptist, prophet of the Most High (1:67, 76)
- *End: Simeon filled with the Holy Spirit to utter the Nunc Dimittis (2:25-27)*
 - Honoring Jesus, Son of the Most High (1:32)

Zechariah / Elizabeth :: Simeon / Anna

- *Beginning:* Elizabeth reacted to the good news by thanking God (1:24-25); the good news reached her neighbors (1:57-58)
- *End:* Anna reacts to the good news by thanking God, and speaks about the good news of the child Jesus to all those waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (2:38)

Zechariah / Elizabeth :: Simeon / Anna

- Zechariah / Elizabeth and Simeon / Anna both recall Old Testament couple Elkanah and Hannah (Anna), who
 - prayed to have a child, who was Samuel
 - presented child Samuel to the Lord (1 Samuel 1:25) to the aged high priest Eli and to the women serving at the entrance
 - Are blessed by Eli (1 Samuel 2:20), just as Jesus' parents blessed by Simeon
 - Return home (1 Samuel 2:20), just as parents of Jesus return to Galilee

Zechariah / Elizabeth :: Simeon / Anna

- Samuel grows in stature and favor with God and men (1 Samuel 2:21, 26), just as Jesus grows and becomes strong, filled with wisdom and favored by God (Luke 2:40)

Two Poetic Oracles of Simeon

- **Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32)**
 - Simeon's blessing of God
 - One of four Canticles in Luke's nativity narrative (others: **Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria in Excelsis**)
- **Second oracle (Luke 2:34-35)**
 - Simeon's blessing upon the Parents, and especially upon Mary

Two Poetic Oracles of Simeon

Nunc Dimittis

Mighty Master, now you may let your servant depart in peace, since you kept your word.

For my eyes have seen this salvation that you made ready in the sight of all peoples:

a light to be a revelation to the Gentiles and to be a glory for your people Israel

Two Poetic Oracles of Simeon

Nunc Dimittis

- Spoken by one “waiting for consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25)
 - Echoes language of second and third parts Isaiah (40:1, 66:12-13)
- Canticle itself almost a pastiche of passages from Isaiah (40:5, 42:6, 46:13, 49:6, 52:9-10), with its themes of:
 - Seeing salvation
 - The sight of all the peoples
 - A light to the Gentiles
 - Glory for Israel

Two Poetic Oracles of Simeon

Nunc Dimittis

- It is remarkable that the universalism of Isaiah is now brought into Luke's narrative
 - The consolation and salvation of Israel is also a revelation to and the salvation of the Gentiles
- Echoes Matthew's interest in the Gentiles with his story of the revelation of the star to the magi from the East

Two Poetic Oracles of Simeon

Second Oracle

**Behold, he is set for the fall and rise of
many in Israel**

and for a sign to be contradicted –

**indeed, a sword will pass through your
own soul –**

**so that the inmost thoughts of many may
be revealed**

Two Poetic Oracles of Simeon

Second Oracle

- Simeon foresees rejection and catastrophe. Majority of Israel will reject Jesus
- “A sword will pass through your own soul,” addressed to Mary
 - Sword is a selective sword of judgment, destroying some and sparing others
 - Discriminating judgment will come upon Israel and upon Mary as an individual
- Jesus will later declare: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Acts 1:14)

Two Poetic Oracles of Simeon

Second Oracle

“The physical fact of motherhood gave her [Mary] no special status according the values Jesus preached. If she is remembered as a mother in the Christian community, it is not only because her womb bore Jesus and her breasts nourished him (11:27); rather it is because she believed the Lord’s word in a way that gave her a preeminent membership in his true family of disciples (1:41; 8:21)”

- Brown

The Finding of the Boy Jesus in the Temple

Luke 2:41-52

A Christmas Story?

- The Finding of Jesus in the temple story had the same purpose as the other Christmas stories

- The Core of the story:

the boy Jesus calls God his Father

(Luke 2:49)

An Independent Tradition

- Story was likely *independent* of the preceding birth stories. Reasons:
 - Different literary genre. An example of a “hidden life” story (Jesus’ life with his family before his ministry)
 - Other examples are found in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*
 - Does not fit Luke’s diptych arrangement of:
 - 1. Matching annunciation scenes for John the Baptist and then Jesus
 - 2. Zechariah / Elizabeth :: Simeon / Anna parallel

An Independent Tradition

- Story best read as independent of the previous stories:
 - Joseph called the father of Jesus (2:48)
 - Mary and Joseph don't seem to understand Jesus when he calls God his Father (2:49-50)
- Greek in Finding story has fewer Semitisms than the Greek of preceding nativity narratives

Development of New Testament Christology

- The Backward development of New Testament Christology
 - Jesus “adopted” as Son of God via his Passion, Death, Resurrection (in Paul’s letters)
 - Jesus revealed as Son of God at his baptism (Gospel of Mark)
 - Jesus revealed as Son of God at his birth (Matthew’s and Luke’s nativity stories)
 - Jesus Son of God before his conception (John’s pre-existence Christology)

Development of New Testament Christology

- The “hidden life” stories are another example of developing Christology in the early Church
 - Center on the first moments of Jesus’ rationale life, when Jesus can express a self-evaluation of who he is
 - Conception stories: an “angel of the Lord” reveals Jesus as Son of God
 - “Hidden Life” Finding story: Jesus himself speaks and reveals his self-revelation as the Son of God

Boyhood Stories

- World literature abounded with stories of great men who were showing astounding capabilities between age 10-14
 - Buddha in India
 - Osiris in Egypt
 - Cyrus the Great in Persia
 - Alexander the Great in Greece
 - Augustus in Rome

Boyhood Stories

- Jewish legends about Moses in Philo:
 - Extraordinary knowledge as a boy
 - God gave him understanding and stature and beauty of appearance
- Jewish legends about Samuel in Josephus:
 - Began to act as a prophet at the completion of his twelfth year
- “... there was a clear pattern of boyhood stories of famous figures at about age twelve...”

Boyhood Stories

- Customarily stressed three features anticipated from subject's later career:
 - His piety
 - His wisdom
 - Some distinctive aspect of his life's work
- Luke presents each feature in an ascending order of importance

Outline of the Story

- ***Framework Statement:*** about Jesus' growth, his wisdom and favor (2:40)
- ***Geographical Introduction:*** Jesus and parents have gone up to Jerusalem (2:41-42)
- ***Setting:*** Parents lose Jesus and search for him (2:43-45)
- ***Core:*** Parents find Jesus and are amazed; Jesus stresses the claims of his Father (2:45-50)

Outline of the Story

- ***Geographical Conclusion:*** Jesus goes down with his parents to Nazareth (2:51)
- ***Framework Statement*** about Jesus progress in wisdom, maturity, and favor (2:52)

Piety

- Parents again obedient to the Law by going up to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover (2:41)
 - Jesus implicitly also respectful of duty
 - Echoes the “temple piety” of Luke’s description of the first Christians in Acts (2:45, 3:1, 5:12)
- Message: there is no conflict between Jesus himself and the best in Judaism

Wisdom

- Story framed between two statements of Jesus' growth:
 - 2:40 “And the child grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom and favored by God.”
 - 2:52 “And Jesus made progress in wisdom, maturity [or stature], and favor before God and men.”

Wisdom

- Framing statements parallel the growth descriptions in 1 Samuel:
 - 2:21: “And the child [Samuel] waxed mightily before the Lord.
 - 2:26 “The child advanced and was good in the company of God and men.”

Wisdom

- Luke mentions **wisdom** in both his framing statements
- In story's core: "All who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers."
- Anticipates the wisdom in sacred teaching and amazement of those hearing it that will mark his ministry (Luke 4:22, 4:36, 19:47)

Distinctive Aspect of His Life's Work

- **Mary:** “Child, why have you done this to us? Behold your father and I have been so worried looking for you.”
- **Jesus:** “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?”
- Jesus' response shows his priorities are with God rather than his earthly family

Distinctive Aspect of His Life's Work

- Parallels in other gospels:
 - Mark 3:21. When “his own” hear about his all consuming ministerial activity, “they set out to seize him.”
 - Mark 3:33: Who are my mother and my brothers? ... Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Distinctive Aspect of His Life's Work

- Parallels in other gospels:
 - John 2:3: Jesus' mother makes a demand of family obligation on Jesus, reporting her friends (or perhaps relatives) are out of wine
 - John 2:4: "Woman, what has this concern of yours to do with me? My hour has not yet come."
 - The "hour" will be determined by his relationship with his heavenly Father (13:1)

Distinctive Aspect of His Life's Work

- In declaring “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house,” Jesus:
 - Makes clear his priorities are with God
 - Reveals he is God’s Son
- Parent’s lack of understanding of his statement in Luke’s context is a lack of understanding of the claims of his vocation over the claims of his parents

Distinctive Aspect of His Life's Work

- Mary, although not understanding, keeps “with concern all these events in her heart.”
 - She is like the good disciple in the parable of the Sower, where the seed falls on good soil = “those who, hearing the word of God, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.” (Luke 8:15)
- Later in his ministry, Jesus will explain his priority “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:19-21)

Why Do People Not Know Who Jesus Is When He Begins His Ministry?

- Luke insists on the uniqueness of this moment of self-revelation by Jesus: “He went back down with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them” (2:51)
- “Marcan Secret” = Jesus is Son of God during his ministry, but disciples do not know
- Luke thus moves the “Marcan Secret” back to the boyhood of Jesus

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