

BIRTH OF JESUS

Genealogy:

Both Matthew and Luke present a genealogy for Jesus. Matthew draws immediate attention to two figures, Abraham and David, before he begins with the genealogy. Not only are these two figures important in Israel's history, but God made promises to them both that find their fulfillment in Jesus. To Abraham, God had promised that all nations of the earth would be blessed through him and through his seed (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). To David, God promised that a descendant of his would build a house and establish an everlasting kingdom, that the Lord would be his father and he God's son (2 Sam 7:12-14). The promises were fulfilled immediately in Solomon who did build a temple in Jerusalem and a long line of kings did follow from David and Solomon; but with the exile of God's people to Babylon and the historical events that followed it seemed as though this promise of an everlasting kingdom was yet to be fulfilled; the Jews therefore believed another king from the Davidic line would come whose reign would be glorious. The promise of this everlasting kingship is perhaps also relevant in reference to Abraham for Abraham himself was promised that kings of the earth would come from him (Gen. 17:6, 16). In any case, the promises to both David and Abraham find their fulfillment in Jesus and Matthew's inclusion of these two names before the genealogy allude to this. He is the one through whom all nations of the earth will be blessed and he is the one whose kingdom will be everlasting. Matthew's genealogy is divided into three sections, from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, and from the exile to the birth of Christ. In this middle section, all those listed were kings of Judah. The genealogy presents Jesus as being from a line of kings.

Along with Mary, Matthew also mentions four other women in his genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. The women Matthew chooses to mention were in one way or another of questionable repute. Tamar was involved in incest with Judah; Rahab was a prostitute and a traitor; Ruth was a Gentile and Bathsheba was an adulterer. Although their husbands or partners were in one way or another often responsible for what had taken place, Matthew may have included these women in the genealogy to suggest Jesus' role in redeeming sin: their inclusion in the genealogy may indicate their inclusion amongst the people of God. More importantly perhaps, with each of these four women there was something extraordinary or irregular about their union with their husbands or partners. In this respect, all four women may well have foreshadowed Mary. In each of the four instances, God overcame the moral or biological irregularity of the human parents, while with Mary he overcame the total absence of Joseph's begetting. Third, each of the four women were likely Gentiles: there is indication that Tamar was Aramean in the book of Jubilees; Rahab was clearly a Canaanite; Ruth a Moabite and Bathsheba was likely a Hittite like her husband Uriah. That some of all of these women were Gentiles would perhaps suggest the role the Messiah would play to the Gentiles. Finally, Ruth is clearly presented in the Old Testament as a character of faith as is Rahab in the New Testament (Heb. 11:31; Jas. 2:25) perhaps suggesting the faith of Mary in her role in the birth of the Messiah.

The genealogies in Matthew and Luke differ in a number of ways. Matthew traces the genealogy forward through time; Luke backwards through time. Matthew traces the genealogy from Abraham to Joseph. Matthew likely began with Abraham so as to draw attention to the fulfillment of promises. Luke may have traced the genealogy all the way back to Adam to suggest that both Jews and Gentiles, all who descended from Adam, were to be included amongst the people of God. Adam's failure in face of temptation in the Garden of Eden also contrasts with Christ's triumph over temptation in the wilderness which immediately follows Luke's genealogy (Luke 4:1-13). Another notable difference is that, in any given period, Luke's list contains more names than does Matthew. Matthew has three sets of fourteen generations: fourteen generations from Abraham to king David, fourteen generations from David to the exile and fourteen generations from the exile to Jesus. Jesus thus begins the seventh seven, seven being conceived of as a perfect number in Hebrew thought. Matthew appears to have omitted various generations - not an uncommon practice in genealogies at the time - in order to secure the three sets of fourteen generations. Although less explicit, Luke's genealogy also has a certain numeric ordering and Luke too may have been selective with which generations he chose to include. Luke's genealogy has seventy seven generations - eleven sets of seven. Luke has twenty-one generations (three sets of seven) from Joseph to Shealtiel and the end of the exile; twenty-one generations (three sets of seven) from Shealtiel and the end of the exile to David; fourteen generations (two sets of seven) from David to Abraham; and twenty-one generations (three sets of seven) from Abraham through Adam to God. God thus ends up being the seventy seventh name from Joseph, suggesting his perfection. Luke's emphasis

on Jesus' human ancestry contrasts with his divine sonship announced at his baptism which immediately precedes the genealogy in Luke's gospel (Luke 3:21-22). Luke desires to make clear that Jesus is "son of God" in the both human and divine understanding of this expression (Luke 3:22,38).

The discrepancies between the two genealogies however go beyond ordering. Certainly an immediately perceivable difference between the two is that starting with what appears to be Joseph's father, the lists all the way back to Zerubabel and the post-exilic period have almost no names in common. Some have proposed that Matthew's genealogy traces Joseph's line and Luke's genealogy traces Mary's line. Indeed, Joseph seems to be the central character in Matthew's infancy narrative and Mary is the central character in Luke's. Furthermore, in Luke's genealogy there is the note that it was only commonly supposed that Jesus was the son of Joseph perhaps hinting that Luke intends to trace rather Mary's genealogy. Others have suggested that the genealogies differ because of the varying ways of accounting for levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10), the custom when a husband has died childless, of having his next of kin marry the widow in order to beget children to continue the deceased husband's lineage. If such were the case, both evangelists have given the family line of Joseph but one through Joseph's natural father and the other through Joseph's legal, deceased father. Such a theory might also potentially account for the differences in the genealogies between king David and the exile.

Mary and Joseph:

Mary and Joseph also some receive attention in the birth narratives. Matthew focuses on Joseph and Luke on Mary. In both gospels both Joseph and Mary are presented as being obedient to what God has directed. The angel of the Lord had commanded that Joseph take Mary home as his wife because the child who had been conceived in her was of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was also told to call the child to be born of Mary, Jesus. He is obedient to both instructions (Matt. 1:24-25). Mary's response when the angel Gabriel appeared to her to announce Jesus' conception was "may it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) which is in sharp contrast to Zechariah's doubt concerning Elizabeth's conception earlier in Luke's account (Luke 1:18).

Both Matthew and Luke speak of the child of Mary being conceived of the Holy Spirit. From this Matthew draws attention to the virgin birth (Matt. 1:20-23) and Luke also makes reference to Mary's being a virgin (Luke 1:27,34). Matthew speaks of the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah had prophesied of a virgin conceiving and giving birth to a child whose name would be "Immanuel" meaning "God with us" (Is. 7:14). The immediate referent of the prophecy was Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, who went on to institute numerous religious reforms and had been a righteous king. But Matthew suggests that the prophecy ultimately pointed to Jesus.

A few further details concerning Luke's account of Mary worth mention. First, whereas in Matthew an angel of the Lord is said to appear to Joseph in a dream, in Luke it is the angel Gabriel who appears to Mary. Gabriel is mentioned in the Old Testament only in the book of Daniel (Dan. 8:16-27; 9:21-27); there the angel Gabriel announced seventy weeks of years until the coming of the Messiah, the Prince (9:21-27). When Mary visited Elizabeth who was to give birth to John the Baptist, the baby in her womb leapt for joy; Elizabeth subsequently praised Mary for her faith (Luke 1:39-45). Also of note is Mary's response, the Magnificat, to Elizabeth's greeting her (Luke 1:46-56). Mary praises God for his action towards her; for his might, holiness and mercy; for his blessing the poor and for the help he has given to Israel.

Even in these accounts of Mary and Joseph, the gospel writers reveal something of the identity of Jesus. Mary is told that the child to be conceived in her she shall name Jesus (Luke 1:31). Joseph is also told to call the child to be born of Mary, Jesus (Matt. 1:21). Jesus in the New Testament corresponds the name Joshua in the Old Testament. Both mean "God saves" and indeed the angel tells Joseph that Jesus will save his people from their sins. Mary is also told that God will give her child the throne of his father David and that his kingdom will never end (Luke 1:32-33), clearly making reference to God's covenant with David and suggestive of the hope for the Messiah. Finally, Mary is also told that because the conception of the child will be through the coming of the Holy Spirit upon her, through the power of the Most High, the child to be conceived will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

Announcement to the Shepherds:

In Luke's account, Mary and Joseph had been living in Nazareth, but were required to travel to Bethlehem because of a census ordered by Caesar Augustus. While they were there Mary gave birth to her son and because there was no room in the inn, they laid him in a manger (Luke 2:1-7). To shepherds nearby an angel of the Lord announces the birth of the child. The angel tells this shepherds that the child has been born in the city of David perhaps alluding to Micah's prophecy of a ruler from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2-4); the angel also tells the shepherds that this child will be a Savior; he is the Christ; he is Lord. The shepherds are to identify the child by his lying in a manger. This the angel claims is the gospel, the good news and it will bring great joy for all the people (Luke 2:8-12). The shepherds indeed do their part and, after having visited Mary and Joseph and the baby, share this news with others (Luke 2:17-18,20). Following this message, however, a multitude of the heavenly host, those angels who dwell in God's presence in heaven praising him, appear to the shepherds announcing glory to God and peace among men (Luke 2:13-14). In addition to the prophecy of a ruler from Bethlehem, Micah had also prophesied that to the "tower of the flock" would come dominion and the kingdom of Jerusalem (Mic. 4:8). This prophecy may well have set the background for Luke's story about the announcement to the shepherds.

Presentation at the Temple:

After eight days the child was circumcised and named Jesus according to the instruction of the angel of the Lord (Luke 2:21; 1:31) and then, after Mary's purification, brought to the temple to be presented to the Lord according to the law (Ex. 13:2,12,15; 8:15-16; Lev. 12:8). The obedience of Mary and Joseph toward the law is frequently emphasized (Luke 2:22-24,27,39). During their time in Jerusalem, Simeon, a righteous and devout man, filled with the Spirit, prophesies to Mary and Joseph about the child's destiny. He praises God that he has seen his salvation as it had been revealed to him by the Spirit that he would not die until he saw the Christ. He then declares that the child will be a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of God's people. This brief song of praise has come to be known as the "Nunc Dimittis" (Luke 2:29-32). The themes and words of the song are taken primarily from the latter parts of Isaiah (Is. 40:5; 42:6; 46:13; 49:6; 52:9-10). Perhaps of special note are the two servant songs in Isaiah in which the servant of the Lord is described as one who will be a light to the Gentiles (Is. 42:6; 49:6). Immediately afterwards, Simeon prophesies that the response to Jesus will be mixed: some will oppose him and fall; others will accept him and rise. The reference to his being a sign to be opposed may suggest Old Testament prophecy of a stone on which people stumble and fall (Is. 8:14) or the cornerstone which is rejected (Ps. 118:22; Is. 8:14; Luke 20:17). Simeon speaks of the response to Jesus as revealing the thoughts of many hearts (Luke 2:35). And it would appear that Mary too is to suffer on account of him (Luke 2:35). In Simeon's song of praise and in the oracles that follow, Luke makes clear to his readers what Matthew does through the stories of the Magi from the East and the Flight to Egypt: that Gentiles will believe in Jesus and that some in Israel will reject him. Following Simeon's prophecy, Anna, a prophetess and a widow also gives thanks to God and speaks of Jesus in reference to the redemption of Jerusalem. The scene of Jesus' being presented at the temple with the prophecies of Simeon and Anna suggest that in Jesus the law and the prophets are fulfilled. After the presentation at the temple, Mary, Joseph and Jesus return to their own city of Nazareth and Jesus is said to grow, to become strong, to increase in wisdom and to have upon him the grace of God (Luke 2:39-40).

Magi from the East:

Magi or wise men from the East come to Jerusalem asking for the one who has been born king of the Jews. The visit of the magi again reinforce Jesus' kingship. The chief priests and scribes make reference to a prophecy of Micah which suggests the Messiah, the coming ruler, will be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2-4). We later read that they have come not only to see this king but to worship him. They fall to the ground before him and present their gifts. Their visit perhaps also is indicative of what the Gentile response to Jesus will finally be.

Several Old Testament texts lie in the background of this scene of the narrative. The Queen of Sheba had visited Solomon and brought gifts. This visit is spoken of in one of the royal psalm (Ps. 72) which eventually came to be interpreted messianically: the psalm speaks of all the kings coming to bow before the ruler of Israel (Ps. 72:11) and this text may have led to the reinterpretation of the magi as kings in Christian thought. The prophecy of Micah which the chief priests and scribes draw attention to speaks of one who will come forth from Bethlehem to be ruler in Israel whose goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity; the rest of the brethren will return to Israel; the ruler will shepherd his people and he will be great to the ends of the earth (Mic. 5:2-4). The final line quoted in Matthew's account may however be a more direct quotation of 2 Sam. 5:2 in reference to David perhaps again emphasizing Jesus' Davidic origin. Isaiah prophesies of the wealth of nations coming and those from Sheba bringing gold and frankincense and proclaiming the salvation of the Lord (Is. 60:5-6) and Matthew likely had this prophecy in mind with allusion to it in the magi's presentation of gifts. The very same prophecy speaks also of the coming of the light of Jerusalem (Is. 60:1) suggestive of the star the magi saw. Related also to the star perhaps is a prophecy of Balaam as the Israelites were wandering through the desert who prophesied that "a star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel" (Num. 24:17). The star and the person to whom it pointed was the light to the Gentiles (Is. 42:6).

Flight to Egypt:

Herod's intent in having asked the magi to report to him where the child was born was to kill this infant ruler. God however warns the magi in a dream not to return to Herod. Similarly, in order to thwart Herod's plan, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream warning him of Herod's plot. Joseph is to stay in Egypt until the angel of the Lord appears in a dream to him once again to instruct him to return to the land of Israel.

Indeed, Herod's response to all of this is not to follow the magi and likewise worship the child born in Bethlehem but rather to kill all the male children in Bethlehem and in its vicinity. Herod's massacre may be seen as an event parallel to Pharaoh's slaughter of the Hebrew male infants. Mary and Joseph and Jesus are forced to flee to Egypt. In reference to Jesus' coming out of Egypt, Matthew quotes from the prophet Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1). The original context of these words was Hosea proclaiming to the people that despite God's having brought them out of Egypt, they are rebellious. Within the context of the infancy narrative, the use of Hosea's words may have identified Jesus' life with the history of Israel; the words might have further suggested that God would lead a new Exodus. The application of these words to Jesus might be taken to suggest that Jesus himself was the true Israel. Matthew's use of Jeremiah has some similar implications. The original context of quotation itself (Jer. 31:15) is Jeremiah prophecies of hope to the exiles in Babylon (Jer. 30-33). Rachel, Jacob's second wife, is pictured as weeping for her sons, perhaps the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons, because they have been destroyed. Jeremiah tells the people to restrain their weeping, that God will end their exile. Matthew's use of Jeremiah perhaps again identifies Jesus' life with the history of Israel by drawing attention to the fact that Jesus' birth took place in the context of suffering; however the quotation of the passage amongst Jeremiah's promises of hope perhaps also suggested that the end of the exile had drawn near with Jesus' coming.

Once Herod is dead, an angel of the Lord again appears to Joseph in a dream to instruct him to return to the land of Israel and then later to go on to the regions of Gaililee. Joseph does so and eventually settles in Nazareth. Matthew's final quotation in the infancy narrative, "he shall be called a Nazorean" is somewhat complex. The quotation seemingly appears nowhere in the Old Testament. The Greek "Nazoraioi" may have three possible etymological derivations. The word may be related to Hebrew "neser" meaning "branch" in reference to various prophecies that Israel's coming king would be a branch from David's line (Is. 11:1-16; Jer. 23:5-6; 33:14-26; Zech. 3:8-9; 6:12-15). The word may also be derived from the Hebrew "nazir" suggesting he would be a Nazorite, a holy one set aside to God's service from birth (Num. 6:1-21), like Samson and Samuel. The Hebrew for both "Nazorite" and "holy one" are sometimes translated into Greek as just "holy one" (Is. 4:3; Jud. 16:7). Finally, and clearly suggested by the geographical context, the word may be taken as "Nazarene," one who lives in Nazareth. It is likely Matthew had all three of these meanings in mind.

Visit to Jerusalem:

The final account in Luke's gospel before the record of Jesus' public ministry begins is that of a visit of Jesus and his parents to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover (Luke 2:41-52). This is the last recorded visit to Jerusalem in Luke before Jesus' triumphal entry and passion. After the Feast, his parents depart but Jesus stays at the temple in Jerusalem listening to the teachers there and asking them questions. His parents return, searching for him and Jesus responds to them that it was necessary for him to be in his Father's house. Following this he returns with his parents to Nazareth and continues to increase in wisdom, stature and favor with God and man. Jesus' reference to his needing to be "in his Father's house" (Luke 2:49) may have been suggestive of Jesus' status as God's son. The account also suggests that part of Jesus' vocation was and would be both teaching and dialogue with the Jewish leaders. The amazement of the teachers may well anticipate the later amazement of the crowds upon hearing Jesus' teaching (Luke 2:47); the failure of Mary and Joseph to understand their son may likewise have anticipated the later failure of the crowds to understand Jesus' teachings (Luke 2:50). Mary is said to have treasured all these things in her heart (Luke 2:51).

Jesus as God's Messiah and God's Salvation:

The birth narratives, like the entirety of the gospel accounts, are of course fundamentally about Jesus and Matthew and Luke desire to make several things clear to us about who Jesus is in these stories. First, both Matthew and Luke make clear to us that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Both Matthew and Luke tell us this explicitly at the end of Matthew's genealogy (Matt. 1:17-18), in the announcement to the shepherds (Luke 2:11) and in the encounter with Simeon (Luke 2:26). Both Matthew and Luke also implicitly reveal Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Matthew draws immediate attention to Abraham and David at the beginning of his genealogy and the promises God had made to them. Luke likewise makes reference to the Davidic covenant in his account in Gabriel's announcement to Mary (Luke 1:32-33) and in Zechariah's prophecy (Luke 1:69-71). God had promised David that a descendant of his would build a house and establish an everlasting kingdom, that the Lord would be his father and he God's son (2 Sam 7:12-14); this covenant came to be understood as the coming of a future ruler, the Messiah. Jesus was this Messiah. Thus Matthew draws our attention to Micah's prophecy of a coming ruler from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2-4). Matthew further suggests Jesus' kingship through the visit of the magi and the middle section of his genealogy focusing on the kingly line from which Jesus came. Luke gives an account of Gabriel's visit to Mary – the angel who had proclaimed seventy weeks of years in Daniel before the Messiah was to come, had come again to announce that the time had arrived. Jesus, the gospel writers thus tell us, is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel; Jesus is the coming ruler spoken of in the prophets; Jesus is God's Messiah; Jesus is king.

Matthew and Luke also make clear that, in this role as God's Messiah, Jesus is God's salvation. In both Matthew and Luke we read that the child born of Mary is given the name "Jesus," the Greek for Hebrew "Joshua," "God saves." Matthew tells us that Jesus will save his people from their sins. Matthew's story of the flight to and return from Egypt suggest that Jesus will lead a new exodus. Matthew's account of the slaughter of Bethlehem's infants and his Scriptural allusions suggest that Jesus will bring about the true end of the exile. Thus Matthew associates the two major salvific events of Israel's past with the coming of and mission of Jesus. Luke likewise makes clear Jesus' role as Savior. In reference to Mary's being the mother of Jesus, Mary praises God in the magnificat for his mercy (Luke 1:46-55); with reference to Jesus, Zechariah speaks of "redemption for [God's] people" and "salvation from... enemies" (Luke 1:68,71); the angel announces to the shepherds that to them and to all people has been born a Savior (Luke 2:10-11); when Simeon sees Jesus he prays to God stating that his eyes have seen God's salvation (Luke 2:32); likewise Anna speaks to the people about Jesus in reference to the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:38). In Jesus, God would bring forgiveness of sins, deliverance from enemies and the fulfillment for Israel of all that the prophets had promised about redemption.

The gospel writers make clear, even in the birth narratives, that Jesus is God's Messiah and God's salvation. But they suggest also that Jesus' role is perhaps yet greater still. The magi from the East prostrate themselves before Jesus in worship. Of the coming ruler from Bethlehem, Micah had prophesied that his goings forth were "from the days of eternity" (Mic. 5:2). Jesus himself was to be called "Immanuel" meaning "God with us." In Jesus, God himself had visited his people.

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