**Christmas in the Four Gospels**

**2021 Advent Study**

The Genres of the Books of the New Testament

The 27 books of the New Testament can be divided up into one of 4 literary genres:

1. Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)
2. Historical Narrative (Acts)
3. Epistle/Letter (13 Letters of Paul, Hebrews, and the 7 Universal Letters)
4. Apocalyptic Literature (Revelation)

Within each genre, other genres also exist. For example, the 4 Gospels contain sayings of Jesus (such as the Sermon on the Mount) as well as parables (such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan). Sayings and parables are genres in and of themselves.

What is a Gospel?

Gospel is a genre of literature that we associate with the opening books of the New Testament.

Gospel comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” (It’s also where we get the English word “evangelist.”) The Gospels present to us the “good news” of Jesus.

**This is the Good News [*euangelion*] about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. Mark 1:1 (NLT)**

While the Gospels contain biographical elements, they are not biographies in the modern sense of the term. That is because they don’t give us a full account of the life of Jesus.

* Two of the Gospels (Mark and John) don’t include a birth narrative.
* Luke only gives us a brief snippet of Jesus as an adolescent (Luke 2:41-52).

The Gospels are ***mainly interested*** in making sure that we know the *necessary* stuff about Jesus – that is, that he was crucified, dead, and buried, and that he rose again from the dead on the third day.

Recap of Christmas in Mark

Mark – the shortest of all the Gospels – doesn’t include a birth narrative. If Mark were our only Gospel, we would have no knowledge of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Why doesn’t Mark include a birth narrative? Two possible reasons.

* Mark doesn’t know a birth narrative.
  + A birth narrative isn’t necessary to Mark’s theological agenda.
  + Mark’s main concern is making sure we know that Jesus is the ***suffering*** Son of God. Mark’s writing style is terse and to the point. His entire narrative pushes   
    toward – and culminates at – the cross.

Christmas in Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew

* Written sometime between 70-85AD.
  + Some scholars believe Matthew was written ***after*** the expulsion of Jewish Christians from the synagogues, because throughout the Gospel, the writer continually refers to synagogues in a tongue-in-cheek way, labeling them as “their” synagogues.

**23Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in *their* synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.**

**Matthew 4:23 (NRSV, emphasis added)**

**17Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in *their* synagogues.   
Matthew 10:17 (NRSV, emphasis added)**

**54He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in *their* synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?   
Matthew 13:54 (NRSV, emphasis added)**

* Matthew seems upset by this experience. This may also be why Matthew (more so than Mark before him) includes material in which Jesus’ harshest words are directed against the religious leaders.

**1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2“The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. 3So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. 4They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.  
Matthew 23:1-4 (NLT)**

* An anonymous document (like all the canonical Gospels). However, Church tradition claims the disciple Matthew wrote it.
  + Irenaeus, who was an early Church Father writing in the 3rd century AD, claims the disciple Matthew wrote this Gospel in Aramaic, and that it was later translated into Greek.
    - Greek is the language of the New Testament.
  + Matthew is the one who gives this Gospel “apostolic authority.”
    - Each of the four Gospels are associated with an apostle.
* Matthew writes as a Jewish Christian whose ***chief concern*** is making sure we see the connection between Judaism and Christianity.
* Above all, ***Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the royal Son of God, and that Jesus fulfills all the promises God made to the people of Israel*.**

Matthew’s Presentation of Jesus

* Matthew makes heavy uses of Moses typology, showing that Jesus is a ***new*** and ***greater*** Moses.
  + Like the infant Moses, the infant Jesus experiences an attempt on his life by a ruler bent on preserving his own kingdom: Pharaoh, in the case of Moses, and Herod the Great in the case of Jesus. Herod’s slaughter of the infant males in Bethlehem’s vicinity evokes Pharaoh’s attempt to kill the Hebrew males (Exodus 1:15-2:10).
  + Like Moses fleeing from Pharaoh (Exodus 2:11-15), Jesus was forced to flee into Egypt for safety from the wrath of Herod. Jesus emerged from there to deliver his people from slavery (to sin and death).
  + Jesus fasted for forty days and nights before teaching the new Law of God; Moses did the same (Deuteronomy 9:9).
  + Just as Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, Jesus ascends a mountain to bring forth a new Law from God (i.e., the Sermon on the Mount).
  + Jesus gives Ten Beatitudes from a mountain just like Moses receives the Ten Commandments on a mountain.
  + The Gospel of Matthew includes five discourses, which parallel the 5 books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)

1. The Sermon on the Mount Discourse (Matthew 5-7)
2. The Mission Discourse (Matthew 10)
3. The Parabolic Discourse (Matthew 13)
4. The Discourse on the Church (Matthew 18)
5. The Olivet Discourse or the Discourse on the End Times (Matthew 23, 24, 25)

* Matthew dramatically cuts back on kingdom of God language. Instead, he prefers to use the far less loaded term “kingdom of heaven.”
  + As a Jewish Christian, Matthew would have been reluctant to use the word “God,” because faithful Jews didn’t use the proper name of God.

Christmas in Matthew (Matthew 1)

Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus begins with a **genealogy**.

While we tend to ignore genealogies because they’re not as exciting and riveting as other parts of Scripture, my Old Testament professor in seminary (Ellen Davis) would often remind our class, *“Genealogies tell a story.”*

What story is Matthew trying to tell through the inclusion of this genealogy?

**1 This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of *David* and of *Abraham*.   
Matthew 1:1 (NLT, emphasis added)**

Why does Matthew specifically mention Abraham and David?

Abraham is considered the “father” of the Jewish people.

**1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am El-Shaddai—‘God Almighty.’ Serve me faithfully and live a blameless life. 2I will make a covenant with you, by which I will guarantee to give you countless descendants.”  
3At this, Abram fell face down on the ground. Then God said to him, 4“This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations! 5What’s more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations. 6I will make you extremely fruitful. Your descendants will become many nations, and kings will be among them!  
Genesis 17:1-6 (NLT)**

David is considered Israel’s chief monarch, the greatest king Israel ever had.

**4“As for you, if you will follow me with integrity and godliness, as David your father did, obeying all my commands, decrees, and regulations, 5then I will establish the throne of your dynasty over Israel forever. *For I made this promise to your father, David: ‘One of your descendants will always sit on the throne of Israel.’*   
1 Kings 9:4-5 (NLT, emphasis added)**

With this genealogy, Matthew wants to show how Jesus fulfills the story of Israel.

After presenting this genealogy, Matthew proceeds to tell us how the birth of Jesus happened.

**18This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. 19Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.  
20As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 21And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”  
22All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet:  
23“Look! The virgin will conceive a child!  
    She will give birth to a son,  
and they will call him Immanuel,   
    which means ‘God is with us.’”  
24When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. 25But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.  
Matthew 1:18-25 (NLT)**

**Bethlehem**

* Population of five hundred to one thousand at the time of Jesus.
* Located six miles south of Jerusalem.

**Bethlehem (continued)**

* Home to laborers, farmers, shepherds (Luke 2:8), and bakers.
  + All of these persons, for the most part, resourced Jerusalem.
* The name Bethlehem means “House of Bread.”
* Though small, Bethlehem was a fairly well-known town.
  + Jacob built a monument in Bethlehem to his late wife Rachel.
    - Rachel died giving birth to their son Benjamin (Genesis 35:16-20).
  + Setting of the Book of Ruth.
  + Hometown of David, Israel’s greatest king.
  + Birthplace of the Messiah (Micah 5:2).

**Breaking the news**

Joseph was likely in Bethlehem when Mary broke the news and told him she was pregnant, which means their engagement was ***a long-distant arrangement***.



William Barclay writes that in the ancient world Jewish marriages consisted of a sort of 3-step process

1. **Engagement**
   * Usually happened while the couple were still children.
   * *“Marriage was held to be far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of the human heart”* (William Barclay, *the Gospel of Matthew*, 19).
2. **Betrothal (the stage of Mary and Joseph when Matthew picks up the story)** 
   * A year-long legal contract that began once the couple was of age.
   * A dowry was paid to the bride’s family.
   * Could only be broken by divorce.
3. **Marriage proper**
   * Final ceremony and the rest of the agreed-upon dowry was paid.
   * Consummation of the marriage.
   * Move into the husband’s home.

Matthew refers to Joseph as ***“a righteous man”*** (Matthew 1:19), because Joseph initially wanted to divorce Mary. If Joseph had been successful in divorcing Mary, everyone would have assumed that Joseph had impregnated Mary and then abandoned her just before the ceremony. Therefore, the shame would have fallen on Joseph instead of Mary. Further, if Joseph had gone ahead and publicly disgraced Mary, there is a possibility Mary would have been stoned.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**13“Suppose a man marries a woman, but after sleeping with her, he turns against her 14and publicly accuses her of shameful conduct, saying, ‘When I married this woman, I discovered she was not a virgin.’ 15Then the woman’s father and mother must bring the proof of her virginity to the elders as they hold court at the town gate. 16Her father must say to them, ‘I gave my daughter to this man to be his wife, and now he has turned against her. 17He has accused her of shameful conduct, saying, “I discovered that your daughter was not a virgin.” But here is the proof of my daughter’s virginity.’ Then they must spread her bed sheet before the elders. 18The elders must then take the man and punish him. 19They must also fine him 100 pieces of silver, which he must pay to the woman’s father because he publicly accused a virgin of Israel of shameful conduct. The woman will then remain the man’s wife, and he may never divorce her.  
20“But suppose the man’s accusations are true, and he can show that she was not a virgin. 21The woman must be taken to the door of her father’s home, and there the men of the town must stone her to death, for she has committed a disgraceful crime in Israel by being promiscuous while living in her parents’ home. In this way, you will purge this evil from among you.  
Deuteronomy 22:13-21 (NLT)**

*“It was not his obedience to the law, nor his pursuit of justice, that defied Joseph’s righteousness. Instead, it was Joseph’s compassion and mercy that led Matthew to call him righteous.”*

Adam Hamilton, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, 45

**More on Joseph**

* Carpenter by profession (Mark 6:3).
  + *Tekton* (the Greek word for carpenter) can also mean woodworker, craftsman, and possibly stonemason.
  + Joseph was not an *arch-tekton* (master-builder).
* A dreamer like Joseph in the Old Testament (Genesis 37, 39-50).
* Joseph’s age.
  + Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians typically portray Joseph as an older man. Protestants, on the other hand, tend to view him as much younger. These former Christians view Joseph more like a grandfather figure than a husband, which means they believe he and Mary never consummated the marriage (thereby giving credence to the idea that Mary was a perpetual virgin). However, what are we to do with Matthew 1:25?

Christmas in Matthew (Matthew 2)

Matthew 2 begins with the Magi’s visit to Jesus.   
  
The Maji

* Astrologists by profession.
  + In those days, astrologists were well-respected men. They were advisors to kings and business leaders. They gained their insights from studying the stars.
  + This sort of practice is not in keeping with Judaism, which means God appeared to the Magi *in their own religion practice*, and from there, led them to Christ.
* Matthew tells us that the Magi were *“from the east”* (Matthew 2:1) (likely from Persia).
  + The Persian empire was in modern-day Iran, more than eight hundred miles from Bethlehem. This means their journey likely took weeks or even months.
    - Matthew tells us that by the time they arrived Jesus was in a house rather than in a manger (Matthew 2:11).
* The star the Magi followed could have been a literal star or an alignment of planets.
* Initially the Magi went to Jerusalem rather than Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1).
  + Jerusalem was the capital city, where Herod’s palace was located.
* We’re not sure how many Magi there were. However, because they brought three gifts, we tend to assume there were three of them – one Magi for each gift.
  + Each of these gifts represents a key piece of Jesus’ identity.
    - Gold – fitting for a king, since Jesus is the King of Kings.
    - Frankincense – incense that priests used when making prayers to God, and Jesus is our High Priest.
    - Myrrh – an embalming oil that’s only mentioned three times in the New Testament. One of those references is in this story; the other two are at the cross (Mark 15:23, John 19:39). Therefore, this gift reminds us that this child ultimately came to die.

The Maji (continued)

* Left by another route (Matthew 2:12).
  + When we encounter Jesus, we all leave *“by another route.”*

The Escape to Egypt

For a second time an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and communicates with him. This time the angel tells Joseph to take the child and his mother to Egypt and to stay there until Herod’s death. We’re not sure how long the Holy Family stayed in Egypt, but it could have been several years. Again, the flight into Egypt and the death of the innocents parallels the Moses story. As we’ve already seen, ***Matthew’s intent is to show us that Jesus is a new and greater Moses*.**

The Return to Nazareth

Upon Herod’s death, the Holy Family initially tries to return to Bethlehem (where Joseph’s family lives), but Joseph is warned in a dream to instead go to Nazareth (Mary’s hometown).

1. This outcome seems unlikely given that the Romans did not permit the Jewish people to carry out executions (all executions had to be authorized by the state). Still, an out of wedlock birth would have posed a great deal of shame to Mary and her family. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)