

THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST, PART 2 **(SUNDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2010)**

SCRIPTURE READING: MICAH 5:1-4; LUKE 2:22-38

INTRODUCTION

It is interesting to observe that apart from Matthew and Luke, there is not much discussion in the NT directly related to the birth of Christ. This is not to say that the other NT writers were ignorant of Matthew and Luke or didn't think that the subject was important. One very important reference to the birth of Christ outside of Matthew and Luke is found in Galatians 4:4-5.

Gal. 4:4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, **5** to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

These two verses are a beautiful summary of the longer accounts of Jesus' birth as found in Matthew and Luke. These two verses from Galatians, I believe, also highlight three important themes found in both Matthew and Luke.

1. Jesus' birth was part of His humiliation; he was born in a very humble way. As Paul says He was born of a woman, born under the law.
2. Jesus entered the world as a baby and yet He was deserving of worship because He is the Son of God.
3. The birth of Jesus is part of God's glorious plan to bring salvation to His people and assert His rule over heaven and earth. Jesus was born at just the right moment in time, when the fullness of the time had come.

As we continue to look at the accounts of Matthew and Luke, I would encourage you to see these three themes as we look at the final 7 parts of the story of His birth.

Carl F. Henry once stated, "The early Christians did not say in dismay, 'Look what the world has come to,' but in delight, '**Look what has come to the world!**'"

As we again consider what I trust is a familiar story, may you again be encouraged by the great humiliation and suffering that Jesus endured even as a child. Even as a child, Jesus' life was part of your redemption and salvation. May you bow the knee before King Jesus and dedicate yourself anew to serving Him.

1. VISIT OF THE SHEPHERDS – LUKE 2:8-20

Who were the first people to hear about the birth of Jesus Christ? I think appropriately the joyous news was first announced to lowly shepherds. There is some controversy about whether shepherds were a despised class of people.¹ But even if shepherds were not despised by others, we can say that they were not part of the elite of Jewish society. And

¹ See for example the NET Bible vs. Craig Keener.

though there are no direct connections made in the NT, I think appropriately shepherds were the first to hear. Jesus was the Son of David, the shepherd and king of Israel. Jesus is the Great Shepherd.

It is also significant that God's glory in announcing the birth of a Savior was not revealed in Jerusalem and in the temple, but to shepherds living out in fields.² To shepherds not the High Priest or other leaders of Israel, an angel of the Lord appeared. They were given the privilege of seeing in some special and dramatic way the glory or brightness of the Lord.³ The shepherds understandably were absolutely terrified.⁴

Being in God's presence is a terrifying thing. But God also assures you and welcomes His people into His presence. The angel told the shepherds, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring good tidings of great joy which will be to all people." The words 'I bring good tidings' are significant. They translate a verb from which we get the word evangelize. Here is the first gospel witness.

Verse 11 is such a beautiful verse. For there is born to you this day or **today** in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. **Today** is another important word in Scripture. The word calls attention to God's work of salvation and the fulfillment of God's plan.⁵ Isn't verse 11 a wonderful summary of the gospel message? What was announced on the day of His birth over 2000 years ago continues to be the only hope for sinful men and women. The whole of Christ's life is important for your salvation.

The shepherds were not given the name of Jesus but they were given a sign. Look for a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

The shepherds were also given a sight that we will one day enjoy for eternity. In contrast with the earthly choirs used to worship and praise Caesar Augustus, a vast heavenly army of angels declared in praise, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men or **peace among those with whom He is pleased.**"⁶

The shepherds responded with obedience. They came with haste to find **Mary** and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. (Notice it is Mary who is first listed.⁷) The shepherds also became the first forerunners for Jesus. They made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. Those who heard the witness of the shepherds **marveled.**

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 131.

³ Tyndale translates glory here as brightness.

⁴ NET Bible translation.

⁵ NET Bible, s.v. Luke 2:11.

⁶ There is a variant here. Metzger writes, "The meaning seems to be, not that divine peace can be bestowed only where human good will is already present, **but that at the birth of the Saviour God's peace rests on those whom he has chosen in accord with his good pleasure**" (*TCGNT*, 111).

⁷ Green, 138.

Mary we are told, pondered these things in her heart. She also attempted to put things together – to figure out what they all meant.⁸

Even though there is so much paganism and abuse of what is supposedly the celebration of Christ's birth, it is good that you also give special thought to the coming of Christ and be encouraged by the whole of His life lived for you.

2. CIRCUMCISION AT 8 DAYS – LUKE 2:21

Paul said that Jesus was born under the law. The law is part of the greatness of Christ's coming because there was no other way that your redemption could have been secured without Christ coming to earth and fulfilling all that the law required for your salvation.

Why was Jesus circumcised? Jesus was circumcised therefore to (1) be identified with His people. Hebrews 2:17 says, "Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." (2) Jesus was circumcised to take your place. Those who were circumcised were debtors to the law; Christ being circumcised was made sin for you and fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the Law. (3) Jesus was circumcised to confirm that the rite was truly a seal of the righteousness of faith for all who believed in the OT as it is baptism today. In Christ you have all that circumcision was a symbol of – regeneration, justification, and sanctification.

3. PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE AT 40 DAYS – LUKE 2:22-38

Jesus' birth involved two other ceremonial laws which are described in verses 22-24 his presentation and dedication along with the rite of purification which according to the law took place when Jesus was 40 days old.

Here again the law is part of the reason for the season showing the necessity that a Redeemer would come. Because Joseph and Mary were not wealthy, they offered either a pair of turtledoves or the young of two pigeons. One would have been offered as a burnt offering and the other as a sin offering. We might rightfully ask the question, why these sacrifices needed to be offered since Jesus was without sin, but the verse we noted before again provides the answer. Jesus fulfilled all that the law required on behalf of his people and to also confirm that the practices of OT saints were not in vain because they pointed to Christ.

Verses 22 and 23 describe the presentation and dedication of Jesus. All the firstborn males of a mother were considered holy to the Lord. This was set forth in the law as remembrance of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt when all the firstborn of Egypt were slaughtered and the firstborn of Israel were spared.

What is the significance of His presentation and dedication?

First, Christ's presentation and dedication shows that He is the greatest of all the firstborn. Israel was called by God his firstborn, but Christ truly as the Son of God is the

⁸ NET Bible.

ultimate firstborn. Second, the Levites were taken in place of all the firstborn of Israel to serve God. Firstborn males could then be redeemed through the payment of 5 shekels of silver. While the text does not mention the payment of 5 shekels by Joseph and Mary, perhaps it was waved because they were poor, Jesus' presentation is part of His being made our Great High Priest.

The Law then not only pointed to Christ but it also pointed to its own insufficiency in bringing redemption for God's People. It set forth then the greatness of Christ's coming. Do not pass this by in your celebration of Christ's advent. Christ was born under the Law for your redemption.

After John's birth, circumcision, and naming, Zecharias composed a song. We find this same pattern with respect to Christ after his birth, circumcision, and naming **through the song of Simeon.**

Let me make just a few summary comments on verses 25-38 dealing with Simeon and Anna.

In this entire section Luke shows how Christ not only submitted to the law but is the fulfillment of the hope of the Prophets.

Consider again the great desire of Anna – waiting for decades, her entire life for the redemption of Israel. She and Simeon represent the hope of all the prophets and saints in the OT who waited for the coming of Christ. Hebrews 11 writes how the OT saints did not receive the promise – that is they died before seeing the salvation that would come through Christ. But Anna and Simeon are blessed to finally receive the promise that the prophets waited for.

Simeon and Anna also show the beautiful unity in God's plan of salvation from the time of the OT to the NT. Both of them recognized this is how the Lord would bring salvation for Israel and for all the nations. And if Simeon and Anna in seeing the baby Jesus could understand, what excuse was there for those who did not believe the even greater witness presented by Jesus through His teaching and miracles?

How were Simeon and Anna able to recognize that baby Jesus was the promised Savior? More detail is given with respect to Simeon, but the same must be true for Anna. How did they come to this understanding? It is the combined work of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. The Old Testament gives all that is needed to prove that Jesus is the Savior. Through the Spirit's work both Simeon and Anna, knowing Scripture, could declare, my eyes have seen your salvation! If you are trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation, rejoice also that your eyes also have been opened by the Holy Spirit to the testimony of Scripture.

4. RETURN TO BETHLEHEM

It is most likely the case that the visit of the magi came after Jesus was brought to the temple. Since Matthew's story in chapter 2 takes place in Bethlehem, then it only makes

sense to believe that Jesus and his family continued to live in Bethlehem until they were driven to Egypt and then settled back in Nazareth.

5-7. MATTHEW 2

Two years we looked in greater detail at Matthew 2, so we will not try to cover all the same ground. I want to mention three points from Matthew 2.

1. Even as a Child, Christ was King and was deserving of the worship of all peoples and nations.

Throughout this chapter Jesus is called the Child. Nine times this is how Jesus is identified in verses 8-21. The NKJ and KJ versions translate the Greek word as young Child, but Child by itself is probably a better translation.

The usage of this word Child is important for at least two reasons. First, Herod was not born to be king of the Jews. His grandfather and father had gained power and Herod eventually worked his way up to being king, but his title was not truly deserved. But Jesus from birth was the true King. And in this chapter there is a war between the mighty King Herod and the Child. And Matthew shows clearly that Jesus, the Child, won this battle. Three times in this chapter Matthew mentions the death of Herod.

Matthew calling Jesus the Child also shows that though He was the true King he would not be like the other kings of earth. Remember Matthew 18 where the disciples asked Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven? As part of his answer Jesus stated, **4** Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **5** Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.⁹ True greatness is not the quest for power but humble service.

Ernest Martin, who I have mentioned before, has argued very compellingly that the star that God used to lead the wise men to Jerusalem was the coming together or conjunction of Jupiter and Venus on June 17, 2 B.C.¹⁰ This coming together can be precisely dated, but we cannot with 100% assurance say that this was indeed the star that the wise men saw. But this is one possibility, which can be harmonized with what Matthew has written.

Bethlehem is only about five miles south of Jerusalem.¹¹ So the wise men would not have had any problem finding Bethlehem. It well may be that the purpose of the star was to confirm that Bethlehem was the city they needed to visit or that in some way the star directed them even more specifically to the house where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus lived. Ernest Martin in his book also explains how it would be possible for the planet Jupiter to be stationary over the village of Bethlehem at that time. Martin argues that the likely time of the visit of the wise men was on December 25, 2 B.C. during the festival of

⁹ These insights on the importance of the word Child come from Prof. David Pao of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

¹⁰ Martin, 18.

¹¹ Hagner, 26.

Hanukkah.¹² Again, this certainly may be possible but not something we can prove with total assurance.

In contrast to Herod, paranoid and troubled, the wise men seeing the star again rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. Matthew does not directly compare the gifts that the wise men brought to the gifts brought by the Queen of Sheba when she visited Solomon, but they are similar. We are told that she brought with her gold, spices, and precious stones, similar to the gifts given here. Frankincense is a spice that comes from several kinds of trees in Arabia. Myrrh is similar and comes from a bush. Both were extremely valuable treasures of the east. These three gifts were the customary gifts of subject nations given to their superiors.¹³

So here we have these mighty men from the east coming to what was likely a humble home in the tiny village of Bethlehem. They come before Jesus, probably just a little over 1 year old, and bow down before Him, and present Him their treasures, recognizing that they must submit to Him. This scene prepares the way for the message that Jesus would bring. A message that would confound the wise and bring wisdom to the simple.¹⁴

2. Even as Child Jesus identified with His people in repeating parts of Israel's history

Because of Herod's murderous intentions, Joseph was told in a dream to take Jesus and His mother and flee to Egypt and to stay there until word came to him to leave.

It made sense to go to Egypt, as there was a fairly large Jewish population there. The famous city of Alexandria, Egypt was about 1/3 Jewish.¹⁵ So Joseph, Mary, and Jesus would have fairly easily found a Jewish community in Egypt in which they could have lived until the death of Herod.

But more importantly Joseph was directed by God through the angel to go to Egypt in fulfillment of Scripture. Matthew in verse 15 is quoting part of Hosea 11:1 which reads, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son."

Why has Matthew quoted this passage which is not looking to the future but to the past? Well, as we noted before, the use of the word fulfilled does not mean in every case that Jesus was fulfilling a specific prophecy given in the OT. **Rather in this case Matthew is calling for us to consider how God's deliverance of His people of old is related to what God is doing through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.**¹⁶ Jesus is the New Israel. The Exodus 1400 years earlier was not the ultimate Exodus but the only that which foreshadowed the much greater exodus that would come through Christ.

Verses 16 and 17 speak of Herod's murderous cruelty in response to the wise men not telling him about Jesus.

¹² Martin, 59-60.

¹³ Martin, 29.

¹⁴ France, 75.

¹⁵ Craig Keener, 106.

¹⁶ France, 78.

The population of Bethlehem during the days of Jesus' birth has been estimated to be less than a 1000 people.¹⁷ The surrounding districts would also not have been very large either. This in part explains why this event has not been preserved in the few histories we have from this time. Herod was so wicked and cruel that the additional murder of maybe around 20 children was not enough of an event in comparison to Herod's other atrocities to be recorded by some historians.¹⁸

Herod's actions here are reminiscent of the time of the Exodus and Pharaoh's decree that all male children born to Israel be put to death. Satan in his wrath always seeks to target the most vulnerable and weak. What could be a more helpless than a baby or young child?

Matthew says that this was the fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah.

In Genesis 35 we have the story of the death of Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife. She died on the road to Bethlehem while giving birth to Benjamin.

Over 1300 years later after the fall of Jerusalem, the exiles were gathered at the city of Ramah in the tribe of Benjamin, perhaps near where Rachel died, before in great humiliation they were dragged off to Babylon. And so this is why Jeremiah in chapter 31 speaks of Ramah and Rachel with Benjamin her son representing the southern kingdom of Judah being taken into exile. Jeremiah trying to capture the grief of the exile speaks of it in terms of Rachel weeping and refusing to be comforted. Her children are no more – they have been taken in exile.

And this says Matthew is related to the profound sadness that came over Bethlehem and the murder of all her baby boys two years and younger. Rachel continues to weep from her grave in the murder of these children.

3. The birth of Christ is connected with His death.

Matthew has written chapter 2 in such a way as to show connections with the later chapters in the gospel. In verse 2, the wise men came to Jerusalem asking where they could find the **King of the Jews**. This title for Jesus, King of the Jews, is not found again in Matthew's gospel until the story of His crucifixion in Matthew 27, where it is found three times. In verse 3 we are told that all of Jerusalem was troubled at the birth of Christ. And similar language is found describing the city of Jerusalem after Jesus rode into the city on a donkey the week of his death. And the word destroy in verse 13, is also used in Matthew 27:20, "But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and **destroy** Jesus." Matthew has written His gospel showing that from the very beginning of His life, Jesus suffered, and that He was born so that He might die.

¹⁷ France, 85. He does not cite how this figure has been calculated, though it does fit with Micah 5:2 that Bethlehem was not a significant city in terms of size or power.

¹⁸ France, 85.

Joseph and Mary likely would have made their home not back in Nazareth but in Bethlehem. And yet after hearing that Archelaus was ruling over Judea, he was afraid. Archelaus was wicked like his father and yet was even less capable as a ruler. Josephus notes that Archelaus began his reign by slaughtering 3000 Jews who were celebrating Passover.¹⁹ So once again and for the fourth time, through divine revelation in a dream Joseph was guided back home to Nazareth. Matthew says that this was in fulfillment of that which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

We have noted before that there is no OT passage that directly says that Jesus would be from Nazareth. However, Nazareth was a town that was scorned. Nathanel asked Philip in John 1, “**Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**” Nazareth was not a highly impressive city, rather it was a little backwoods town that probably had only a few hundred people in it.²⁰

Matthew is then not giving an exact citation of any passage in the OT. But he is calling attention to a very important point about Jesus the Messiah. Yes, he is the King of the Jews, worshipped by wise men from east. And yet the OT also shows that the Messiah would be one mocked, despised, and rejected. Born as the King of the Jews in Bethlehem, yet he was raised in a city that had no honor, history, or glory. His birth and early life are connected with His death.

CONCLUSION:

Benjamin Warfield wrote:

The glory of the incarnation is that it presents to our adoring gaze not a humanized God or a deified man, but a true God-man — one who is all that God is and at the same time all that man is: one on whose almighty arm we can rest, and to whose human sympathy we can appeal.²¹

Rom. 5:10 For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

If Jesus humbled Himself and suffered for you even when a Child, if then later in life He died the most shameful and painful death of the cross, then you are to even now have greater assurance of His continued work on your behalf, as He sits enthroned in glory at the right hand of the Father.

Closing Hymn: 169

Benediction – Romans 16:25-27

¹⁹ France, 91.

²⁰ France (91) estimates a maximum population of no more than 480. I don't think it was even mentioned by Josephus in his listing of towns in Galilee. Skeptics don't even believe it existed during the days of Jesus.

²¹ Taken from *The Complete Gathered Gold*.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to [the] my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith— to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.