

Scripture from Scratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible

The Christmas Stories: Exploring the Gospel Infancy Narratives

by Raymond E. Brown, S.S.



Only Matthew and Luke in the New Testament tell us about Jesus' birth and youth. Our Christmas cribs harmonize and intermingle details from the two Gospels, but if you read the accounts without that conditioning, you will find that they diverge on many points, for neither evangelist was simply recording a life of Jesus.

Matthew pictures Mary and Joseph living at Bethlehem and having a house there. The coming of the magi, guided by the star, causes Herod to slay children at Bethlehem while the Holy Family flees to Egypt. After Herod's death, the accession of his son Archelaus as ruler in Judea makes Joseph afraid to return to Bethlehem, so he takes the child Jesus and his mother, Mary, to Nazareth in Galilee, seemingly for the first time.

Luke, on the other hand, tells us that Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and went to Bethlehem only because they had to register there during a Roman census. The statement that Mary laid her newborn child in a manger because there was no place for them in "the inn" indicates that they had no house of their own in Bethlehem. In recounting the peaceful return of the Holy Family from Bethlehem through Jerusalem to Nazareth, Luke leaves no room for the coming of the wise men or a struggle with Herod.

Some scholars have tried hard to reconcile the discrepancies between Matthew and Luke, but with little success. A greater



Illustrations by Paula Wiggins

fidelity to Scripture would recognize that the Holy Spirit was content to give us two different accounts of the Christmas events, and that the way to interpret them faithfully is to treat them separately. Scripture is inspired by God, and sometimes the drive to harmonize the two stories arises from the false idea that each infancy account must be approached as if it were an exact historical record. Yet the Catholic Church teaches clearly that the Bible is a library containing many different types of inspired literature, including poetry, drama and parable. Only part of the collection consists of books that are historical in various degrees.

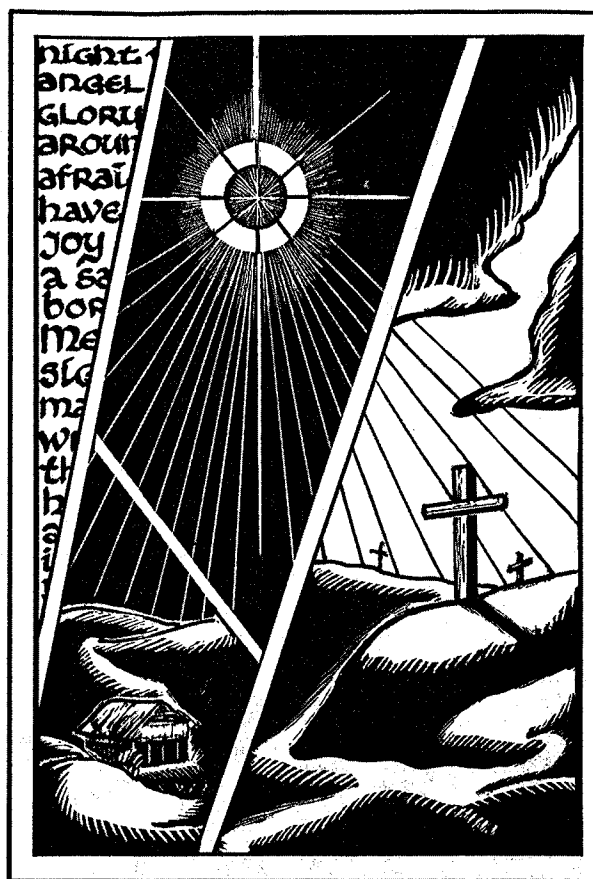
In one respect the accounts of Jesus' birth differ significantly from the Gospel versions of Jesus' ministry and death. The latter were drawn from the oral preaching of apostolic eyewitnesses, but the apostles were not on the scene at Jesus' birth. Some may object that the authors of the two Gospel infancy narratives surely got their information about Jesus' birth from his parents. Yet that is never claimed in the New Testament, nor in the earliest Church writings. Indeed the sharp differences between the two Gospel versions make the idea that they came from Mary and Joseph improbable. Moreover, the rest of the New Testament offers no confirming echo of the peculiar information that appears in the infancy narratives.

Seemingly, then, there is no way we can know for certain how historical many details in the infancy narratives are, or where Matthew and Luke obtained their divergent information. In

making judgments we should be careful to avoid both naive fundamentalism and destructive skepticism. To take every word of these accounts as literal history does not deal realistically with the problems. Yet the accounts should not be dismissed as mere fiction or myths. Between precise history and purely imaginative creation there is a whole range of ways to convey a religious message. Moreover, for all their differences Matthew and Luke were both trying to convey a central religious message about Jesus on which they were in remarkable agreement. This message had two major points: the identity of Jesus and the way the early life of Jesus echoed the history of Israel.

Who Is Jesus?

Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus could claim descent from David through Joseph and thus was a Son of David. They also agree that Mary conceived Jesus not through sexual relations with Joseph but by the creative power of the Holy Spirit. Thus Jesus was truly Son of God. This dual identity, Son of David and Son of God, was



a very important component in the New Testament understanding of gospel or Good News. Elsewhere in the New Testament, however, this identity is associated with "moments" in Jesus' life other than his conception and birth.

Paul, reassuring the Roman Christians that the gospel he preached was the same gospel they had learned (from others), described Christ as: "Born of the seed of David according to the flesh; designated Son of God in power according to the Holy Spirit as of the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:3-4). Paul was pointing out the twofold identity we find in the infancy stories; but writing 20 to 30 years earlier than Matthew and Luke, Paul linked Jesus' divine sonship through the Holy Spirit with the resurrection, not with the conception of Jesus.

In Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus, God declares to Jesus, "You are my beloved Son," while the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus. At this very point in the Gospel, Luke chooses to present an ancestral list tracing Jesus' descent from David and the ancestors of Israel. Once more, then, we see a twofold son-



Praying With Scripture

■ **Read Luke 1:47-55. This is Mary's response to God's plan for her life. It reflects not only her acceptance but her love, faith and hope. How well does this prayer reflect your attitude when you find yourself facing a difficult situation?**

The Christmas Crib Lies Under the Shadow of the Cross....

ship of Jesus, from God and from David, and the activity of the Spirit, this time associated with baptism.

Thus, as the early Christians reflected on Jesus' life, great "moments" of that life (the resurrection, the baptism and the conception) became key occasions for clarifying who he was: the Messiah or anointed King of the House of David and the unique Son of God through the Holy Spirit.

Because the infancy stories were very effective in conveying Jesus' identity, they were included in the written Gospels. Moreover, once the child's identity has been revealed, it is quickly shared. In Matthew the revelation given to Joseph is shared with magi from the East, for the star is a sign of the birth of the King of the Jews. In Luke the revelation given to Mary is made known to Jewish shepherds.

Although the cast of characters differs, each evangelist in his own way is teaching us that Christ's identity is never received to be kept as a private possession. In God's providence there are other people eager to believe in Christ's identity, even if they are not

the ones we might have expected. Alas, there are also others who reject Christ: Herod, all the chief priests and the scribes in Matthew; in Luke (in Simeon's prophecy) many in Israel who will fall. Thus the Christmas crib lies under the shadow of the cross, and its joy has an element of sadness. In a very real way, then, the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are like mini-Gospels. They contain the basic revelation of the full identity of Jesus, and the way in which this revelation was shared, evangelizing some, but causing rejection and hatred among others.

Jesus' Infancy Echoes Israel's History

There is a second religious message on which Matthew and Luke agree—one that needs emphasis today since so few Christians appreciate it. In early Christian circles the Scriptures were the Jewish books called "the Law, the Prophets and the other books." These Scriptures were later called the Old Testament by Christians who gathered their own books as a New Testament. Both evangelists used their first two chapters (the infancy narratives) as a bridge from those Jewish Scriptures to the story of Jesus' ministry. They rightly believed it was impossible to

appreciate Jesus without a preparation of Old Testament stories and themes.

Matthew begins "the story of the origin of Jesus Christ" with Abraham begetting Isaac! That is followed by a strange selection of the ancestors of the Messiah: Jacob and Judah, for example, chosen over more honest or noble figures such as Esau and Joseph. This choice will be echoed by Jesus' strange choice of sinners over the just. Next Matthew gives a list of kings but with emphasis on a decline from the founding of the monarchy by David to the Babylonian Exile—a background appropriate for a Jesus who would discourage his followers from seeking first places in God's kingdom.

After the Exile most of Jesus' ancestors in Matthew's list are not famous and are completely unknown to us. They anticipate the insignificant fishermen and tax collectors who would constitute the first followers of Jesus and the ancestors of the Christian community. The women included by Matthew are not the obvious "saints" such as Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, but Tamar, Rahab and Uriah's wife Bathsheba who were seen in their lives as publicly scandalous. Yet these women were true instruments of God's Spirit and grace in preserving Israel. Their inclusion prepares the readers for Mary who is "found with child" before living with her husband, and yet is the vessel



Living the Scriptures

- **Anna immediately went and told everyone she met about Jesus. Think of one person you would like to share your faith with and make a point of doing so. Think of one person who has shared his or her faith with you: How did this influence your own faith?**
- **In Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, we find the names of four women—a seductress, a prostitute, an adulteress, a foreigner. Mary was an unmarried pregnant teenager. Resolve not to judge any person in an unusual situation but to reach out a helping hand.**

of the Holy Spirit in conceiving Jesus.

Following his list of ancestors Matthew offers more echoes of Israel's history. Jewish readers, for example, hearing of Joseph, would have thought of the great patriarch Joseph, whom Genesis portrays as the master interpreter of dreams. He went down to Egypt and from there was able to save his family from famine. It is not accidental that Matthew's Joseph is the principal New Testament figure to receive revelation in dreams and the only one to take his family down to Egypt. After the patriarch Joseph brought Israel to Egypt, a wicked Pharaoh killed all the Hebrew male children. The infant Moses escaped, ultimately to save his people by leading them out of Egypt. Similarly in Matthew, the wicked King Herod kills all the male children at Bethlehem. The infant Jesus escapes, ultimately to return from Egypt and save his people. Matthew accompanies all this by citations of the prophets, to show the extent to which Jesus sums up the story of Israel to whom he has been sent.

Luke shares this outlook but presents

it more subtly. He too begins the infancy story with Abraham and Sarah, though not by name. Instead he portrays them in the persons of Zechariah and Elizabeth—a technique similar to a photograph that has undergone double exposure, so that one set of figures is seen through another. With both Abraham/Sarah and Zechariah/Elizabeth, the situation involves the aged and barren, an angel announces the forthcoming conception to the father who asks, "How am I to know this?" and the sequence concludes with the mother rejoicing. Luke's narrative of Mary echoes the mother of Samuel presenting her son at the sanctuary in the presence of the aged Eli and singing a canticle magnifying God. Five times Luke notes how, in the incidents of Jesus' infancy, his parents are faithful to the demands of the Jewish Law. We see from this that Luke's coverage of the Old Testament is as comprehensive as Matthew's.

Thus the Gospel infancy narratives go to the heart of the meaning of Christmas—no sentimental "baby Jesus" language here. Rather we find a

clear emphasis on the conception and birth of the Savior King of the House of David and God's unique Son. This identity of Jesus is splendidly set in the context of the Old Testament echoes, to show that the God who is acting through Jesus behaves consistently with the way the God of Israel has acted in the past. ■

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Next: Luke's Gospel: Like Entering a Painting (by Eugene LaVerdiere, S.S.S.)



Talking About Scripture

- In Luke's infancy narrative, three women—Elizabeth, Mary and Anna—immediately accept and recognize Jesus. What message is Luke trying to get across here regarding women in the early Church?
- Matthew mentions that the wise men from the East brought gifts of gold (symbol of royalty), frankincense (symbol of worship) and myrrh (used in embalming) to Jesus. What theological point do you think Matthew is making with these details?



Reading About Scripture

- Brown, S.S., Raymond E. *A Coming Christ in Advent (Matthew 1 and Luke 1)*. Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1988.
- Brown, S.S., Raymond E. *An Adult Christ at Christmas (Matthew 2 and Luke 2)*. Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1978.
- Brown, S.S., Raymond E. *The Birth of the Messiah* (revised and updated). New York: Doubleday and Co., 1993.