

The Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke

Summary of Content

- Infancy narratives are **not historical**: the writers “move back” the moment of Christian recognition of who Jesus is, to his birth (& conception)
- **Redaction criticism** reveals that Mt & Lk had different concerns/ emphases in the way they present the meaning & effects of Jesus’ birth. These differences enrich our understanding of what Jesus’ birth meant.
 - Matthew themes – Jewish OT fulfilment, conflict, Kingly Messiah. Substantial.
 - Luke themes – universal, angelic, peace, salvation, lowliness. Kenotic.
- The infancy narratives reflect both **kenotic and substantial models** of the incarnation.

Background

Both gospels written after Mark’s gospel, between 80-100AD.

Matthew wrote for persecuted Jewish-Christians.

Luke wrote for (safe) non-Jewish Roman-Christians.

Historically Unlikely Aspects of the Narratives

1. Star:

- Halley’s comet 6BC?
- Possible conjunction two planets. But not exactly the same as mysterious guiding star.
- If so visible, why did Herod have to enquire of the Magi, where they were going?

2. No external historical record of a massacre by a Jewish king. This would surely be noteworthy, even for a cruel king like Herod.

3. There is evidence of a census taken by Romans,

- but taken **at a later date** than the birth of Jesus.
- did not require people **having to move** back to their home town (as Mary & Joseph did, to Bethlehem)

Contradictions between Mt and Lk

Matthew

- No annunciation story
- No JB story
- Dreams (Joseph)
- 3 Magi. Star.
- No stable
- Conflict: Herod
- Flight to Egypt & return
- OT prophecies of the events.
- OT parallels (Joseph-Joseph dreamer/ Herod-Pharaoh, Egypt-Exodus)

Luke

- 3 annunciations (to Zechariah (JB), Mary, to shepherds)
- JB story/ Mary&Elizabeth
- no star
- no dreams
- No conflict
- shepherds. Lowliness. Universal peace.
- No flight to Egypt
- OT parallels (barren women of OT)

How do we explain these differences/ contradictions, and inclusion of unhistorical “mythical” events?

- Are Matthew/ Luke responsible? Are they just making up whatever they feel like?

- Are they recording oral traditions that grew up around Jesus? Maybe early Christians “spun” real events and appropriated them for the Jesus story -eg comet is a guiding star, a visit by eastern envoys a special visit to Jesus?
- Could they be doing this, on purpose? What for?

Redaction Criticism

A method of investigating a text, to identify the alterations that an author has made to their sources, according to their bias and concerns: what he chose to include, or exclude, the images he used, the way in which he wrote about it.

By comparing the Matthean and Lukan narratives, we can distinguish different aspects which each author chose to emphasise and include. This gives us some insight into how he understood the event of Jesus birth, and what it meant for him and his community and reading audience.

In doing this, Matthew and Luke were doing what the early Christians had been doing since the Resurrection, when it was conclusively realized that Jesus was the Son of God: they were looking earlier and earlier into Jesus’ life, to try and recognize signs of Jesus’ divinity, even while he was living on earth. They “moved back” the moment of realization of Jesus’ divinity from the resurrection, back to the Transfiguration and Baptism, and then even further back, to the events surrounding his birth. Whether or not these moments did first reveal Jesus as Son of God, as a matter of historical fact, does not really matter: Matthew and Luke are trying to write an account of Jesus which will help you, the reader, to grow in your realization and understanding, and so they plant “clues” and hints, throughout their narrative in various creative ways. The differences in the narratives are not a problem – rather, they give us a fuller picture, from two very different perspectives, of who Jesus was, and what his birth meant for us.

Mini-Recap

1. What is redaction criticism?
2. What does redaction criticism tell us about the narratives in Mt and Lk?
3. What are some differences? (characters, themes, titles of Jesus)
4. Why are they including/ picking out certain things?
 - Their audience: which parts does that explain?
 - Their theological beliefs: who Jesus was

See the handout with the table, for differences in the gospel writers’ concerns and biases. Look at the summary of “themes” especially.

The Doctrine of the Incarnation – Kenotic and Substantial theological models

- **Kenotic model** – God empties himself of his divinity, and becomes a humble man, in order to be able to suffer and die for us. (Philippians 2:6-11)
- **Substantial model** – God unites his divinity fully with a particular human nature, to reveal himself as God to humanity, and save us from sin & corruption. (see extracts from St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*)

Both models are represented in scripture. The Infancy Narratives also illustrate both models, but in different degrees –

- **LUKE** is more **substantial**, overall (themes of universality, cosmic peace and salvation, divinity/ Holy Spirit, glory, angels interfering, certainty, destiny, Saviour title for Jesus) with kenotic elements (shepherds, women, stable);
- **MATTHEW** is more **kenotic** (realism & ordinariness of Jewish history & life, vulnerability/ weakness/ doubt (eg Herod, rejection) with some substantial (OT prophecies showing God’s plan, Emmanuel title).