

## **Reason Smeason for the Season**

A look at the Birth Narratives in Matthew and Luke

By Dennis Diehl

I grew up with the Christmas traditions being soundly grounded in the birth narratives found in Matthew and Luke. In my youthful career, I have been both shepherd and Magi. I never got to be Joseph, but then he seemed kind of a vague figure in the whole play. I really believed that Jesus was born on December 25<sup>th</sup> and was the "reason for the season" as some like to note. While I later came to find answers to my suspicions about the holiday itself, I never questioned the literal truth of the birth stories of Jesus as found in Matthew and Luke. Now I know they are theological statements and plays complete with Acts and Scenes, but they are not literally true.

In the 1960's I came across a booklet. *The Plain Truth about Christmas*, which, at that time, clarified all my doubts about the Christian/Pagan origins of the celebration of Jesus birth. Plainly, Christmas was a pagan astrological holiday. With December 22<sup>nd</sup> being the shortest day of the year, and a day which pagans feared proved the sun was simply going away. The next three days were very significant and reassuring to those who observe such things.

Astronomically they noticed that from December 22<sup>nd</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> the sun simply seemed to hang in the sky, going neither further south, plunging their world in endless night, nor heading back north with the hope of life-giving sunshine. In effect, it was dead and lay three days in the grave until its rebirth on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Thus it was that December 25<sup>th</sup> was the traditional day of the rebirth of the sun, or son, depending on your theology. Significant god-men were born or reborn on December 25<sup>th</sup> and Jesus, it seemed, was no exception. Plainly, the church was adopting paganism to wash out the ambiguities and contradictions of Jesus birth origins as told in the Gospels, and to run a better chance of appealing to the masses by not forcing them to give up their god-men mythologies. Twas no big thing to change Sun to Son, and the 12 signs of the zodiac into perhaps 12 followers around the central Son. But that's another theory as to the origins of the Gospel stories.

When we think of the Christmas story today, we always run both stories of Matthew and Luke together into one big event, taking it as one harmonious whole. This is pure biblical illiteracy and it is perpetuated every year in the name of believing the Bible.

Alexander Hislop's, *The Two Babylon's*, and later, *Babylonian Mystery Religion* by Ralph Woodrow were the sources for the reality of pagan influences. In time the Worldwide Church of God would come to repudiate these books as poor

sources of information on the origins of the Christmas. They opted for worse sources and a kind of theological dishonesty that has left its legacy.

They actually readopted Christmas as a significant Christian holiday centered around it being the literal birthday of Jesus and once again, the reason for the season. Splinter groups in the COG movement bolted and continued to declare the pagan origins of Christmas as not being the historically accurate birthday of Jesus. They are more historically correct, aside from many, many other theological faults.

WCG is wrong in its Evangelical perspectives on the spiritual efficacy of Christmas, while the COG splinter groups are more historically correct about the pagan aspects of Christmas.

Today we have impeccable sources that substantiate the Pagan origins of the Christian myth of December 25<sup>th</sup> and it not being the literal birthday of Jesus. There has never been a time in history where the information on the Christian adoption of pagan customs to promote itself has been more readily available to the average person, both in book form and on the Internet, where excellent presentations by experts can be studied. I feel sorry today for the pastor who does not do his homework in an Internet savvy congregation. Had I had such free access to the excellent theological and historical information as we have today, choices might have been different.

The research of highly qualified scholars on the topic is readily available to those who are willing to look and consider that a literal belief in the December birth of Jesus and associated Christian celebrations are illusions and historically defective. I realize that most of those in this particular reading audience are well aware of this and don't need to be convinced. Whether it is significant to ones practice or belief is also not the point of this article.

In recent years, we have seen the WCG go from the "Christmas is pagan and therefore, not worthy of real biblical note" to "Christmas is Jesus birthday" and an essential part of the Christian story. Gosh, I still am shaking my head over that one. They are wrong and have bought into the lie that makes up much of literalist Christianity.

The COG splinter groups on the other hand have retained their understanding of pagan origins, though they are not as aware of the depth of the matter as they might be. They fall back on the Biblical holidays for their Biblical format of the "plan of God" not realizing that even the Old Covenant Holydays originated in Canaanite agricultural deity and worship practices, and are not pristine from the mind of God.

Karen Armstrong's [The History of God](#) has all this background to Israelite realities.

But what both groups miss is that the Biblical accounts of Jesus birth brought to us by Matthew and Luke are also not literally true. They rely on the fact that the text tells an accurate story.

WCG and most Christian churches, will encourage acting out this drama to prove one's Christian faith, while most other COG's will rarely cover the text, not quite knowing what to do with these stories, and yet believe they too are accurate accounts of the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Both are wrong in this regard.

In this article I would simply like to bring to your attention the fact that the literal stories and events of Jesus birth are suspect and the texts themselves are the best proof of this. Even Isaac Asimov noted that "properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived."

### Part 1

#### The Birth of Jesus According to Matthew

"There is no prophecy in the OT foretelling the coming of Jesus Christ. There is not one word in the OT referring to him in any way—not one word. The only way to prove this is to take your Bible, and wherever you find these words, "That it might be fulfilled" and "which was spoken" turn to the OT and find what was written, and you will see that it had not the slightest possible reference to the thing recounted in the NT—not the slightest."

Robert Ingersoll

"The most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books... If you once admit into such a high sanctuary of authority one false statement, there will not be left a single sentence of those books, which, if appearing to anyone difficult in practice or hard to believe, may not by the same fatal rule be explained away as a statement, in which intentionally, the author declared what was not true."

St. Augustine in *Epistula*

*"Whosoever will take the trouble to read attentively, will find in all those passages where the OT is cited, only and obvious abuse of words, and the seal of falsehood on almost every page."*

Voltaire

Before we begin, we must first understand that the Gospel accounts were not really written by the men whose names are affixed to the books. In short, Matthew the disciple did not write Matthew the book. All of the names attributed to the gospels were added decades later to give credibility to the gospel writings. The real authors of both Matthew and Luke are unknown. It is not my purpose to prove this in this article but the information is readily available to a serious student of the New Testament.

Neither Matthew nor Luke was an eyewitness to the details they give about the literal birth of Jesus. Actually this type of information would not have come from any of the 12.

If you think that Mary or Joseph must have supplied the information, you are being naïve. In Mark, a gospel which contains no birth account of Jesus and is the first gospel written chronologically, we find the account of Jesus' mother and brothers coming down to Jerusalem to retrieve him as being "beside himself", or insane as we might say today (Mk 3:20). Clearly Mary and sons had quickly forgotten the miraculous events surrounding his virgin birth to have come to such a conclusion. There are many times where later Gospel characters seem to not know, or forget Jesus miraculous birth stories.

In the book of Mark, we have a Mary that never knew the miraculous events of her son's birth. Even in Matthew and Luke, Mary and all others, later, seem to forget the miraculous events of Jesus birth. The reason for this can be that the birth narratives were added to the original texts at a later date after the original books had been scripted. If one takes the birth narratives out of Matthew or Luke, we have accounts, which read just fine without them, and begin in as logical a fashion as Mark with the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1/Luke 3:1). This is the truth of the matter, as Mark never knew of such things and never reported them.

For the sake of this article we will assume that the true order of the Gospels is Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. While there are other possibilities, this is the most generally accepted order. Matthew and Luke reproduce 90% and 60% of Mark's material so we have to ask just why an eyewitness to the same events would have to rely so heavily on Mark to flesh out the story.

The idea that each author was seeing the same events through different eyes is not true. It is one thing to say we all saw the accident but to disagree on just how the cars interacted with each other. But to have one witness say that it was a truck, one say it was an airplane and one to say there was no accident at all, is not going to produce the details of a credible event.

In this article we will look at the impossibilities and irreconcilable contradictions we find in the accounts of Jesus birth as reported by the authors of Matthew and Luke. We'll take a look at how the authors tell a story. The Bible is neither inerrant nor historically accurate in its details, as we shall see.

Paul, who lived, wrote and died before the first gospel was ever written, simply notes that Jesus was born of a woman...nothing special here (Gal. 4:4). Paul is not even familiar enough with the literal life of Jesus to quote him when it would have been to his advantage to do so, such as when he noted that sometimes we do not know how to pray. Rather than ramble on about the spirit groaning and muttering for us, it would have been a great time to remind the reader of the Lord's Prayer, but alas, Paul had never heard of such a thing.

For Paul, Jesus was the hallucinatory Christ on the road to Damascus. However, this was Luke's account of Paul's experience and not the experience of being called that Paul relates in Galatians. Paul simply did not know the earthly Jesus. He quoted no miracles, healings, teachings or happenings in Jesus life because he did not know of them. The Gospel accounts came after Paul had died.

It is interesting to note that for Paul, Jesus became God's son at his resurrection. For Mark, Jesus became the Son of God at his baptism. For Matthew it was at his birth, as for Luke. For John, Jesus was God's son from the foundation of the world and was with God from the beginning. So the origins of sonship evolved as well in the Gospels and in this case, each appealing to an earlier time in Jesus life.

It is also noteworthy to see that in John 7:25-27 some discounted Jesus because they knew where he was from and it was not Bethlehem, but rather Galilee from which no prophet could come (: 52). In one view, no one would know where the Messiah was from.

In verses 48-53 we see that some factions argue that Jesus could not be the Messiah because the Messiah had to come from Bethlehem and "we know where this man is from." Others just did not know anything about him. It was obvious to them; in other words, Jesus was either from Nazareth or at least somewhere else in Galilee, which did not qualify him as the Messiah. The Bethlehem birthplace had to be created from scripture, not reality.

The information that Jesus was that miraculous baby born in Bethlehem, under the sign of a star, honored by Magi and Shepherds and hounded by Herod has somehow escaped John's community of believers. In fact it all seems to have escaped the knowledge of everyone but the authors of Matthew and Luke, including later characters in the books themselves.

We also see the charge that Jesus was born, not miraculously, but of fornication (John 8:41). This charge is repeated in the Jewish literature about Jesus and is not the focus of this article. Let it be said that John 7-8 is a tirade against Jesus, and Jesus' rebuttal over his paternity. It is an angry exchange leading to charges of illegitimacy. Jesus is called a Samaritan (8:48) a term meaning he is of mixed blood and too impure to be the Messiah. Jesus defense is that God is his Father and Satan is theirs.

It is interesting to note that just prior to Jesus defending the validity of his testimony, the story of the woman taken in adultery is inserted in John 8.

There is some speculation that this story was inserted to show that the birth circumstances of Jesus, while suspect, could be remedied by forgiveness towards a woman, (his mother Mary?) taken in adultery. Jewish literature accuses Jesus of being the illegitimate son of Mary and a Roman Soldier, a scenario not uncommon in those times.

It is noteworthy that Matthew's genealogy of Jesus contains four women (the "whose mothers") which is a very uncommon thing in genealogies. They are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Each of these women is associated with some kind of flaw...incest, prostitution, being a foreigner and adultery. Subtract the four women and the genealogies contain the men who bring the brilliant moments to Israel. Add them and we see that the message is that the bad moments were the fault of women but that God works everything out for the good.

Perhaps this is the message Matthew wanted to send before explaining in his own way how Mary came to give birth to Jesus without an obvious father around to claim him. These women are being held up as examples of how God might use unexpected and outwardly suspect circumstances to bring about a proper end. We at least have to admit that the genealogies do not contain any of the female heroes of Israel like Miriam, Sarah, Rebecca or Deborah, which would have been a bit more positive. With Mary as the fifth women mentioned in the genealogy, the implication seems obvious.

It is my purpose to examine the story of Jesus birth within the text and show that the accounts are neither inerrant nor historically feasible. We will draw some conclusions from this information at the end of the article.

So let's begin.....

### Matthew's Account of Jesus Birth

Matthew's account runs from Matthew 1:18-2:23. I will not reproduce the account here. While Matthew and Luke agree on several facts, it is those that are irreconcilable that I will dwell on.

Joseph and Mary already live in Bethlehem and have a home there from the beginning. There is no mention of Roman decrees to get them from their real home in Nazareth to Bethlehem to be born in a manger. Bethlehem is their real home. There is no trip taken by Mary, nine months pregnant, to Bethlehem, an act that would only be considered sheer folly on Joseph's part. There is no manger and no shepherds. Just a house that they seem to already live in when Magi from the East show up almost a year after Jesus birth.

There is the account of Herod fearing the birth of a rival king and killing all the children two years and under. We then have Jesus and family being told to flee to Egypt until the coast is clear before returning to Bethlehem.

Along the way, new dangers arise and it is then we find Jesus and family going to Nazareth for the first time as a function of finding a safe haven. We assume they lost the home in Bethlehem.

Matthew goes to great lengths to create a birth story for Jesus from Old Testament passages, which he implies, predict all the details of his birth. In fact,

most of Matthew's account is cobbled together from such passages and fleshed out to imply that this is really how Jesus' birth came to be. We will examine each of Matthew's topics from which he concludes that all these things took place that certain "fulfillments" might take place. We will see that at best he is reaching for a story he actually knows nothing about and contradicting a later account that Luke knows little about himself.

### The Angel Appears to Joseph

In Matthew the angel appears to Joseph in a dream. When you understand Matthew's mind in finding OT accounts to back his story, a Joseph having dreams is a subtle throwback to another Joseph in the history of Israel. In Luke we find an angel appearing not to Joseph, but to Mary and not in a dream but literally. There is no indication that either Joseph or Mary shared their encounters with each other.

Mary is told she will give birth to a son who will be named Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). Then Matthew reaches in a remarkable and somewhat dishonest way back into the OT to back this part of his account. While the purpose of these citations was an apologetic against the synagogue and to give early Christians a way to explain Jesus to protesting Jews, it was a weak approach.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call his name Immanuel, which means, God with us"

Isaiah 7:14

This is Matthew's first appeal back to the OT for creation of Jesus' birth narratives. The simple fact is that while this passage may be important for Matthew, it is badly wrested out of its original context to portray it as prophecy of Jesus.

It was to the wicked King Ahaz (ca 735-715 BC) that Isaiah spoke the oracle involved in 7:14. The sign of the birth of Immanuel by a young girl, not necessarily or exclusively a virgin, and certainly not impregnated by a Holy Spirit, was a sign to a disbelieving king.

The child to be born at most refers to a Davidic prince who would deliver Judah from its current enemies in 735 BC.

The word "alma" used to describe the woman normally describes a young girl who has reached the age of puberty and is thus marriageable. It puts no stress on her virginity, although de facto, in light of Israelite ethical and social standards, most girls covered by the range of this term would be virgins.

Neither the Hebrew nor the Greek of Isa 7:14 referred to the type of virginal conception of which Matthew writes, and his Christian use of the passage has added a great deal to the literal meaning.

Simply stated the circumstances of Isaiah 7 have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus in any literal prophetic sense. Matthew picks and chooses the portions of the text that he can use to cobble together his account. He fails to continue the account after verse 14, which notes that, this child will “eat curds and honey and when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right., the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.” Isa. 7:15

At best we have here a Jesus who has to learn wrong from right, and either learn it or not learn it in time for the events to unfold.

Matthew also gets his text from the LXX (Greek version of OT) where the word for virgin is *virgin* in the sense he is looking for but is not the word used in the Standard Hebrew Bible (MT).

In summary, the MT of Isa 7:14 does not refer to a virginal conception in the distant future. The sign offered by the prophet was the imminent birth of a child, probably Davidic, but naturally conceived, who would illustrate God's providential care for his people. The child would help to preserve the House of David and would thus signify that God was still “with us.”

#### Birth of the Messiah p. 148

Of course, from this first example of Matthew's overreaching, has sprung all kinds of theological nonsense about Mary, perpetual virginity and Immaculate Conception, needed to explain a sinless Jesus. Matthew's original point may have been more to relate the Davidic origins of Jesus over his virgin birth, but in Christian theology, with God as Jesus' real father, all ancestors of Jesus are only pretend ancestors, just as Joseph was only a pretend father.

After Joseph awakes from this vision Jesus is born and immediately named Jesus, not Immanuel. While we might argue that “well yeah, but He is God with us” and thus also Immanuel, that is not the literal part of the Isaiah citation Matthew knew he could bring forward.

#### The Visit of the Magi

In chapter 2 we have the arrival of the Magi, generally thought to be Persian Magicians from the east of Jerusalem. Jesus is said to be born in Bethlehem, sometime before the death of Herod in 4BC, in a house that Mary and Joseph already own and thus need no trip from Nazareth. That is something Luke has to come up in his account.

The Magi inquire about the King of the Jews, whose star they saw in the east, or “at its rising” as quoted in some translations, and that they have come to worship



him. Hmm, what credibility does it lend to Jesus that Magicians visit him first? Why not a prominent Rabbi? Seeing a star rise in the east and following it would imply a regular star, but we simply have to admit that stars do not lead to specific homes. Nor do comets or planetary conjunctions. The implication is that this star was a special one. After all, it could appear to the Magi, disappear for all the Romans and Herod, reappear for the Magi when needed, head east to Jerusalem, turn south toward Bethlehem and park over a specific home. Pretty darn special.

Herod can't seem to see it, or if he did is incapable of following it himself, having to inquire about the exact time this star did these remarkable things. Not being able to see it himself, he charges the Magi to go find this king and report back to him...uh huh.

This is all quite remarkable when in the Gospel texts the characters later seem to remember nothing of these events, doubt his ministry, call him illegitimate and don't seem to know either where he is from or that he is definitely not from Bethlehem (Jn 7.)

Remember, remove the birth narratives from the texts and you have a more coherent Gospel account. Had you not known they were there, you would not suspect they had been there if removed.

The fact here is that we are not talking literal history but rather literary fiction. More likely what Matthew is doing is formulating a story based on a Joseph in Egypt who dreams dreams and Moses who, as a child, escaped the wrath of child killing Pharaoh. In a bit we will see that Herod acts out the Moses role again and the family will flee to Egypt so they can come out of Egypt and fulfill another non- prophecy. Like the Joseph of Egypt who never came out of there alive, the Joseph of Mary is never heard from again after this return from Egypt. If Joseph was a real person, he came, played his part and vanished forever never to be spoken of again.

As the years went by, the story of the Magi grew even knowing them as Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar which of course is nonsense. Today we find the Magi, the Shepherds and animals never mentioned all quaintly assembled in manger compliments of Luke and a home in Bethlehem never again alluded to from Mark.

### *In Bethlehem of Judea*

The evidence for Jesus being born literally in Bethlehem is not impressive. Only in Luke and Matthew do we have this being explained as Jesus birthplace and that by reaching back into the OT for prophetic non-proof. Matthew has Mary and Joseph owning a home in Bethlehem and Luke, having them actually from Nazareth, has to come up with a way to get them to Bethlehem for the birth. Both cannot be correct.

The problem of no other sources in the NT attesting to the Bethlehem birth would not be so serious if the two authors of Matthew and Luke agreed in their story, but they do not. On top of this we have the confusing concepts about Jesus' birth circumstances and place in John 7 and 8. The silence in the rest of the NT is deafening. On top of the general silence about Bethlehem, there is a more positive assurance that Jesus is indeed from Nazareth in Galilee or at least from the region.

In Mark 6:1-6, a gospel account without a birth narrative and no Bethlehem story, we find Jesus in his "hometown" of Nazareth being called "Mary's son" (a hint of illegitimacy with no known paternity), and being less than honored by them for his work. Jesus responds by saying that it's difficult to get respect in one's own hometown.

These neighbors of Jesus and Mary seem to remember or know nothing of his glorious, star-studded birth in Bethlehem. You'd think at least a few of them would have had to also travel to Bethlehem during the tax decree and would have known that Mary went very PG and gave birth there. They did not. If Mary had a stash of gold from Magi from the east, one could not tell it.

Without going into all the information available, Jesus was born in Bethlehem as a construct of Matthew and Luke to give Jesus the Davidic background he needed to be credible as a Messiah. But the actual accounts do not lend themselves to a credible story and contradict from the start as to whether Mary and Joseph lived there naturally (Matthew) or had to have a tale woven to get them there (Luke.) In Matt. 2:19-23 we have the need for Matthew to get them out of Bethlehem down to Egypt and up to Nazareth so that he indeed can be Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus of Bethlehem forevermore. Matthew constructs an OT scenario to get him back to Nazareth where Luke had to construct one to get him out of there. They can't both be right and aren't.

So Matthew says,

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea...Herod the king gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel."

Matthew 2:6

Matthew is referring back to Micah 5:1-2, which says,

"Now gather thyself in troops, O Daughter of troops: he hath laid siege against us: they shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek. But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet

out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is, to be ruler in Israel, whose going forth have been from of old, from everlasting.....

The problem with this verse and the way that Matthew uses it is that Bethlehem Ephrathah spoke of here is not a place but rather a person. The NIV says, "but you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will rule over Israel."

This verse suggests that the Messiah would not be born in a town called Bethlehem, but out of the clan of the Ephrathah, or from the man called Bethlehem Ephrathah. Matthew assumes that the thousands in Judah referred to in Micah meant thousands of towns, where in fact it meant thousands of clans or families.

In context Micah was assuring Israel that a savior would come and save them from the Assyrians, not the Romans who had yet to come on the scene. In short, and typical of Matthew's use of non-prophecy prophecy, it is reaching at best to cobble the story of Jesus birth together in a way that puts Jesus birth in the City of David...Bethlehem where the Messiah was thought, by some, to need to be from.

#### *Bad Herod Bad Pharaoh*

In Matthew 2:7 we begin the account of Herod's role in the Jesus birth narratives. After having quizzed the Magi for just where and when this star appeared and just how one might find this king of the Jews, the Magi suspect a problem and return home another way after bestowing their gifts to the family in their home. Why Herod and all of Jerusalem could not see the star itself and follow it themselves is never explained.

In verse: 13 we have an angel, once again in a dream, appearing to Joseph telling to flee with his family to Egypt to avoid the massacre of the infants that is brewing. They left during the night with the approximately one year old Jesus and left that night. Matthew finds this fulfilled in the account of Hosea 11:1 where God called the nation of Israel out of Egypt. Of course this scripture has absolutely nothing to do with Jesus having to flee to Egypt to fulfill his coming out of Egypt in the OT, but it worked for Matthew.

I suppose I could go back and find the Iraqi war predicted in some passage in the *Da Vinci Code*, but I doubt it would be very convincing and neither is this. Joseph, Mary and Jesus did not literally flee to Egypt, as we shall see when we get to Luke's account, who knows nothing of this tricked Herod and the flight into Egypt. They simply had the baby Jesus, waited the appropriate 40 days of purification and sauntered back to Nazareth quietly and without drama. You can't flee to Egypt in the same night with a one year old Jesus and quietly shuffle back to Nazareth 40 days after the birth. One or both of these accounts is literally wrong.

Next Herod realizes he has been outwitted by the nefarious Magi and orders all male children, like Pharaoh in the story of Moses, to be killed. While a nasty tale, it is just that and never happened. It was another construct of Matthew based on his view of OT non-prophecy used to tell the unknown story of Jesus' birth.

No historian outside the Bible ever recorded such a killing of Israelite boys and the records on Herod are impeccable. While capable of it and while having killed his own children to prevent them taking the throne, there is no evidence of this killing in his career. Certainly Josephus never mentions it, or any contemporary historians.

Matthew proves it from OT scripture, not history. If it is history then we are stuck with the theological problem of all the children dying for Jesus long before Jesus died for them. I can't much imagine Joseph being told what was going to happen and they leaving town not warning the neighbors of this threat to their children. While they might not have known what Herod had in mind, one would have to suspect that if an angel tells you get out of Dodge, those left behind might be in danger.

If Mary can burst into OT prophetic song, based on the OT story of Hannah giving birth in her old age, she could have suspected that Israeli children were in danger based on OT accounts. There is no hint of NT bitterness over the children killed as a result of Jesus miraculous birth in Bethlehem and the negative impact it had on the neighbors within the first year. You'd think someone might throw a rock or two at Jesus later in his career for being the reason someone's child is dead. It simply did not happen. It is Midrash of which I will comment more later.

Matthew proves this fulfillment by quoting Jeremiah 31:15.

"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more."

If we take this verse at face value as Matthew wishes, it means that indeed, many, many children were slaughtered by Herod to get at Jesus, as they are "no more." But in fact, the verse, lifted out of context in Jeremiah is a non-prophecy prophecy. It has to do with the people of Jerusalem being taken captive to Babylon and the reaction they felt when they passed through Ramah, a town about five miles from Jerusalem.

This verse has absolutely nothing to do with women weeping for future children to be killed by Herod in an attempt to rid the Roman world of a Jewish Messiah. But once again, it fleshes out the story of Jesus birth in a way that makes the adult Jesus a special baby as well, even though we don't know his real birth circumstances. One does not wait at a hospital for a famous person to be born. Miraculous birth stories spring from remarkable adults who have become important as adults! From Abraham Lincoln who walked 16 miles, as a child, to

return two cents to George Washington who could not tell a lie as a child, we just know that special adults had to be special children or in Jesus case, a special baby.

And thus what we really don't know is filled in with literary license and special circumstances pointing to the special adult. Remember, no disciple of Jesus and certainly not the author of Matthew is witness to the details as he reports. Matthew gets them from the OT and not from reality.

### The Return to Nazareth

And so in Matthew 2:19 we start our trip from Egypt back to the land of Israel. An angel once again comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him the coast is clear and that "those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." This phrase is the same one used to tell Moses the coast was clear and he could once again return to Egypt (Ex. 4:19.) So the same phrase gets both Joseph and Moses out of Egypt. With our knowledge of Matthew's use of the Moses/Pharaoh story to flesh out his Jesus birth stories, this is no coincidence and the phrase did not escape the reader's understanding.

But we have a problem. Joseph finds out that Herod's son, who he deemed just as dangerous as dad, was ruling. The Angel evidently did not fill him in on this one until a later dream, and so Joseph opts to give up the family home in Bethlehem and move to Nazareth 90 miles north in Galilee. Of course, this is Matthew's way of getting Jesus to Nazareth so he can be "Jesus of Nazareth."

His proof of this happening is remarkable. Once again we have Matthew not reporting any facts, but this truth being established by OT non-prophecy.

"And he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: He will be called a Nazarene."

### Matthew 2:23

The problem with this particular proof of Jesus being spoken of in the OT is that no such verse exists in the OT. There are no such verses in the OT having anything to do with Nazareth or Nazarenes. No city of Nazareth is mentioned in the Old Testament and there is much information that it may not have even existed in the New until the beginning of the second century. Prior to that it was a necropolis, a burial ground and always had been. This is another topic but not insignificant to the story of Jesus.

Did a poorly inspired Matthew think that a Nazarite, a man who took a vow not to shave his head or drink wine etc, was the same as a person who came from the then non-existent town of Nazareth? Was his Nazarite cousin John the Baptist from Nazareth? Did he think the Hellenized word "Nazarene" which is the Hebrew counterpart of "notsri", meaning sprout, branch or offshoot, meant that Jesus came from a town called Nazareth? None of it has to do with a town.

Does he think that Isaiah stating that “A root (nezer) will come from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will rest upon him...” (Isa. 11:1), means that the Messiah will be from Nazareth? We don't know, but we do know it is dicey reasoning and reaches far beyond the OT scriptures.

Matthew had a hard enough time remembering that a scripture can never mean what it never meant, but in this case a non-scripture could mean what it never said. Jesus coming from Nazareth was not a known fact to Matthew; it was a fulfillment passage from the OT that told him so. The town of the Messiah's birth just has to be mentioned here somewhere...

### A Word About Midrash

Before we end Part 1 and progress to Luke's account of Jesus birth, we need to understand a bit about Midrash. It is the writing style called Midrash that Matthew seems to be using to cobble together the story of Jesus birth. Midrash is a study technique used to find out, to know or to investigate something. In some circles it means that the narratives are fables and myths.

Rabbinic Midrash is a homiletic reflection or meditation on the Bible, which seeks to reinterpret or actualize a given text of the past for present circumstances.

### Renee Bloch's Testament in Midrash

Midrash is a way to make sense of the present by reaching back into the past in a way that we can only note as being “creative.” It is “imaginative interpretation in order to make the Scripture understandable for a later generation.” Birth of the Messiah, p. 559. It is a way to show a continuity between the old and the new, the then and the now, and the what we don't know happened with what could have happened, based on what we think may have happened in the past. Thus we have Matthew likening the story of Moses with the story of Jesus, and Joseph who dreams in Egypt to help his people with a Joseph in Egypt to save his son. Its stars that wander and point the way to Jesus just as stars always pointed the way to the king. It's Magi who Balaam like come to bring blessings to Israel and her king. It's subtle and it's obvious. The story to the writer might not literally be true, but it is important. In Western culture we might call it literary license and fiction.

Midrash is looking back into the OT to find the words, people and events that seem to explain what is happening or what could have happened. It is a major part of the way that Matthew comes up with his idea of how Jesus may have been born and how he is the Messiah based on such teasings from scripture. It is not how Jesus really came to be. It is not a reflection of the real events that may or may not have occurred at Jesus birth. It also is not the way that Luke understood the how, when and why of Jesus birth.

## Part 2

### The Birth of Jesus According to Luke

It is not my purpose to expose every detail of the birth accounts to detailed scrutiny. There is no finer source of research on the literal vs. fable or Midrashic nature of the birth than Raymond Brown's Book-*The Birth of the Messiah*. This detailed work is readily available to the public, and will tell you, in detail, more than you ever wanted to know. Father Brown's *The Death of the Messiah* two book set is equally fine on the topic of the nature of the death and resurrection accounts of Jesus in the Gospels.

The birth narratives of Luke are written as a play with acts and scenes. Luke 1 is the account of the birth of John the Baptist who was cousin of sorts to Jesus according to this account. John's mother Elizabeth has proven barren and both parents are well along in years beyond the natural years of childbirth. Of course, an angel appears, drama is played out and Elizabeth is told she will give birth to a significant male...John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, his younger relative. This event takes place in Jerusalem where Zechariah is a priest.

Ninety miles away, in Nazareth, Mary is also visited literally by an angel, which is a step up from Joseph's dream angel visit in Matthew. In Luke 1:39 we see Mary, in Nazareth, making a hurried trip down to Jerusalem to see her relative Elizabeth, where Elizabeth's baby jumps for joy in the womb as Mary walks into the room, and Elizabeth praises Mary as being most blessed as the mother of the Lord.

I would like to talk a bit about what happens next. In 1:46 and following read "and Mary said..." followed by a burst of thankful praises right out of the Prayer of Hannah in I Samuel 2. Add some quotations from Genesis 30:13 where, in a Hand Maiden shootout between Leah and Rachael, Leah declares "for the women will call me happy." Throw in a bit of 2 Sam 22:28, Psalm 111:9, Eccles. 10:14, Ps. 107:9, I Sam. 2:5, Isa. 41:8, Mic. 7:20 and Gen. 17:7, we pretty much have it. Pretty old and detailed stuff for a teen to blurt out so perfectly. This portion of Luke is called the Magnificat (My soul magnifies the Lord) and is an eloquent statement of the joy, blessedness, deliverance and mercy she feels for being pregnant with the child Jesus. It was placed here by a scribe, not an earwitness of what Mary said.

The problem with the Magnificat, credited to Mary, is that it might just indeed be, not the ecstatic joy of Mary, but rather that of Elizabeth with a bit of editing. Many theologians, including Raymond Brown feel that the words "and Mary said" actually originally said, "and Elizabeth said." After all it is Mary visiting Elizabeth and the entire Magnificat is written in the style and content of the Prayer of Hannah, a barren woman who gives birth naturally to a child after years of no success.

The Magnificat fits the circumstances of Elizabeth much more than those of Mary. Elizabeth and Hannah were older barren women who gave birth naturally. Mary was a young, fertile woman who gave birth supernaturally. In vs. 56 we read where Mary stayed with Elizabeth (who just spoke) for about three months and then returned home the 90 miles on foot to Nazareth.

The text makes it sound as if Mary came alone...not likely for a woman who was pregnant herself. So in context we have a six-month pregnant Elizabeth rejoicing over that of her "cousin" Mary and her own pregnancies. At this point, Mary was newly pregnant herself if we go by the idea that John was about 6 months older than Jesus was. Thus Mary, it seems, stays the remaining three months of Elizabeth's pregnancy and I would imagine be there for the birth. It does however not say this and has Mary simply heading the 90 miles back to Nazareth through the waste howling Judean wilderness. I have driven it, trust me!

Finally in vs. 58 we have the neighbors and relatives take up the same "great mercy", theme of the Magnificat, over Elizabeth's birthing. Some few early Latin texts hold to "and Elizabeth said" and not to "and Mary said" (*Putting Away Childish Things*—Uta Ranke-Heinemann, pg. 47. ) Have the priest correct this one in Church next week!

#### The Census of Augustus.

"In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria). And everyone went

\_\_\_\_\_ that people (Jewish or otherwise) came from was a matter of complete indifference to the Roman State. According to Roman law, the tax declarations had to be made in the town where the taxpayer resided, or in the case of real estate, in the town where the property was. (Emphasis mine)

Putting Away Childish Things

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Remember, it is only in Matthew that we have Mary and Joseph as homeowners. In Luke they are residents of Nazareth, very poor as witnessed by the offering of doves for Mary's post birth purification, and having no place to stay when they get to Bethlehem to be counted in the census.

The fact that Mary had just been there in Luke's account and stayed with Elizabeth for three months seems to escape the casual reader who then never asks why Mary and Joseph did not stay with Zechariah and Elizabeth for the census. Remember, they stayed in the inn, not really because of having to sleep in Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy, but because there was no room anywhere else, supposedly.

Of course, Luke would have said that it was a need to have the birth in Bethlehem so that Jesus could be born in the town of David to fulfill prophecy, and wherever Elizabeth lived was not good enough for that.

Since it is also stated that Joseph was descendent of David to begin with, one would have thought that was good enough to be the Messiah and we could let the false Bethlehem idea go for comfort sake. Of course, since God, by a Holy Spirit was Jesus' real Father, the whole idea of genealogy back to David was a false trail, cut off just before Jesus by his faux father Joseph. Joseph may have been of the House of David, but God being Jesus' Father cuts him off from the line real quick.

At any rate, the census ordered by Quirinius actually did take place in history, but it did so in 6 A.D. , a full ten years AFTER Matthew says Jesus was born just prior to 4 B.C. and the death of Herod. Can't both be right? Perhaps neither is.

Josephus, the Jewish general turned Roman historian says,

*Quirinius had now liquidated the estate of Archelaus: and by this time the registrations of property that took place in the thirty-seventh year of Caesar's defeat of Antony at Actium were complete...."*

Putting Away Childish Things

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The Battle of Actium took place in 31 B.C., so we are back to 6 A. D. Nothing is known of an earlier census and the way Luke proposes it would never had been the way the Roman government would have carried it out. As stated, Luke's motive for them to get to Bethlehem is false. They owned no property there. There was no need to go from Galilee where they lived and the idea that "he was of the house and lineage of David" would be of NO Roman concern. With Jerusalem and environs being well equipped to handle the masses of people that came yearly for the Festivals, the idea that there was no room in the inn for

a census where people are assumed to be leaving Bethlehem to go to their own cities is ludicrous. It's theology, not history.

### Shepherds and Angels

The story of shepherd's abiding in their winter fields around December 25<sup>th</sup> has been covered enough in other sources. The tale does not take place in the winter as we should all understand and do. The Shepherd's scene is simply that, a scene in a play, complete with singing angels who no one but they can seem to hear.

One would think that with all the female angels in gift shops (they are never male) God would have sent comforting female angels for such things as women having significant male children.

The fact is that there are no female angels in the Bible. All angels are male, and all significant births are male. So all gift shop angels are female and all Bible angels are male. Go figure.

This Gabriel, sent to announce Jesus birth, would have scared the Bejesus (well not that!) out of Mary. In Daniel 10-12 we find him to be made of olivine making him green. His face is like lightening and eyes of flaming fire and arms of burnished bronze and a voice that was sheer terror. He was a battle angel. Gabriel is a vengeance seeker of the harshest kind. A hit angel if there ever was one and not the one you would expect to send to a young pregnant girl. Known as the harshest of the angels, Gabriel was simply known as "terror."

The idea that Shepherds and Magi all met in the Manger is a complete contradiction of the story. The common Nativity scene that we are so spoon fed and over which we seem to suspend our capacity to think is a mixture of both accounts making neither true in any historical sense.

After this we simply see the couple, new Jesus in arms heading peacefully back to Nazareth after a 40-day period of purification according to the law. Matthew assured us that they fled immediately to Egypt and then had to make their way back to their new home, Nazareth at a much later date.

### Summary of Matthew and Luke

#### **Matthew's Account**

Joseph spoken to by dream angels  
Mary and Joseph own a home in Bethlehem  
No trip necessary to get to Bethlehem  
Magi come to home  
Magi led by star  
No shepherds

#### **Luke's Account**

Mary spoken to by literal angels  
Home in Nazareth  
Census. Need to leave Nazareth  
No Magi  
No star  
Shepherds in fields

Herod drama, slaughter of innocents  
Flight to Egypt  
Jesus born in Herod's reign 6 BC

No Slaughter  
Back home to Nazareth  
Jesus born during census of 6 AD

### Conclusion

This is no means a definitive study. It is simply meant to get one to think about the way the Bible tells it's stories, which are stories and not literally true. Instead of trying to make the Bible say what it never says, to mean what it never meant, or to fit together in ways that it does not fit, we need to accept that the Bible is simply not literally true and without errors. It was not literally written by the hand of God Himself and as we have seen is often cobbled together in a style called Midrash to bring the present into some kind of meaningful theological alignment with the past.

I am not against the deep spirituality that many feel in their connection with the birth of Jesus. I am against the ignorance and the idea that we have to suspend credulity in deference to religious control. The literal approach to the Biblical message has and is hurting countless people with its demand that it be held in such unwarranted esteem. It is a book. It is documents that could have just as easily have contained other documents that did not make the cut. It is a book that conveniently ends with a curse on those who add or take away from any of the words of the book. It means the book of Revelation, but is located conveniently enough to imply all the books of the Bible must not be changed one bit or you are under a curse. That "curse" keeps people in fearful ignorance and afraid to question, out of imagined respect, the background, ideas, stories, theology and way we must be or else, found in the Bible.

Thomas Jefferson was less than kind when he said, "I have recently been examining all the known superstitions of the world, and do not find in our particular superstition (Christianity) one redeeming feature. They are all alike, founded upon fables and mythologies." --Jefferson, Letter to Dr. Woods.

Perhaps we'd feel better if we got a similar observation out of the Bible itself. "Anyone inexperienced puts faith in every word, but the shrewd one considers his steps." Prov. 14:15.

We would all say that as human beings we want to know and believe the truth of all sorts of topics. We want to know why we are here. Why do we have consciousness? We want to know where we came from and are we alone in the universe that we know, more than ever before is a very, very large and amazing place. The Church I was born into, Presbyterian, claimed to know. The Church I thought I found really understood, the WCG, claimed to know. The New WCG claims to know and those who have rebuilt themselves on the ruins of past errors that can't be let go of, also claim to know. Like the accounts in Matthew and Luke, they can't all be right. Something is missing here.

Jesus was born somehow, in some way, somewhere to someone under less than ideal circumstances. Frankly, if Jesus was illegitimate and his untimely birth was admitted as more of a possibility than a virgin being impregnated by God, that would be ok with me. Somehow a Savior born out of natural wedlock seems a more compassionate and believable Savior. Jesus had the temperament and personality of a young man who did not know his real father. His compassion tended towards those that were the underdog and abandoned. Perhaps his mom really did tell him his father was God instead of the truth. I assume Jesus was born just as we all were...of a woman and that, to date, all babies, even special ones, have come to this planet in the usual way. The Virgin birth is a construct and not literally true.

The birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are two different stories of how each imagined Jesus was born and how he fulfilled the OT in his arrival. Mark knew of no such birth narratives. John noted only the confusion that whoever Jesus was, he was not born in Bethlehem as "we know where this man is from." Paul simply knew the cosmic Christ. A Jesus who, for him, didn't even have much of an earthly existence and was born in the usual way.

The Catholic Church has a hymn that says "Oh God, I believe with all my heart what your Church teaches is true. For both the written and unwritten part came to her directly from you." The fact is that it didn't. It came from men who were not the real Mark, Matthew, Luke and John of the Gospels. It came from competing Christian communities of believers. It came from men who either never heard of Jesus real birth circumstances or could not face the scandal of it. It came from the pens of men who gave him a contradictory, but glorious arrival that never really happened in the way we have become so accustomed to in our Churches.

Jesus is not the reason for this season. But that's another story.

For further, more in depth study on this topic I recommend:

**The Birth of the Messiah** by Raymond Brown

**Putting Away Childish Things** by Uta Ranke-Heinemann

**Born of a Woman** by John Shelby Spong

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