

The First Christmas

Narratives of Empire and Resistance

Session 2: Through the Eyes of Matthew
The Rev. John Elliot Lein — December 8, 2019

The Christmas Narratives: What is Their Purpose?

These stories were crafted around critical questions from the second generation of “little-Christ” in the 1st century CE:

1. Who is the “King of the Jews”? (Herod *or* Jesus)
2. Who is the Son of God, Lord, Savior of the World, God-With-Us, Prince of Peace? (Caesar Augustus *or* Jesus the Anointed)
3. Who is the light of the world? (the Son of Apollo, the Sun God *or* the peasant Galilean crucified in his name)
4. Where do we find the fulfillment of God’s dream? (As-is now *or* after death *or* in a recreated world order)

We know three items underlying the stories are *fact*: Jesus was an **historical figure**, with parents Mary and Joseph, whose **home** was Nazareth in Galilee. The rest is about *meaning*.

Consider these stories as *overture*: an opening which proclaims the overall theme of a work. Matthew and Luke have different stories to tell, both here and when the primary narrative begins with the baptism of John (as in all four gospels).

IMPORTANT NOTE: The Hebrew Bible is fulfilled/completed in two ways: the *New Testament* for Christians, and the *Mishnah/Talmud* for Jews. Both are “the old covenant re-*new*-ed”.

Unique Elements of Matthew's *Overture*

- The story is one-quarter the length of Luke's version.
- Mary and Joseph live in a *house* in *Bethlehem*, from which they journey to *Egypt* (after birth) and then to *Nazareth*.
- *Joseph* is the main character:
 - He is named eight times and Mary only three (in Luke, Mary is named eleven times and Joseph three).
 - Dreams come to Joseph, not Mary.
- Jesus is hardly featured: no journey to Bethlehem, no birth, no angels or shepherds, no circumcision, no blessing or teaching in the temple (all from Luke). It's all about Joseph's dilemmas and Herod's threat.
- Magi (not kings) arrive, calling Jesus "King of the Jews," a title held only by Herod and later used against him only by Pilate—connecting the two in contrast to Jesus. They also serve to tip Herod off, keeping dreams for "the good guys."
- Connections to *Mosaic Midrash* (imaginative retellings):
 - "*Why did Moses' parents conceive after Pharaoh promised to execute all males?*" Because of a **revelation** in which the **husband** was told to **remarry** his wife (they had **divorced** to prevent conception) because their son was **predestined**.
 - "*Why was the predestined child sent in time of death threat?*" Because Pharaoh's command to **kill all male children** was driven by fear from a dream about Moses' birth.

The Virginal Conception

Unique amongst New Testament records, Matthew and Luke share the tradition of Mary as a virgin who conceives (both *virginal birth*—rather than "vaginal"—and *immaculate conception*—Mary herself conceived without sexually-transmitted Original Sin—are later-developed doctrines), while only Matthew connects it to a prophetic fulfillment.

Then and for millennia later, human life was considered to originate entirely in semen, needing a womb in which to grow.

Jewish tradition was full of divine conceptions to post-menopausal or barren women (featured: Isaac and Samuel). There are *five* women in Matthew's genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary.

Greco-Roman tradition spoke of predestined children conceived by divine intercourse with a human—most importantly, Octavian, who would become Caesar Augustus, the first Emperor of Rome.

Caesar Augustus's Birth (as retold in epics)

- Foretold by a portent: a king would be born!
- In fear, the Roman Senate decrees all male children born that year would be killed.
- His mother falls asleep in the temple of Apollo and is impregnated by Apollo in the form of a snake.
- These stories reflected those of philosopher Pythagoras, Alexander the Great, and Roman general Scipio Africanus.
- Individual stories would be questioned by later writers while acknowledging what they pointed to: greatness.
- (Roman legend also says that the goddess Venus, as the evening *star*, guided their ancestors *westward* to Italy.)

Jesus' conception, in comparison, is greater than either Jewish or Roman miraculous births.

*The focus is on "...the theology of the child
and not the biology of the mother..."*

Matthew's Theme: Jesus the New Moses

King Herod (Matthew 1-2) fills the role of Pharaoh (Exodus 1-2); Jesus as Moses ("the predestined child escapes!"). Herod claimed to be the legitimate King of the Jews, but this Gospel depicts him as the enemy.

Joseph repeats the pattern of Moses' father: he (almost!) *divorces* (1:18-19), has a *revelation* (1:20-23), and "*remarries*" (1:24). (Note: this requires Matthew's "suspicion of adultery.")

Note the patterns: Matthew describes *five* divine dreams

and *five* scriptural fulfillments, mentions Bethlehem *five* times, and calls Jesus “Messiah” *five* times—all in his overture.

Five Dreams Given:

1. *To Joseph*: divine conception.
2. *To the Magi*: warning of Herod.
3. *To Joseph*: warning to flee to Egypt.
4. *To Joseph*: return from Egypt.
5. *To Joseph*: warned to go to Galilee (Nazareth), not Judea (Bethlehem).

Five Scriptures “Fulfilled:”

1. On the virginal conception: Isaiah 7:14
2. On the birthplace of the Messiah: Micah 5:2/II Sam 5:2
3. On The departure of the Holy Family from Egypt: Hos 11:1
4. On Herod’s infanticide at Bethlehem: Jer 31:15
5. On Nazareth: *unknown source*

The pattern of using ancient language to express current conviction was common in first century Greco-Roman writing.

The *fulfillments* are not of “oracular *predictions*.” The passages quoted are clearly of their own times or of symbolic hopes. Matthew uses them not to prove Jesus’s predestination to “outsiders,” but to express the convictions of “insiders” of their real experience of him as the *culmination* and *completion* of God’s promises and Israel’s longings.

“*This is ‘NT testimony,’ not ‘OT prediction.’*”

Developing the Narrative

Matthew follows this pattern from the overture into the body of his Gospel where in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus as the *new Moses* delivers the *new Law* from a *new Mt. Sinai*: “I say” vs. “was said”. There are four more major discourses by Jesus in Matthew, adding up to *five*. Therefore, Matthew 1-2 is the overture to the “five-book” *New Torah* of Matthew 3-28.

Keep Reading:

- *The First Christmas*
Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan