

Birth Narratives

A Defective's Guide

The main rule about birth narratives is to keep them apart from one another – so either choose one and stick to it, or make a point of separating them out in the game. The defectives involved must observe this faithfully, or drown in the pious porridge known as THE Christmas Story – a phrase begging the question: *which?*

1 Matthew

A Gospel written for Jews, therefore requiring Jewish ears to be properly heard.

- Jesus is a new and greater MOSES. Thus the parallels between Jesus and Moses: Pharaoh/Herod – wicked king persecuting holy baby – flight into EGYPT (geddit?) - see Exodus 2
- Joseph the Patriarch/Joseph of Nazareth: both *dreamers* (see Genesis 37 and 40-41) whose rôle is to *interpret* dreams (*ie* act on them: *when Joseph awoke he did what the angel told him to do...*)
- Note the hidden plan: the genealogy (Matt 1) arranged in significant mathematical segments (design); why is Joseph called “Son of David”, as opposed to “Son of Jacob”? “David” is mentioned in Mt 1:1, 6,7,17, 20.
- *The numerical value of letters* depends on their position in the Heb alphabet (Aleph, 1; Beth, 2...). The 3 letters for David (*DVD* - Hebrew has no vowels) add up to *fourteen*: thus the whole pattern of the genealogy is *three* sections each containing *fourteen* generations. So the genealogy “means” *David*.
- Joseph’s dream: note that as a good *man* he wants to call off the wedding. It isn’t enough to be a good *man*; he needs *revelation* for what he is being asked to do. Thus an angel; but he has to act in faith – *ie* in the realm of the spiritual. So his task is to *trust* the revelation, and step out of the realm of the flesh and into the realm of the spirit.
- Magi Following Star: this is out of the book of Numbers (22 etc) or to be exact 24:17. Balaam is exactly a *magus*, a Zoroastrian stargazer; the wisdom read in the stars is sufficient to carry you so far, but you need *revelation* (cf Joseph above) to take you to the right conclusion. So the magi make it to the Royal Palace, Jerusalem, but they need revelation (in the shape of the scribes’ quotation from Micah) to get them to Bethlehem (David again); once they are on the right path they see their star again, because revelation and the cosmos are not giving contrary messages.
- Death of the Innocents – but perhaps that’s enough to be going on with!

2 Luke

A Gentile writing for non-Jews, therefore trying to encapsulate the Jewish background they may not have.

- Twin accounts (*diptych*) of two “miraculous” births – John the B and Jesus. In every respect the second surpasses the first; John is born to aged and infertile parents, Jesus without human paternity. At John’s birth people rejoice, at Jesus’, angels. Zechariah is struck dumb because of unbelief: Mary is inspired with song (*Magnificat*) when she finds her faith confirmed.
- Announcing-birth-angels occur in the OT, so much so that there is a standard form (cf Jg 13, 2-5, 1Sam 1:5ff, &c).
- Note that John the B is a secret after the annunciation of his birth: Zechariah is dumb, and tells no-one, and neither does Elizabeth (Lk 1: 24): so the knowledge delivered by Gabriel to Mary takes on the nature of revelation; Mary’s test of this revelation acts as a sign for her.
- Mary’s annunciation claims much more for her child. She is allowed to ask how he will come about, what with her being a virgin and all (If she knew enough to know she was a virgin, she ought to have had a good idea how it would come about). In fact, the question is itself an opportunity for the angel to announce the virgin birth, which is vital to our understanding (and your defectives’ quest):

The Holy Spirit will come upon you

- which evokes the idea of a new Genesis (the earth was a formless void, and the breath of God stirred the water); and

the Power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow

- which evokes the notion of the Exodus, where God protected the pilgrim people with an *overshadowing hand* (a moving cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night). Thus the child is to be the beginning of a newly-created humanity, and a new experience of the salvation of God – thus the name Jesus, *Yahweh Will Save*.
- Census – the Messiah is brought to Bethlehem to be born, not by obedient Jews who have read the OT prophecy, but by Caesar Augustus, no less, who cannot help co-operating with the providence of God.
- The Manger: NOT an image of poverty, but a request for obedience on the part of the Jewish nation; cf Isaiah 1:2, *the ox knows its owner, the donkey its Master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand*. The Master is using the crib to summon the people to understanding: the shepherds who come will fulfil the demand, and reverse the (implied) curse in the prophecy. Note that the lack of space at Bethlehem is not in the Inn (Gk *pandocheion*, used by Luke in the Good Samaritan story) but in the living-space of the house (*katalumaton*); obviously the house is too crowded for a birth (even mine would be!) so they have made space in the ground-floor room where the animals are kept, where it is quiet, warm, and comfortable. Thus “no room at the inn” is an improper extrapolation. Jesus is laid in the manger because of Isaiah 1, not because of “man’s inhumanity to man”.
- The Swaddling-clothes or “Why is an archangel rabbiting on about Pampers?” The answer lies in Wisdom 7:1-6, where Solomon is describing his birth. Thus the swathing-bands of Jesus birth are not “human bonds imprisoning the hands that flung stars into space” (ugh) but *royal* signs of humanity and community with all who are born.
- Shepherds: homeless people (God’s poor): the receivers of revelation (angelic hosts); but perhaps most movingly the “heirs” of David, the youngest of Jesse’s sons, who is *fetches in from the sheepfolds* by Samuel (1 Sam 16:11) to be *anointed where he stood, with his brothers*. Jesus is visited by

the shepherds who are his brothers, and he is the Anointed One (messiah) who stands where David stood.

- Simeon in the Temple represents Israel, the Old Testament, etc., signing off as the Messiah enters his Temple, and the New Testament is about to be inaugurated. Anna is there so that together they can evoke Abraham and Sara, the father and mother of all who believe.
- The prophecy of Simeon (“a sword will pierce your own soul”) is usually referred to Mary at the foot of the Cross. The only snag is that Luke doesn’t put her there. It is held to refer to the way in which Mary, far from relating to Jesus as a mother to her Son, has to learn to be a disciple like all the others; this is dramatized in the little incident of the Finding in the Temple.
- Jesus growing up in wisdom and understanding: this is really inviting us to apply some understanding to this vivid story, so as to grasp the secrets that lie hidden in it. *Mary pondered all these things and treasured them in her heart* has much the same function. The stories offered here “grow up” into the Passion account, where Jesus will once more stand before cruel authorities, and be a stumbling-block, and a sign that is rejected, and set for the fall and rise of many in Israel.