

A FRIENDLY GUIDE TO
THE
BIRTH OF JESUS



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INTRODUCTION

Christmas provides us with many wonder-filled narratives. There are two in the New Testament: in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Apart from these, many of us carry our own Christmas narrative, with all sorts of “characters” in the Christmas story. Often when I ask adults about the Christmas narratives, I get the following mixture: Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Shepherds, Kings, an innkeeper, donkey, angels, sheep, a star, Herod, and occasionally a drummer boy! These stories, remembered from childhood, are compounded by the annual crib scene depicted in churches and sometimes even in shops, as well as various Christmas carols, songs and family traditions. I suspect that few actually read the Gospel texts to check the facts!

When I ask adults to hold a label with a character’s name and to place the labels on two different sides of the room, only then do they realise that they frequently confuse the Gospels and end up with only one impossible narrative.

Luke’s side would have shepherds, angels, sheep, Elizabeth,

Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna and the angel Gabriel.

Matthew’s side would have Joseph, Mary, some magi, King Herod, a star and an unnamed angel.

There is no innkeeper, no donkey or cows, and definitely no drummer boy.

Luke tells a joy-filled story of a birth and angels singing, “Glory to God in the highest”, while Matthew tells a darker story of a man considering divorcing his spouse because she is pregnant before her marriage to him. This story then shifts to the court of King Herod, who is trying to trick some foreign visitors into revealing the birthplace of the child. This trickery is followed by a story of many young boys being murdered by Herod’s soldiers.

These starkly different narratives, in their characters, symbols and writing style, have one purpose – **to introduce their readers to the adult person, Jesus of Nazareth.** If we are to read and understand these narratives, we need to have some knowledge about birth narratives in the ancient world and how different these are to the sort of birth-notice we are familiar with today.

MATTHEW 1:1–2

¹An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers...

LUKE 1:1–3

¹Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³I too decided, ... to write an orderly account for you ...

ANCIENT BIRTH NARRATIVES

A typical birth notice today would be something like: “Tom and Nicole are delighted to announce a little sister for Owen and Josh. Lucy Patricia came a little early but weighed a healthy 3.1 kg. Nic and Lucy are doing well. Thanks to all at the Mater for your care.” Such a notice appears one or two days after the birth and is a simple announcement of basic facts, not a narrative about the family, or the child, or any family difficulties.

In the ancient world, birth narratives were composed only for important people such as kings or heroes and only when they were adults, or even after they had died!

One important person who lived two thousand years ago was Caesar Augustus, who was famous as a soldier and the first Emperor of Rome. In writing his biography, a Roman historian described “omens” from the Roman gods, given before Caesar’s birth and in his early years, to show that this child was destined for great things.

When Atia [Augustus’ mother] had come in the middle of the night to the solemn service of Apollo, she had her litter set down in the temple and fell asleep, while the rest of the matrons also slept. Suddenly a serpent glided up to her and shortly went away. When she awoke, she purified herself, as if after the embraces of her

Below: Augustus – signs of his greatness.



husband, and at once there appeared on her body a mark in colours like a serpent, and she could never get rid of it ... In the tenth month after that Augustus was born and was therefore regarded as the son of Apollo. Atia too, before she gave him birth, dreamed that her inner vitals were borne up to the stars and spread over the whole extent of land and sea, while Octavius [Augustus father] dreamed that the sun rose from Atia's womb. (Suetonius. *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*)

What is important to notice is that the greatness of the adult Caesar is written back into his birth and childhood. This was a standard way

of beginning a biography. **Truth lies in the greatness of the adult** and his achievements, not in the symbols used to link this greatness to his birth.

BIRTH NARRATIVES IN THE BIBLE

Birth stories and announcements in the Bible are similar to other ancient birth stories. Their starting point is the *adult* person, and then the adult is introduced by a birth story using symbols to show that this child is destined to have a special role in God's plan. Often the birth is presented as miraculous to emphasise that the power of God lies behind this birth. The biblical writers also have some common elements in their announcements about the future birth of a child. We never read a

DID YOU KNOW?

- ✦ Bedouin Arabs today look back to Ishmael as their ancestor. The Hagar episode, produced or edited hundreds of years after the events described, may be an attempt to explain the hostility between the Israelites and the Arabs trying to co-exist in the land.

Below: Bedouin preparing food on a campfire.



DID YOU KNOW?

✦ The Gospel of Mark, which was the earliest written Gospel and dates back to 70 CE, begins with the adult Jesus and adult John preparing the way for Jesus' ministry. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit comes upon him and Jesus hears "a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved'" (Mark 1:11).

✦ Ten to fifteen years later, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke push Jesus' heavenly origins back to his birth through their birth narratives.

✦ The final Gospel of John, which dates around 95 CE, pushes Jesus' divine origins back even further: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

✦ *Beer-lahai-roi* means the "Well of the Living One who sees me".

✦ The name *Ishma-el* means "God hears", and Ishmael is considered to be the ancestor of a people called Ishmaelites, who were Israel's foes.

simple statement by a woman to her husband, such as, "I am pregnant" – this is much too ordinary when a person had been an extraordinary adult.

Here is a typical announcement of the birth of a special child. The full details can be found in Genesis 16. The story begins with Abraham having no children, and so his wife, Sarah, tells Abraham to conceive a child through Hagar, Sarah's maid. But then there is trouble between the two women, and Sarah drives Hagar out into the wilderness. Then we read this announcement story.



⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude."

¹¹And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard your affliction."

¹²He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he

shall live at odds with all his kin." ¹³So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael (Genesis 16:7–15).

You might also notice the literary pattern of this announcement (although not all elements are in every announcement).

- Appearance of an angel (or the Lord)
- Response of fear or awe
- Divine message –
 - Person addressed by name
 - Qualifying phrase describing the person
 - Person urged not to fear
 - Woman is to have a son
 - He is to have a special name
 - The meaning of his name
 - His future accomplishments
 - Person objects, raises a problem or expresses doubt
- A sign of reassurance.

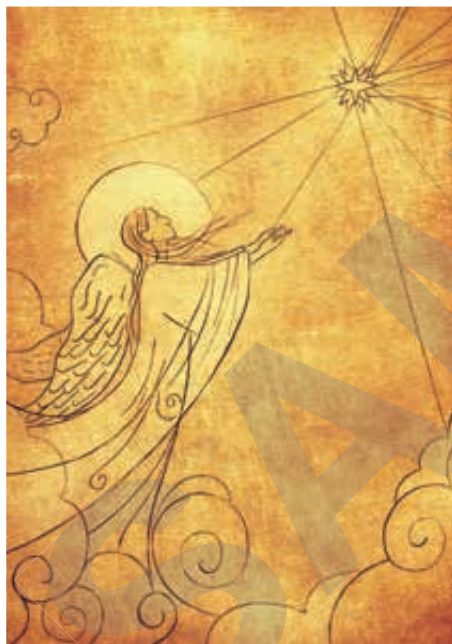
These elements can also be seen in the following announcement stories: the **Birth of Isaac** (Gen 17:1–21) and the **Birth of Samuel** (1Sam 1:1–28). This pattern is found in many biblical birth stories, and the Gospel writers use this pattern from the Old Testament to announce the birth of Jesus.



MARK'S GOSPEL (70 CE)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" ⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:1-4).



DID YOU KNOW?

- ✦ As the New Testament developed, the story of Jesus' beginnings moved back in time from his adult life (Mark), to his birth (Luke and Matthew), to the very beginning of time with God (John).



Top: The mosaic of the Nativity, from Saint Sebastian Cathedral, Bratislava, Slovakia.

JESUS' BIRTH STORY

When we turn to Jesus and his birth story, we see something similar to the birth stories found in ancient biographies. The story of Jesus' birth was not written until well after his death. The Gospels of both Matthew and Luke are dated in the 80s CE, about fifty years after Jesus' death and around ten years after the Gospel of Mark, which was known by both evangelists and formed the "backbone" of their Gospels.

By this time, people knew a great deal about Jesus and believed

that Jesus was showing the world what God was like. People were already giving him special titles, such as King, Son of God, Saviour, Emmanuel (God-with-us) and Son of David; the Jewish followers of Jesus thought he was like their great ancestor Moses. So when Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels about the *adult* Jesus, they did not start with his adult life beginning with his baptism by John, as Mark's Gospel had. Matthew and Luke introduced Jesus by writing a birth story for him that would point to what he would be like *as an adult*.

They could simply have written the historical details, "Joseph and Mary are pleased to announce the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem."

This is the sort of birth notice we might expect today. But, considering how important Jesus was, Matthew and Luke each wanted to write a longer story about his birth that would give some clues about who this baby was going to be and what he was going to do when he grew up. As we read these stories we need to look for the clues that point ahead to the *adult* Jesus.

A GENEALOGY OF JESUS

¹ An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴ and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷ and Solomon the father of

Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, ⁸ and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah,



⁹ and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹² And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the

Messiah.

¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations (Matt 1:1–17).