

The Birth of Jesus:

Comparing the Gospel Infancy Narratives

by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D.

Introduction to Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2:

The birth of Jesus is narrated at the beginning of the **Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke**, but is not mentioned in Mark, and alluded to very differently in John. Although the story may seem familiar, a close analysis shows that there are *many significant differences* between the Matthean and Lukan accounts, with *hardly anything in common* between them. The following are the only commonalities, and even these contain significant differences in the details:



Common Elements in Both Infancy Narratives:

- Main characters: *Mary, Joseph, Jesus*
- Supporting characters: *Angels, Holy Spirit*
- Titles attributed to Jesus: *Christ, son of David*
- Heritage: *children of Abraham/Israel, house of David*
- Place names: *Nazareth in Galilee, Bethlehem in Judea*
- Historical period: *during the reign of King Herod*

Different Contents of the Two Accounts:

Matthew 1–2 (only 48 verses, including genealogy)	Luke 1–2 (total of 132 verses, plus 16 more in genealogy)
1:1 - Title of the Gospel	1:1-4 - Literary introduction to the Gospel
1:2-17 - The Genealogy of Jesus (from Abraham to King David to Exile to Joseph)	(Genealogy included later, in Luke 3:23-38)
-	1:5-25 - Angel Gabriel announces John the Baptist's birth
1:18-24 - An unnamed angel announces Jesus' birth to Joseph in a dream	1:26-38 - Angel Gabriel announces Jesus' birth to Mary while awake
-	1:39-56 - Mary visits Elizabeth (incl. Mary's "Magnificat")
-	1:57-58 - Elizabeth gives birth to her son (John the Baptist)
-	1:59-80 - John the Baptist is circumcised & named (incl. Zechariah's "Benedictus")
-	2:1-5 - Joseph & Mary journey to Bethlehem for the census
1:25 & 2:1a - Mary's son is born in Bethlehem of Judea, and named Jesus	2:6-7 - Mary gives birth to her son in Bethlehem of Judea
-	2:8-14 - Angels appear to some shepherds (incl. the "Gloria" of the angels)
-	2:15-20 - Shepherds visit Mary & Joseph & the infant lying in a manger
-	2:21 - The infant is circumcised & named Jesus
-	2:22-38 - Jesus is presented to God in the Temple (incl. Simeon's "Nunc Dimittis")
2:1b-12 - Magi from the East come; they first visit Herod, then Jesus	-
2:13-21 - Joseph & Mary flee to Egypt with the child Jesus; the Innocents are murdered; the Holy Family returns to Israel	-
2:22-23 - They journey to Nazareth	2:39-40 - The family returns to Nazareth
-	2:41-52 - At age twelve, Jesus & his parents visit the Jerusalem Temple

Click here for more detail on the structure of [Luke's Infancy Narrative](#)

Different Theological Emphases of Each Narrative:

	Matthew 1–2	Luke 1–2
Driving Force:	<i>Hebrew Scriptures</i> are fulfilled (1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23)	<i>Holy Spirit</i> is at work (1:1, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-27)
Jesus' Heritage:	* Son of <i>David</i> , son of <i>Abraham</i> (1:1-17) * Legal son of Joseph, but child of the Holy Spirit (1:18-25)	* Son of <i>God</i> , son of <i>Mary</i> by the Holy Spirit (1:26-38) * Heir to David's throne, over the house of Judah (1:32-33; 2:4)

Names & Titles:	* Messiah (1:1, 16-18; 2:4) * Jesus: "For he will save his people from their sins" (1:21, 25) * <i>Emmanuel</i> : "God with us" (1:23) * <i>King of the Jews</i> (2:2) * "A ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel" (2:6) * Nazorean (2:23)	* Jesus (1:31; 2:21) * Son of the Most High; Son of God (1:32, 35) * He will be great, holy, full of wisdom and grace (1:32, 35; 2:40) * "Of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:33) * A <i>Savior</i> is born... who is Messiah and <i>Lord</i> (2:11, 26) * A light for revelation to Gentiles and for glory to Israel (2:32)
Characters Emphasized:	<i>Men</i> : King David, Joseph of Nazareth, Magi from the East, King Herod, chief priests & scribes, Ethnarch Archelaus	<i>Women</i> : Virgin Mary of Nazareth, Elizabeth, Anna <i>Poor & Aged</i> : Shepherds, Zechariah, Simeon
Themes:	obstacles, conflict, fear, murder, politics	glory, praise, joy; poverty, humility, faith
OT Parallels:	Dreamer Joseph (Genesis 37-41) Baby Moses (Exodus 1-2)	Birth of Samson (Judges 13) Birth of Samuel (1 Sam 1-2)
Number Symbolism:	[King] David = 14 (DVD = 4+6+4); three groups of 14 generations in genealogy; focus on royalty	70 weeks from Gabriel's first Annunciation to Presentation in Temple? related to 70-week prophecy by angel Gabriel in Daniel 9:24-27?
Distinctive Images:		

Old Testament Quotations and Allusions in Matthew's Infancy Narrative:

Matthew's Gospel	Old Testament Texts
Matt 1:3b-6a - [direct quotation of ten generations from Perez to David]	Ruth 4:18-22 - [ten generations from Perez to David]
Matt 1:22-23 - All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel ," which means, " God is with us ."	Isaiah 7:14 - "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel ." Isaiah 8:8b, 10 - "It [the Assyrian army] will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel ... / Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us ."
Matt 2:2 - [Magi ask Herod]: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (cf. 2:8)	Numbers 24:17-19 - "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near-- a star shall come out of Jacob , and a scepter shall rise out of Israel ; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites. / Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly. / One out of Jacob shall rule , and destroy the survivors of Ir."
Matt 2:5-6 - [scribes tell King Herod where the Messiah will be born]: "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: / 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"	Micah 5:2 - "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."
Matt 2:11b - Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense , and myrrh.	Isaiah 60:3, 6 - "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense , and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD."
Matt 2:14-15 - Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, / and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, " <i>Out of Egypt I have called my son</i> ."	Hosea 11:1 - "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and <i>out of Egypt I called my son</i> ."
Matt 2:17-18 - Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: / "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."	Jeremiah 31:15 - "Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."
Matt 2:23 - There [in Galilee] he [Joseph] made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean ."	Isaiah 11:1 - "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (nezer) shall grow out of his roots."

What does Mark's Gospel Say about Jesus' Heritage?

The Gospel according to Mark does *not* contain a *narrative* of Jesus' birth, but it does make a few brief references to his family heritage:

- Mark's Gospel does *not* directly tell us *where* Jesus was born, and it *never* mentions the town *Bethlehem*;
 - Several times it calls him "**Jesus of Nazareth**" (1:24; 10:47; 16:6) or "**the Nazarene**" (14:67).
 - These references do not necessarily imply that Jesus was *born* there, but at least indicate that he *grew up* in the town of Nazareth in Galilee (cf. 1:9).
- Mark's Gospel says *nothing* about who Jesus' earthly *father* was, nor does it ever mention *Joseph* by name;
 - In contrast, Jesus several times refers to God as his "**Father**" (8:38; 14:36; see also 11:25; 13:32).
- Only *once* does Mark's Gospel mention the name of Jesus' *mother*, calling him "**the son of Mary**" (6:3).
 - His **mother** is referred to in only one other pericope, when she (along with his "brothers and sisters") comes to see Jesus while he is preaching in Capernaum (3:31-35).
 - Although Mark tells us that Jesus had "**brothers and sisters**" (3:31-32), and even names four of his "brothers" (6:3; James, Joses, Judas, and Simon), it never specifies if these were older or younger siblings, nor whether these were children of his own mother and/or father, or other close relatives (using "brother/sister" in an extended sense for what we might call "cousins," as was common in ancient Jewish culture).
 - At the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, Mark's Gospel mentions the presence of a certain "*Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses*" (15:40; cfr. 15:47; 16:1); some scholars argue that these references are to Mary, the mother of Jesus, while other scholars believe it refers to another Mary (since these were all very common names at the time).
 - See also a separate page about [The Family of Jesus](#).
- Mark mentions Jesus' *occupation* only once, calling him a "**carpenter**" (6:3; the Greek word *tektwn* could also mean "craftsman" or "construction worker").
 - In contrast, Matthew's Gospel only calls Jesus "the carpenter's son" (Matt 13:55), while Luke and John say nothing about what occupation Jesus had before beginning his public ministry.

Johannine References to Jesus' Heritage and Birth:

Although the Fourth Gospel does not contain a *narrative* of Jesus' birth, it does mention his "coming into the world" and "becoming flesh" (Latin: *incarnatus est*), as well as several debates about his heritage (Is he Judean or Galilean? human or divine?):

- **The Incarnation: "The Word Made Flesh"**
 - "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. *And the Word became flesh and lived among us*, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (1:9-14)
- **The Ancestry of Jesus: Son of Joseph or Son of God?**
 - Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, *Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth*." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*" (1:45-49; cf. 6:42)
- **The Messiah's Origin: Known or Unknown? From Bethlehem or Galilee?**
 - Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, "Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? *Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.*" Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me." (7:25-29)
 - When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, "This is really the prophet." Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some asked, "Surely the Messiah does *not* come *from Galilee*, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes *from Bethlehem*, the village where David lived?" (7:40-42; cf. 7:52)
 - "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because *I know where I have come from* and where I am going, but *you do not know where I come from* or where I am going." (8:14)
 - [Pharisees]: "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man [Jesus], *we do not know where he comes from.*" The [formerly-blind] man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! *You do not know where he comes from*, and yet he opened my eyes." (9:29-30)
 - [Jewish authorities to Pilate]: "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because *he has claimed to be the Son of God.*" Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "*Where are you from?*" But Jesus gave him no answer. (19:7-9)

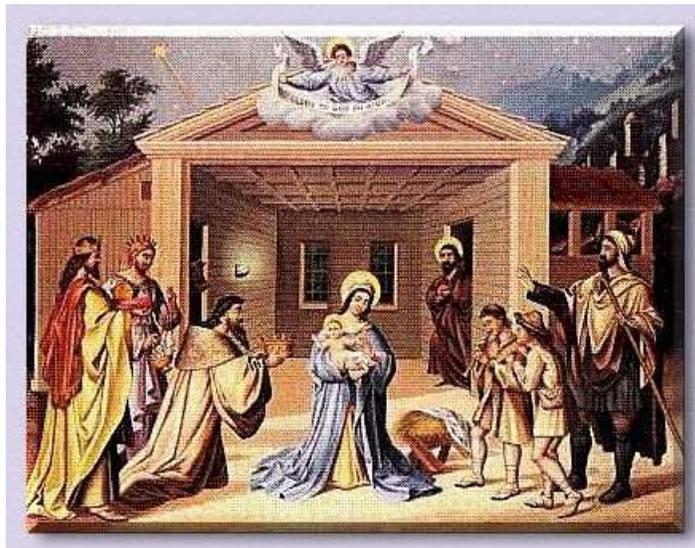
Use of the Infancy Narratives in the *Lectionary for Mass*:

- [Fourth Sunday of Advent, Years A, B, C](#): parts of **Matthew 1** & **Luke 1**
- [Weekdays of Advent, Dec. 17-24](#): most of **Matthew 1** & **Luke 1**
- [Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Christmas Season](#): **Matthew 1-2** & **Luke 2** & **John 1**

Non-Biblical Elements in Popular Conceptions of Christmas:

- **Combining Details from Matthew & Luke** (such as depicting both the Matthean wise men and the Lukan shepherds and angels, as in the card below, and many other Christmas cards, pageants, movies, etc.)
- **The "Three Kings": Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar**
 - The NT mentions "magi from the East," but does not give their names, nor say that they were kings, nor say there were exactly three of them (read Matt 2:1-12 carefully).
 - Matthew mentions "gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh," which eventually led to the assumption that these three costly treasures must have been brought, one each, by three rich and powerful men.
 - The traditional names are first mentioned in manuscripts and mosaics of the 6th or early 7th centuries.
- **The Ox & Ass in a Stable** (from St. Francis of Assisi; 1181-1226)
- **The Story of the Other Wise Man** (by Henry Van Dyke, 1852-1933; [full text online](#); movie version: [The Fourth Wise Man](#), 1985)

- **The Little Drummer Boy** (by Katherine K. Davis, Henry Onorati, and Harry Simeone, 1958; [online lyrics](#); [movie version](#), 1968)



All images borrowed from <http://www.earlenesroots.com/christmas.html>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What is the main message of the Infancy Narrative in **Matthew's** Gospel? What is Matthew emphasizing through the way he has told the story?
2. What is the main message of the Infancy Narrative in **Luke's** Gospel? What is Luke emphasizing through the way he has told the story?
3. Why is the birth of Jesus not narrated in **Mark's** Gospel? What does Mark say about Jesus' family and heritage?
4. How is the "incarnation" of Jesus told very distinctively in **John's** Gospel? (see esp. John 1:14-18)
5. Look at some **Christmas cards**: Are the details of their depictions based on Matthew, or Luke, or both, or neither?

See also my collection of
[Resources for Prayer and Liturgy during Advent and Christmas](#)
 or more detailed analysis of
[The Infancy Narratives in Luke's Gospel](#)

E.N.T.E.R.

Return to the [HOME PAGE](#) of Felix Just, S.J.
 This page was last updated on December 28, 2012
[Copyright © 2006--2012](#)

9,738,477