

Part Two The Biblical Account of the Nativity

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The Biblical Account of the Nativity

We have, up to this point, attempted to ‘set the scene’ by assembling in ‘jigsaw’ fashion a composite picture made up of biblical, theological and historical data which, taken together, comprise the stage upon which the Lord Jesus would accomplish His earthly ministry. It is hoped that we have indeed assembled a broad ‘picture’ in which the Nativity, which we are about to review, is a key focal point: but a focal point cannot be fully appreciated outside the context of the broader picture. Liken it if you will, to a Christmas card depicting the nativity scene: if the picture was of nothing but a baby lying on a bed of straw, we would recognise little from the image. But put the baby on its bed of straw, in an animal feeding trough, and place this in a cattle stall, with the figures of a concerned man and woman looking on, perhaps with a number of rough dressed shepherds in attendance, and a complete scene, indeed a message, is recognised. God prepared mankind for the entry of His Son into the world through the events described in the Old Testament. By the time of Jesus, the desire for a Messiah was palpable amongst the Jewish nation, and perhaps amongst other peoples as well. Yet it seems that most were looking in the wrong place, as did the ‘Wise Men’ from the East, shortly after Jesus was born.

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There were two ways in which this series of studies might have reviewed the biblical account of the Incarnation. We might have taken the various events in sequence and then analysed them, looking at the history, the context and the interpretation of the events themselves. Such an analysis may have value, but would be unduly long and disjointed. The alternative, and the method actually chosen, is to look at the historical and theological setting in which the events occurred, only then reviewing the accounts of Christ's birth contained in the Gospels. This is what we set out to do in this study. It will be followed by studies of the key characters and events reported in the biblical narrative, together with some of the controversies that have attended the traditional understanding of the Nativity.

We obtain our understanding of the events from the witnesses John, Matthew and Luke. Their accounts are written from different perspectives although for the same basic reason— that their readers will put their faith in the Lord Jesus by *believing* in Him. It is only by reading all three accounts that we achieve the full biblical account of Christ's Nativity. In this chapter, the writer has taken each Gospel account, segregated the various events contained in them and reassembled them into a single narrative, believed to be in the correct chronological sequence, as follows:

- A. John 1:1-5 The Word
- B. Matt 1:1-17 The Genealogy (cp. Luke 3:23-38)
- C. Luke 1:5-25 John the Baptist's birth announced
- D. Luke 1:26-56 Annunciation of birth of Jesus Christ, Mary, Elizabeth, Mary's song
- E. Luke 1:57-66 The birth of John the Baptist
- F. Luke 1:67-80 Zechariah's prophecy about John the Baptist (cp. John 1:6-9)
- G. Matt 1:18-25 Joseph's dream and decision
- H. Luke 2:1-20 The birth of Jesus Christ; the visit of the shepherds
- I. Luke 2:21-38 The baby Jesus presented at the temple in Jerusalem
- J. Matt 2:1-12 The visit of the Wise Men (Magi)

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K. Matt 2:13-18 The flight into Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents

L. John 1:10-14 To all who received Him....

This sequence commences in pre-history (A) and concludes in the theological statement (L) that to all who receive Jesus, to those who believe in His name, He gives the right to become children of God. Only one of the two genealogies is included, partly because no purpose would be served in including what is basically repetitive information, partly because they start from opposite points (Luke working from Jesus backwards and Matthew working from Abraham forwards); partly because Luke includes his genealogy well into his account of the life of Jesus whereas Matthew includes his as an integral part of the account of Jesus' birth and partly because they do not match—a matter we will investigate in Chapter 11. Apart from the genealogy included in Luke, all the relevant narrative is included.

A word of explanation is necessary about the position of (G), Joseph's dream and decision. We presume that when Mary returned from visiting her cousin Elizabeth she was between one and three months into her pregnancy, leaving Elizabeth's house about the time that Elizabeth gave birth to John. Travelling back to Nazareth we again presume that Mary quickly told Joseph of her condition. It is quite possible that (F) and (G) happened at the same time or that their order should be reversed. For this study, however, it is felt that the details of John's birth should be kept together, then moving to Joseph's side of the narrative which in turn leads naturally to the birth of the Lord Jesus.

The text is taken, with permission, from the New International Version of the Bible. The bold headings are devised for the purposes of these studies, as are the comments on the probable timing. The verse numbers are, of course, those from each Gospel as appropriate. Readers may, therefore, notice some slight variation in style between the three Gospel witnesses, but apart from this the various strands of the overall account mesh with each other quite satisfactorily. Note that the period covered by

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the “Christmas” account may be as long as two years, judging from the fact that the visit of the wise men was to a house (Matt 2:11) not a stable and that Herod, in his attempt to exterminate Jesus, gave orders for all infant boys up to the age of two years should be slaughtered (Matt 2:16). All this indicates that Mary and Joseph settled, temporarily, in Bethlehem after the birth. This writer’s investigation calculates the story from September/October of 7 BC to late 5 BC.

BIBLICAL ACCOUNT OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS

A. John 1:1-5 The Word

Time: pre-history

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning.

3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

B. Matt 1:1-17 The genealogy (cp. Luke 3:23-38)

Time: most of the Old Testament historical period

1 A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,

Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, 4 Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nashon, Nashon the father of Salmon, 5 Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah’s wife, 7 Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, 8 Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah,

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9 Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

12 After the exile in Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, Abiud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Eliud,

15 Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Mattan, Mattan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

17 Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.

C. Luke 1:5-25 John the Baptist's birth announced

Time: Fifteen months prior to Jesus' birth?

September of 7 BC?

5 In the time of Herod King of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendent of Aaron. 6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of the incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.

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Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will never take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

18 Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.”

19 The angel answered, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.”

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

D. Luke 1:26-56 Annunciation of birth of Jesus Christ; Mary and Elizabeth; Mary's song

Time: March 6 BC?

26 In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.”

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29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.”

34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one will be called the son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God.”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

46 And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name. 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. 51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. 52

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He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

E. Luke 1:57-66 The birth of John the Baptist

Time: June 6BC?

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy and they shared her joy. 59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

61 They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” 62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

F. Luke 1:67-80 Zechariah’s prophecy about John the Baptist (cp. John 1:6-9)

Time: June 6BC?

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. 69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David 70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), 71 salvation from our

enemies and from the hand of all who hate us - 72 to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, 73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham: 74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, 77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven 79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

G. Matt 1:18-25 Joseph's dream and decision

Time: June/July 6BC?

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel - which means “God with us.”

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

H. Luke 2:1-20 The birth of Jesus Christ; the visit of the shepherds

Time: late December of 6BC?

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (2 This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to his own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

11 Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds

returned, glorifying God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

I. Luke 2:21-38 The baby Jesus presented at the temple in Jerusalem

Time: early January of 5BC?

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. 22 When the time for the purification according to the law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”) 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what was said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons”.

25 Now there was a man living in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God saying:

29 “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for Glory to your people Israel.”

33 The child’s father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and will be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

36 There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty four. She never left the temple but worshipped night

and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Editor's Note: Apparently the Holy family returned briefly to Nazareth (Luke 2:39) —possibly with the intention of winding-up their affairs there prior to a permanent move to Bethlehem. Such a journey would probably have been undertaken slowly, after which they returned to Bethlehem and lived in a house (Matt 2:11).

J. Matt 2:1-12 The visit of the Wise Men (Magi)

Time: mid to late 5BC?

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

6 “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel’ ”

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

K. Matt 2:13-18 The flight into Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents

Time: late 5BC?

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what was said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

16 When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. 17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 "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."

L. John 1:10-14 To all who received Him

Time: Now!

10 He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. 14 The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

