

# The Story (19) – Jesus' Birth

By Ashby Camp

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## I. Introduction

A. The OT ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. It was clear that in one sense God always had ruled the world from the time of creation. He was on his heavenly throne (e.g., Ps. 11:4; Isa. 6:1) and reigned over all (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1, 96:10). But there was some sense in which his kingly rule was not being fully expressed. He was allowing creation to go on out of step with his ultimate intention for it, to continue in a state of brokenness, a state of sin and suffering that was contrary to his ultimate purpose and vision.

B. But the prophets saw that a day was coming in which God would express his rulership of creation in such a way that all things would be brought into harmony and conformity with his ultimate will and purpose.

1. His creation would be redeemed from the dreadful consequences of sin that had invaded it. This world of rebellion, sin, hostility, and fragmentation would be rescued by God, transformed by him into a true utopia, a perfect reality of love, joy, and fellowship with God and one another.

2. On that day God would express his authority over creation in a way he was not doing at present; he would in his sovereign power bring his creation to its ultimate fulfillment. At that time, he *will be* king over all the earth (Zech. 14:9) in a manner unlike the present.

C. The OT uses different imagery to refer to this blessed state that God is going to create. The imagery varies in how sharply it distinguishes the blessed state from this present existence, but all of it says, in forms relevant to ancient Jews, that a time of divine blessing is coming. It says that the failures and sufferings of the present age would be put to rights by the coming of the new age.

D. Israel's return to the land after 70 years of exile in Babylonia was great, but it was still a pale shadow of the kind of glory predicted by the prophets. Israel was small, struggling, and under the oppression of foreign powers, and Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi document the low spiritual state of the nation. And this continued into the first century, where Israel was weak, poor, and under the rule of pagans (the Romans).

E. The people longed and prayed for the coming of God, for his final intervention when he would set all things right and rule in the fullest sense to the blessing of his people. In Mk.

15:43 Joseph of Arimathea is described as one who was "waiting for the kingdom of God" (TNIV). It is at that time that the Lord Jesus came into this world.

## II. The Trinity

A. One cannot understand Jesus' birth without understanding the triune nature of God. As I've said on numerous occasions, Scripture reveals, by necessary inference, that the one being God exists eternally as three coequal and coeternal persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. In other words, God exists as **one** essence or being but **three** distinctive persons. He is a **three-person being** rather than a one-person being. This is the doctrine of the Trinity that was articulated by early Christian theologians and which has been a test of Christian orthodoxy throughout the centuries.

B. This truth is difficult to internalize partly because it is a unique attribute of God. All creatures we know anything about exist as one-person beings, so we are without a familiar comparison. We thus resort to imperfect analogies in our effort to formulate the truth in terms of our experience. We are like creatures in a two-dimensional universe seeking to comprehend a three-dimensional being.

C. After a brief introduction, Luke begins his Gospel with the story of John the Baptist's (Baptizer's) birth followed by the story of Jesus' birth. Matthew begins his Gospel with the birth of Jesus, and Mark begins his Gospel after John and Jesus are adults. But the Apostle John begins his Gospel with a reference to eternity.

1. He writes in Jn. 1:1-3: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* <sup>2</sup> *He was in the beginning with God.* <sup>3</sup> *All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.* And lest there be any doubt the "the Word" is the person of the Godhead who became Jesus, God the Son, John says in 1:14: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

2. Jesus is expressly referred to as God in Jn. 1:18, 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8-9; 2 Pet. 1:1; and possibly 1 Jn. 5:20. So Jn. 1:1 is not unique.

D. As I said many weeks ago, the story of the Bible is the story of God's work through the people of Israel to rescue his creation, which includes mankind, from its fallen state. People are the high point of God's creation, but his rescue effort includes all of creation because all of creation was harmed as a result of sin. That is why Paul in Rom. 8:19-22 says that creation itself looks forward to the day it will be freed from the consequences of human sin.

E. Jesus is the center of this entire effort. It was decided from eternity that to solve the sin problem that would infect creation God the Son would become the God-man Jesus Christ and would take on himself the penalty that all human sin deserved. This allows God to forgive

sinner without making light of the horror of sin, without trivializing sin. It allows God to forgive in a way that is consistent with his nature, a way that expresses his love without neglecting his holiness and justice.

F. In eternity the Father, the Son, and the Spirit freely chose the roles they would take in the redemption of humanity. In the words of James White: "The Father chose to be the fount and source of the entirety of the work; the Son chose to be the Redeemer and to enter into human flesh as one subject to the Father; and the Spirit chose to be the Sanctifier of the church, the indwelling Testifier of Jesus Christ."

### III. The Birth

A. Mat. 1:18-19 – <sup>18</sup> *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. <sup>19</sup> 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.*

1. Mary and Joseph were "betrothed," which in ancient Judaism was really the first part of the marriage process. It was a much stronger connection than what we call "being engaged." It was such a binding arrangement that the parties were called "husband" and "wife," the woman was classified as a "widow" if the man died, and the relationship could only be broken by a divorce.

2. After betrothal, the woman typically would continue living with her parents for about a year, and then the husband would bring her to his house where the marriage was finalized in a ceremony. Verses 18-19 take place during this interim period when Joseph and Mary were betrothed but not yet finally married.

3. You can imagine the problem when it becomes apparent to Joseph and others that his betrothed is pregnant. Since he has not yet had sexual relations with her, he naturally figures that Mary has committed adultery. Of course, the truth was that Mary had miraculously become pregnant by the operation of the Holy Spirit. God the Spirit had placed within this virgin's womb the God-human, Jesus. This is mind-blowing stuff.

4. Joseph apparently was not convinced that Mary's impregnation was miraculous (assuming Mary told him). Because he was a righteous man, meaning pious or law-abiding, Joseph had determined that he was not going to marry an adulteress, but he had no desire to be harsh with Mary. Rather than divorce her by way of a public trial, which would have meant her abject humiliation, Joseph had in mind privately to give her a bill of divorce signed by a couple of witnesses.

B. Mat. 1:20-21 – <sup>20</sup> *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. <sup>21</sup> 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."*

1. After considering divorcing Mary quietly, Joseph is visited in a dream by an angel of the Lord. The angel tells Joseph that he is not to worry that by taking Mary home he would be marrying an adulteress. She is not an adulteress. Rather, she has been given a child miraculously by the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. Joseph is told that the child Mary is carrying is a boy and that he is to give him the name Jesus. This is important because by naming the child Joseph officially accepted him and made him his son. By naming him Joseph brought Jesus into his lineage though he was not his biological father. Thus Jesus is called "the carpenter's son" (Mat. 13:55) and "the son of Joseph" (Lk. 4:22; Jn. 1:45, 6:42).

3. Joseph is, of course, a descendant of David, as specified in the genealogy in Matthew 1. He is called "son of David" by the angel in Mat. 1:20 and is identified as a descendant of David in Lk. 1:27 and 2:4. So whatever link Jesus may have to David through Mary, he is linked to David legally as Joseph's son. God had promised King David a thousand years earlier that one of his descendants would sit on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89).

a. As you probably are aware, the genealogies of Jesus given in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 are quite different. There are a number of possible ways to understand these differences in keeping with the inerrancy of Scripture, but opinions are divided as to which is the best. Some think Luke gives Mary's genealogy with Joseph being named in place of Mary because, it is postulated, Mary's father had no sons and adopted his son-in-law Joseph who became his legal heir. In that case, Jesus' link to David is through both Joseph and Mary.

b. Another possibility is that both genealogies refer to Joseph but Matthew gives the genealogy of throne succession, those having the right to rule, and Luke gives the line of physical descent. Those lines meet in Joseph. Much more would need to be said about this, but I do not want to chase those rabbits right now. I just want to note that there are various possible ways to skin this cat, but be aware that none of them is obvious or problem free.

4. The angel tells Joseph that he is to name the child Jesus "*because* he will save his people from their sins."

a. That sounds strange until you understand that the English name "Jesus" is a transliteration, by way of Latin, of the Greek name *Iesous*, which itself was a transliteration of the Hebrew name "*Yeshua*." The Hebrew name "*Yeshua*" means "Yahweh [God] is salvation." In other words, the angel tells Joseph that he is to give the child a name that means "God is salvation" because the child is going to save people from their sins.

b. So the angel reveals the essence of the Incarnation, the purpose for which God the Son took on human flesh. He entered this world to save his people from their

sins. As Jesus himself said in Lk. 19:10, "[T]he Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

c. Everyone who is old enough and everyone who is sane enough to be morally responsible has sinned. As Paul says in Rom. 3:23, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And everyone who has sinned is in need of saving, in need of rescue.

C. Joseph takes Mary home as his wife but he has no sexual relations with her (Mat. 1:24-25). He and the pregnant Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah (Micah 5:2), because Bethlehem was David's home town. As a descendent of David, Joseph was compelled to go there for the taking of a Roman census. Jesus was, of course, born in Bethlehem. Some six months earlier Mary's older relative Elizabeth had given birth to John the Baptist. (Note: there was no room for Joseph and Mary in the *guest room* of the ancestral family residence not an "inn." They therefore stayed in the back portion of the house used to keep the family animal(s) at night.)

D. The shepherds arrive soon after Jesus' birth, and on the eighth day after his birth, Jesus was circumcised in keeping with Jewish law (Lev. 12:3) and was formally given the name Jesus (Lk. 2:21). Forty plus days after his birth, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice of two doves or pigeons, which signified they were poor (Luke 2:22–24). They returned to Bethlehem and perhaps near the end of Jesus' first year the gift-bearing Magi (not kings but counselors of kings) from the East (perhaps Persia) arrived to worship him.

E. The Magi returned for home without checking back in with King Herod, and when it dawned on him they were not coming back, he had all the children in the region of Bethlehem ages two and under killed (giving himself a margin of error). Before that, however, an angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt to protect his family, which he did.

F. After Herod's death, an angel told Joseph to return to Israel. They went back to Nazareth, the place where they had lived before moving to Bethlehem for the census. This is probably in 3 B.C., Herod probably having died in late 4 B.C. So Jesus was just a toddler.

G. Luke 2:40 says, *And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.* The next verse, Luke 2:41, jumps to the story of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple during the Feast of Passover. His parents have to come back for him, and Luke reports in 2:51-52: *And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.*<sup>52</sup> *And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.* The story picks back up with the ministries of John and Jesus, the only other clue to Jesus' life before that time is the reference in Mk. 6:3 that he (like his father) was a carpenter.

#### IV. Christ's Deity

A. The deity of Jesus is all over the New Testament, so clearly God the Son didn't cease to be God when he became the man Jesus. How could he? He is in nature God. Rather, he became a man while continuing to be God.

B. Systematic theologians sometimes summarize the incarnation this way: "Remaining what he was [that is, fully divine], he became what he was not [that is, fully human as well]." If that doesn't blow your mind, nothing will. I have on more than one occasion quoted the following statement from a theologian named Wayne Grudem: "The fact that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God could become man and join himself to a human nature forever, so that infinite God became one person with finite man, will remain for eternity the most profound miracle and the most profound mystery in all the universe."

V. A Word About Mary – Let me say in closing that in our reaction against the Roman Catholic exaltation of Mary we should not overlook her blessedness. The angel said to Mary in Lk. 1:28, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." And the Spirit said to Mary through Elizabeth in Lk. 1:42, "Blessed are you among women." In Lk. 1:48-49 Mary exclaimed, "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me." As we esteem those who were faithful instruments of God's work, I think it is fitting that we esteem – not worship, esteem -- the mother of our Lord.