

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

The more we study the word of God, the clearer it becomes how inter-related the Scriptures are to each other. We see in this inter-relatedness evidence of divine authorship and evidence of a “plan.” Many Old Testament Scriptures find their fulfillment in the coming of the Messiah. As we see prophetic truths that have already come to pass centuries after they were first recorded, our faith is made stronger to look forward to things that have not yet happened. In relationship to the birth of Jesus, passages from Isaiah 11:1-5 and Micah 5:2 are related to Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 2:1-7.

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. His delight is in the fear of the LORD, And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, Nor decide by the hearing of His ears; But with righteousness He shall judge the poor, And decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, And faithfulness the belt of His waist. (Isaiah 11:1-5)

We see a reference to Jesse, the father of King David. It has been suggested that the prophecy was stated this way so that we would associate the Messiah that was to be born with the humble home of this family in Bethlehem, rather than with the stately mansions of Jerusalem where David reigned as king. Here the Messiah is referred to as a “Shoot” or “Branch” coming from the same family that produced the Davidic line of kings. In Rev. 5:5 we find reference to Jesus as being the Root of David – meaning the Source. In Rev. 22:15 we again find reference to Jesus as being, not only the Root but also the Offspring of David. This speaks to me, that not only is God our Beginning, He is also our Outcome – that Christ is All and in all. He is the Alpha and the Omega. Not only is He the raw material for our spiritual lives. He is also the outcome of our Christian walk.

The reference to the Spirit of the Lord in this passage from Isaiah refers not so much to the activity of the Spirit in the events related to the birth of the Savior, but more so to His ministry. He was born of the Spirit of God from His physical birth; however, the Holy Spirit was also involved in a significant event at the time Jesus was baptized by John. At that time the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon Him which signaled the start of His miraculous ministry. I think that we today could learn from the experience that Jesus had. Not only did He have the Spirit of God because He was born of the Spirit, but also He was endued with the Spirit in a special way for His public ministry. If Jesus needed both, then so do we.

We see in verse 2 of chapter 11, a naming of the sevenfold Spirits of God that are mentioned in Revelation 5:6. This passage from Isaiah is really broad in its scope in that we find reference to the earthly parentage of Jesus (Shoot of Jesse), the earthly ministry of Jesus, and then to the earthly reign of Jesus when He will come again to reign as King.

The second Old Testament background reference for this study is found in Micah 5:2.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."

This passage shows that the Messiah was to be from the tribe of Judah which is in agreement with the prophetic words spoken by Jacob in his old age. In Genesis 49:10 he said, “The scepter or leadership shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet until Shiloh (the Messiah or the Peaceful One) comes to Whom it belongs, and to Him shall be the obedience of the people.” Micah pinpointed the town where the Savior was to be born. Bethlehem was the home town of David and both Mary and Joseph could trace their ancestry back to David. This fact will figure into some of the happenings we will see when we examine the New Testament account. The name

Bethlehem literally means House of Bread. Considering the many references that Jesus made to Himself as being the Bread of Life and the meaningful use of the broken bread in the Lord Supper, we see how really well planned was God's means of redeeming lost mankind to Himself. Even the details were taken into account.

Matthew does not mention the account of the announcement covered by Luke, but starts out with the geneology of Jesus, beginning with Abraham through David and Solomon all the way up to Joseph. This geneology shows that Joseph was a direct descendant of David through the line of kings of Judah. Many writers have pointed out that Matthew's emphasis shows the sovereignty aspects (the kingship, if you will) of the life of Jesus. On the other hand, Luke tended to emphasize the humanness of Jesus, Mark His servant nature and John, His divinity.

After Matthew completed the ancestry of Jesus, he then moved on in the narrative of the story.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. (Matt 1:18)

Matthew was careful to include the significant information regarding the timing of Mary's pregnancy relative to her marriage to Joseph. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. Nowadays we have engagements. A betrothal was more of a commitment to marry than we normally consider an engagement to be. However, before the marriage took place or was consummated, Mary became pregnant or as Matthew put it, "was found with child." We know from Luke's account the conception was the work of the Holy Spirit. That is confirmed also by Matthew.

We don't know a lot about Mary and Joseph. There are many traditions relative to Mary that are advocated by the Roman Catholic Church. Some of these have no historical nor Scriptural basis. A good example is the dogma of Immaculate Conception. This dogma refers to the idea that Mary was conceived by her mother in such a manner so as to be free from all taint of original sin. Such an idea is strictly human in origin and has no basis in any Holy Scripture of which I am aware.

On the other hand, there are people who deny that anything miraculous happened relative to the birth of Jesus, that it is nothing more than a myth. Persons who would deny Christ of His virgin birth would also deny His deity and His power to save. That spirit is even now in the world; it is, of course, the spirit of anti-Christ.

We have to wonder how all of this affected Joseph. We are not told exactly when Mary told Joseph what had happened. I would imagine that it would have been much better for her to have shared the fact that an angel had visited her immediately after the visit. Knowing human nature, it probably didn't happen that way. Luke tells us that after the angel's visit, that Mary went into Judah to visit Elisabeth and stayed with her until John was born. By this time she was probably showing signs that she was with child. By waiting until that time to tell Joseph what had happened, he found it very difficult to believe. What did Joseph do?

Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. (Matt 1:19)

Now you can see that not only did God choose Mary because of her character, but He also choose Joseph to be the head of the household where Jesus would grow up because of his character. I'm sure he was very hurt by what he imagined had happened, yet he was a person of noble character and that characteristic along with the love he had for Mary led him to handle the matter discretely. He was determined to end the engagement, but he would do it quietly with as little embarrassment to Mary and himself as possible. However, as Joseph tried to figure out the details of how he would handle this matter in the most discrete manner he had an unusual experience of his own.

But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of

the Holy Spirit. "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matt 1:20-21)

Though Joseph was conducting himself in a very noble and just manner, he was about to do something that was not in the plan that God had. So we see God intervening. Joseph had a dream in which the angel of the Lord appeared to him and delivered the same message about the Child that Mary had heard, even to the name to be given to the Child. This was enough to convince him to follow through with the marriage.

I think there is a lesson here for us: We may go about our daily lives doing what is noble and just, and, yet, be in conflict with the will of God. From a human point of view Joseph's intended actions were all one could be expected to do and yet God had a better way. What God wanted from Joseph was beyond the bounds of humanly motivated love but called for the kind of love that only God can inspire. It would need to be a love that was self-sacrificing. You know, that is exactly what God was doing in Christ Jesus. We see a clue to the extent of this love in the words, "He shall save His people from their sins." At the time, Joseph did not know how that was to happen, but we can look back and see that salvation was bought by the blood of Jesus as He died for you and me on the cross of Calvary.

Matthew was very careful to point out how events related to Old Testament prophecy.

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." (Matt 1:22-23)

What do you think Joseph did?

Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS. (Matt 1:24-25)

I suspect that the angel of the Lord made a profound impression on Joseph. The angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary to be his wife and when Joseph waked up he did what the angel told him. He and Mary were officially married and yet Joseph did not consummate the marriage until after the birth of Jesus.

We have been emphasizing the fact that all the events surrounding the birth of Jesus were in accordance with Old Testament prophecies. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and yet the Scriptures clearly stated that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. I suspect Mary and Joseph did not know what Micah 5:2 said regarding this matter. They were good people but they were not Biblical scholars. So, how was it to happen that Mary will be at the right place at the right time? God had a way. It is recorded in the gospel of Luke.

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. (Luke 2:1-3)

With God nothing is impossible. The Roman Empire with its high and mighty Caesar was used by God to accomplish the purposes of the Kingdom of God. And they thought that they were in control. Here was Caesar Augustus thinking that he was some sort of god and yet the one true God was coming into the world, not as someone high and mighty, but as a helpless child. You see, even the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man and the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of man. Caesar thought that he had the idea of registering everyone so that he could tax them. Everyone was to go to their ancestral home towns for this registration. Everyone was to include Joseph and Mary.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife,

who was with child. (LUKE 2:4-5)

As you give and receive Christmas cards this year, you will no doubt see scenes of Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem with Mary riding on a donkey and Joseph leading the donkey. We aren't told in the gospel accounts how they traveled, but you can be assured that it was not in the kind of comfort with which we travel today. The total distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 85 miles and the roads were not in the best condition. After all, this was a poor country and under Roman domination. But even with good roads and even if Mary did have a donkey on which to ride, it would not be an easy trip for her since she was nine months pregnant.

With Joseph and Mary having arrived in Bethlehem nothing stood in the way for the prophecies to be fulfilled.

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

We've all seen Christmas dramas in which Joseph and the obviously pregnant Mary are knocking on the door of the inn only to be turned away. I can remember the anger that I used to have toward the innkeeper for turning them away. After I learned what the inns of that day were like, then I lost my anger and thought maybe he had done them a kindness in letting them use the stable. The inns of that day were usually a large open room where everyone bedded down on the floor. This is what you might call "public accommodations" -- really public. It would not be a fitting place for a woman to have a baby. On the other hand, a stable in which animal are kept is not a very fitting place either.

If you visit the land of Isreal and go to Bethlehem you will be shown a cave that is supposedly the location where Jesus was born. This remarkable person came into the world in the humblest of conditions and yet He has had more influence on the world than all the Caesars put together. I don't know of anyone that celebrates the birthday of any of the Caesars and yet all the world of that day would have told you that Caesar was the most important person on the earth at that time, that he had more power than anyone. We can look back on that and realize how foolish those concepts were; and yet I wonder today if our preception is any better in our time than those folks had in their time when it comes to realizing what is really important and what has lasting significance.

As we enter into this Christmas season, we have another chance to look beyond the tinsel and the trees, to look beyond the commercialism and the confusion and to look to the real significance of this season of celebration, the birth of Jesus. If our Christmas commemoration is not about Christ Jesus, then we have missed the point completely.