Accounts of Jesus’ Birth

SESSION 2

Reflecting on the similarities and differences between accounts of Jesus’ birth, we enter into a deeper understanding of the mystery of God with us, Emmanuel.

Introduction

Charles Schulz’s *A Charlie Brown Christmas* has been a favorite television show for many people since it first aired. Many complain that the Christmas season has become too commercialized, and Charlie Brown’s search for the real meaning of Christmas among the lights and decorations and shopping strikes a chord deep within us. And Christmas has become even more commercialized, if anything, in the forty-plus years since the show first aired. Today’s retail outlets barely have time to remove the Halloween decorations and candy from the shelves before replacing them with decorations and merchandise designed to appeal to the Christmas shopper.

Perhaps the best moment in the show occurs as Charlie Brown can take no more squabbling about the school Christmas play. None of the kids wants to play his or her assigned role, and they cannot believe that Charlie Brown was such a “blockhead” as to buy an undersized, real Christmas tree for the production. The entire cast has begun dancing to Schroeder’s jazzy piano tunes, when Charlie Brown pleads for someone to tell him the real meaning of Christmas. Linus dons his blanket as a shepherd’s headdress, asks that all the lights be dimmed except the spotlight shining on him, and recites the familiar words of Luke’s Christmas story. Something about the child’s voice merges with Luke’s simple story about shepherds and angels and mangers and stables to make us stop and reflect on a newborn baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

In session 1 of this study we discussed the relationship between the two Gospels in the New Testament that begin with narratives about Jesus’ birth and the other two canonical Gospels. In particular, we suggested that early Christian communities raised questions about the life and ministry of Jesus that Mark’s Gospel did not answer. But Matthew and Luke did not merely answer those questions with their additions of infancy narratives and resurrection narratives to the structure laid out by Mark. The infancy narratives that begin Matthew and Luke were carefully crafted to introduce major themes and characters important to the individual Gospels.

As we noted in session 1, Matthew’s infancy narrative emphasizes Jesus’ royalty and hereditary qualifications to be “son of Abraham” and “son of David,” as well as “Son of God.” A careful reading of Matthew’s Gospel reveals just how important Jesus’ royal identity is to the Gospel’s plot. Session 2 will turn our attention to the ways Luke’s birth and infancy narratives serve a similar purpose for his Gospel.

Luke 1–2: Jesus’ Birth and Infancy

Luke’s Gospel (and probably Luke’s audience) appears much less concerned with Jesus’ Jewish and royal
identity. That is not to say that Luke’s Gospel is entirely unconcerned to portray Jesus as the Messiah. Luke seems more interested in arguing that Jesus’ ability to reign and offer salvation goes far beyond the scope of the Jewish kingdom. Many interpreters have argued that Luke’s Jesus is a universal savior, and the infancy narratives contain considerable evidence to support that interpretation.

Like Matthew’s narrative, Luke’s Gospel skillfully connects Jesus with his Hebrew heritage from the beginning. Matthew used a genealogy and divine dream communication that prompted the reader to connect Jesus’ story with those of the Hebrew Bible. Luke employs a different strategy. Luke’s story is set in Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Bethlehem, but his characters are not Jewish nobles, nor does he connect his characters with those of the Hebrew Bible. Instead, Luke’s first two chapters sound and feel like the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. His vocabulary and sentence structure help the reader make a smooth transition; Luke’s story sounds as if it belongs with the other familiar biblical stories. This becomes even more apparent when the infancy narrative ends, since the entire tone of the narrative changes.

Like Matthew, Luke was forced to deal with the illogical reality of Jesus’ parentage. Joseph obviously had difficulty believing Mary’s story of an angelic announcement and a Spiritual conception, and both Matthew and Luke could assume that their readers might share Joseph’s disbelief. Since the events surrounding Mary’s conception were integral to the story, though, they would have to be explained in a way that would allow the reader to consider them to be part of God’s plan. Matthew’s narrative introduced the four women in Joseph’s genealogy whose stories suggested that logic and cultural norms had often been ignored by God and God’s chosen women in the process of securing the royal line. God’s divine dream communications with Joseph and the magi added clear confirmation that Mary was pregnant through miraculous, rather than more mundane, means.

In Luke’s Gospel, the important messages come from angels. The presence of angelic messengers is a very familiar aspect of the Old Testament. Their presence is part of what makes Luke’s infancy narratives sound and feel like the Septuagint. More important, though, all of the cultures of the Mediterranean understood angels to be the bearers of divine messages. Angels spoke powerfully and authoritatively; their messages were ignored at one’s own peril.

Luke’s angels appear to Zechariah in the Temple (1:5–23), to Mary in Nazareth (1:26–38), and to the shepherds outside Bethlehem (2:8–14). We learn a great deal from the angelic messages and the characters’ response. Luke noted that Zechariah was “righteous before God” (1:6), but Zechariah’s inability to believe Gabriel’s prophecy resulted in Zechariah’s inability to speak for nine months. Mary’s response to Gabriel’s announcement echoes Zechariah (“How can this be?” [1:34]), but she redeems herself by accepting the explanation with simple faith and obedience (1:38). Perhaps Gabriel’s assertion that “nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37) was all she needed to hear. The shepherds were awestricken by the nocturnal visit of the angel who announced the birth of the Messiah to them, and their fear cannot have been lessened when “a multitude of the heavenly host” (2:13) joined their original visitor. But their response was immediate and exemplary; “they went with haste” to find the baby (2:16), and their belief in the incredible angelic announcement was rewarded.

While the angelic messages established Jesus’ messianic identity and royal heritage, other aspects of Luke’s narrative expanded the scope of Jesus’ life and ministry. Gabriel had explained the role of the Holy Spirit in her conception to Mary, and Elizabeth was inspired to greet Mary as the “mother of my Lord” (1:43). The work of the Holy Spirit is an important theme in Luke-Acts; that work will result in the movement of the Gospel from Judea “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) in Luke’s second volume. Both Mary and Zechariah sing of God’s restoring Israel to its rightful place as a light of salvation to the world.

Luke is careful to include reference points that lie outside of Judea and Hebrew history. The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth begins by referring to the reign of “King Herod of Judea” (1:5), but when the time has come for Jesus to be born, the historical referents are Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, the governor of Syria (2:1–2). So, too, Simeon praises God for revealing “your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2:30–32).
The presence of shepherds at the manger does not extend Jesus’ reign beyond the geographical or ethnic confines of Judea, but it does follow the theme of Jesus as universal savior. For shepherds were low on the social ladder in Judea, and many religious leaders would have entertained serious doubts about a shepherd’s ability to lead a righteous life worthy of salvation. Matthew’s magi were Gentiles (that is, non-Jews), but at least they were acceptable visitors for a royal child. Some in ancient Judea might have considered these shepherds to be on a level with Gentiles when it came to piety, but they would never have achieved the social status necessary to be welcome at a palace. That they received the angelic announcement and were present at the manger underscores Luke’s theme that Jesus came to be savior of all, not just the Jews.

Noncanonical Gospels

We have noted that the earliest traditions about Jesus focused on his adult ministry, especially the last week of his life (the passion). Mark’s narrative structured the story of Jesus’ life and ministry geographically, with the first “act” taking place in and around Galilee, while the second shifted to Jerusalem. More important for our study, Mark began his Gospel with Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan and ended it with Jesus’ death and burial. Within a few years Matthew and Luke wrote Gospels that expanded on Mark’s narrative structure with infancy narratives, resurrection appearances, and other of Jesus’ teachings.

Other Gospels, written after the canonical Gospels, provide evidence that suggests questions about the birth, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus continued to be discussed in Christian communities. Lingering questions about Jesus’ birth concerned Mary’s perpetual virginity and whether Jesus was a direct descendant of David. And, since the canonical Gospels mention very little about Jesus as a child, later Gospels often sought to fill that gap.

One category of infancy Gospels focused on the conception and birth of Jesus. The Infancy Gospel of James, the Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, and a fragmentary medieval infancy Gospel written in Latin are important examples of this category. Both Matthew and Luke had provided genealogies of Jesus designed to connect him with the Hebrew royal line, but both traced that lineage to Joseph. Detractors appear to have argued that the Christian tradition could not claim that Jesus was descended from David since Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father. Both Infancy James and Infancy Pseudo-Matthew countered that argument with stories of Mary and Joseph that took place before the canonical Gospels began. In both cases Mary was portrayed as a young virgin—a direct descendant of David in the tribe of Judah—dedicated to service in the Temple from her birth. Joseph, an older widower with children from his first marriage, is chosen to be her protector rather than her husband. Like the canonical Gospels, these narratives make the divine nature of Mary’s conceiving very clear, but she and Joseph must answer to the priests in the Temple because of her special religious status. Both protest their innocence, but both undergo public testing to prove their lack of sin.

These stories address the lineage of Jesus by connecting him to David through Mary, but they also underscore the tradition of Mary’s perpetual virginity, which developed early in Christian tradition. First, both Joseph and Mary are vindicated when they are accused of having violated Mary’s vow of chastity. Second, like the canonical Gospels, these narratives contain visions and heavenly pronouncements that clearly identify the divine agency of Mary’s conception. But these narratives add Hebrew midwives as witnesses to the miraculous nature of Jesus’ birth. Heaven and earth stand still while they await the savior’s birth, and the birth is painless and bloodless. A bright light fills the stable, and the baby Jesus appears from its midst. And, if that weren’t enough, the midwife insists on performing a pelvic exam on Mary because she doubts the evidence before her. To her dismay, her hand and arm begin to burn away, and she is healed only by the touch of the newborn baby. Mary has remained a virgin throughout the entire pregnancy from conception to birth.

Other noncanonical Gospels provide stories of Jesus as a child, filling the gap between Jesus’ birth and his appearance in the Temple at the age of twelve (Luke 2).
Infancy Gospel of Thomas and an infancy Gospel written in Arabic portray the young Jesus as a miracle worker and prankster. The boy Jesus brings clay pigeons to life and heals playmates and neighbors. He also lashes out in anger toward those who annoy him; he often kills them but almost always brings the dead back to life. His miracles are little more than magic tricks, intended to foreshadow the power of the miracle-working adult. His response to others drives home the idea that he will punish those who ignore him but reward those who are faithful.

Conclusion

A careful reading of the noncanonical Gospels suggests a number of reasons why they were left out of the New Testament canon. Rarely do they address the entire life and ministry of Jesus as do the four canonical Gospels, and their stories seem either too fantastic or obviously dependent on the narratives of their canonical cousins. In the case of questions about the birth and infancy of Jesus, the noncanonical Gospels often appear too interested in proving or defending particular theological positions that might be controversial.

By contrast, Matthew and Luke integrated their infancy narratives into the plot of their volumes. Matthew’s birth narratives begin with a genealogy that connects Jesus with his Jewish heritage and messianic lineage, and his inclusion of four women’s names argues that God has been willing to work through less-than-savory methods to preserve the royal line in Israel’s glorious past. The visit of the magi, with their royal gifts and their message of a star that portends the birth of the “king of the Jews,” reinforces the identity of Jesus as the true heir to Israel’s throne. Divine dream messages and a sojourn in Egypt for the Holy Family connects Jesus’ story with those of the Hebrew Bible and allows a smooth transition into the story of God’s new chosen people.

Luké’s birth narratives also connect the story of Jesus with those of the Hebrew people. Luke’s story begins in a way very comfortable for readers familiar with the Hebrew Bible, for Luke is also interested in presenting God’s new kingdom with Jesus as its savior and king. Historical markers and public figures remind Luke’s readers that the birth of Jesus happened in a certain place and time, beginning a theme that Luke will carry throughout both of his volumes. Angels appear at important junctures in the story, announcing the miraculous pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary and surprising shepherds with the news of the Messiah’s birth. Zechariah and Mary sing of God’s plans to reverse the fortunes of human beings, another theme that Luke carries through both his Gospel and Acts. And the presence of shepherds at the manger suggests that those plans have already begun.

The narrative of Jesus’ birth would seem to be a logical place to begin the story, though John will choose to begin his Gospel before recorded history (“In the beginning . . .”). Both Matthew and Luke use their birth narratives to answer theological and historical questions left unanswered by Mark’s account. More important, though, both evangelists use their birth narratives to connect the story of Jesus with the story of his ancestors and to introduce important themes that will develop throughout the rest of their Gospels.

Every Christmas the manger scene is a familiar part of decorations in homes and churches across Christendom. And every time I see one, I am reminded that the magi, angels, and shepherds surround the Holy Family only in such manger scenes. The essential story of Jesus’ birth remains the same no matter which Gospel one chooses to read. But the differences are vital; each Gospel’s birth narrative is unique. The churches’ portraits of Jesus are different, but their variety is what enriches our perspective on the life and ministry of Jesus.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. A good resource for these documents is Willis Barnstone, ed., The Other Bible (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).