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“Christmas in the Gospels” Advent 2013

I. What a “gospel” is – and is not....

A literal meaning of “gospel” is “good news.”

Deriving from the Old English *gōd-spell*, meaning "good news" or "glad tidings"

And the English words are translations of the Greek *euangelion* which literally means “good message.”

“Message” or “tidings” is actually a better word than “news,” because “news” can mislead us.

I.e., the four canonical gospels¹ are not written as “news” reports, but as theological interpretations, penned long after the facts they are describing, which are meant to explain why the birth/life/teachings/death/resurrection of Jesus is in fact a “good message,” and the writers’ intentions are to be able, therefore, to **persuade and convict**, not simply to “report.” To use a very rough analogy, think of the difference between a news story and an editorial.

Each of the canonical gospel writers therefore is telling of the “good tidings” of Jesus from a very different theological perspective. Therefore, things like the differences in the stories or chronology simply isn’t very important when understood that way.

Some other important points to keep in mind about the gospels:

- a. The near-universal scholarly consensus is that none of them were written contemporaneous with the life of Jesus, but in fact two-three generations after.

¹“Canonical” means the books that are “in the canon” - that is, the books that are a universally accepted part of what Christians call “The New Testament.” There were in fact many, many “gospels” written in the first two centuries; obviously the Church decided that these were not in fact to be considered a part of “the canon.” The story of how the New Testament came to be is a fascinating story for another time. From here on, the word “gospel” or “gospels” (unless otherwise noted) will be referring to one or more of the four canonical gospels.

- b. Rough dating: Mark, ~ 70 C.E.,² Matthew, ~75-80 C.E., Luke, 80-85 C.E., John, ~90-100 C.E.
- c. It is clear that Matthew and Luke knew of Mark's gospel and used/re-wrote parts of it; it is also clear that there are stories that are common to Matthew and Luke that are not part of Mark's gospel which therefore lead scholars to *infer* a now-lost source of that material.

II. What About Mark?

Of the four gospels, Mark is the only one which does not begin with some sort of "Christmas" narrative. This is how Mark begins:

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Notice the careful crafting: this is the beginning of the **good news**. The good news for Mark about Jesus is not that he was born, not that his birth was somehow part of a "royal" genealogy, not that it was heralded in the way that royal births were, etc., etc. (motifs we shall see in the other gospels) but that he acted in a certain way and that those actions were prepared for by John the Baptist. The "good news" for Mark begins with people believing Jesus, repenting of their sins, and being baptized. As one writer puts it, "...it is not important where a servant is born or from which family he comes – it is his service that defines him."³

For Mark, what is important about the gospel he writes is the **urgency** of the task that

²If you've not encountered "C.E." before, it is used by increasing numbers of folks instead of "A.D." as a sign of respect for our Jewish brothers and sisters, onto whom, as Paul puts it, Christians were grafted! The Jewish people were not "replaced" by God (thus it is not simply "The Year of our Lord" – A.D.) but continue, again as Paul notes, as special and chosen in God's sight. It is Christians who are the latecomers to the God of unconditional grace that the Jewish people knew and know through the Teachings and the Prophets. Therefore it is both more respectful and more historically accurate to speak of "the Common Era" (C.E.) than A.D.

³www.cbn.com/special/thenativitymovie/articles/bekker_birth_of_jesus.aspx OR <http://tinyurl.com/meqfwhm> This is a very helpful summary source and I am happy to have borrowed some of its points here!

Jesus came to do – which was to convince people of their need for repentance and belief. Mark is “the gospel of action” (count the number of times, in reference to the things Jesus did or where he went that the word “immediately” is used!)

Because, therefore, there is no “Christmas story,” as we think of the phrase, in Mark, we will spend little time with him for here on.

III. The Christmas Story in Matthew

The entirety of the story (and it will be important to look at it all to see the distinctive points that Matthew is making with his version of the story of the “good tidings” of Jesus) can be found in Matthew, Chapters 1 and 2.

Matthew 1:1-17	The genealogy of Jesus.
Matthew 1:18-25	The discovery that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and Joseph’s reaction. The first “fulfillment reference.” The entire birth itself is in one clause of one sentence: “[Joseph] had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”
Matthew 2:1-12	Visit of the “Wise Men.” Notice something: the story says this: “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born...” It does not say the wise men were there immediately, but most likely it was about two years later that they appeared (see Matthew 16-18, below)
Matthew 1:13-15	Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee to Egypt.
Matthew 1:16-18	Herod kills all the boy babies in/near Bethlehem who <i>are two years old or under</i> .
Matthew 1:19-23	The return from Egypt and settling in Nazareth.

Two General Points about Matthew’s distinctive way of telling of “The Good Tidings”

The intentional parallels between the story of Jesus/the Jewish people and the story of Moses/the Jewish people.

An evil king is threatening his life; forced to flee.

Egypt is a place of refuge (just as it was for the Jewish people at the end of the book of Genesis).

Jesus’ main teaching is delivered from a “mountaintop”

Numerous examples of “Moses told you, but I say to you....”

The “fulfillment quotations”

The genealogy

Jesus is traced back to both Abraham himself (the father of the Jewish people) and King David – thus, Jesus is the “father” as well as the “new king.” Matthew is a prime example of one scholars might call a “Jewish Christian” – for him Jesus was indeed the Messiah and his gospel is written with the strong purpose of helping convince other Jews that that is the case (compare this later to Luke who is writing, as we shall see, mainly to non-Jews and who very much downplays these Jewish genealogical and other references).

“And his name shall be called....” The titles are ones given to King David or ascribed by Isaiah to the coming Messiah who will be the new King David.

In summary: the “Christmas story” in Matthew depicts Jesus as a “new Moses,” who is the Messiah for the Jewish people, whose birth was foretold by the prophets, whose situation was similar to Jewish people (the flight into Egypt and return), whose father Joseph “was a good man” contrasted with the evil man that Herod was (parallel to Egypt’s Pharaoh), and Jesus is the new Father (genealogy traced to Abraham) and the new King David (genealogy traced to David and Davidic/royal titles ascribed to him)

IV. The Christmas Story in Luke

The birth of Jesus is not the first thing in the Gospel of Luke. The story of the birth of John the Baptist, the Annunciation to Mary, Mary’s Song (the Magnificat), the angel visitation to Zechariah, and the visit of Mary to Elizabeth are. Why? Two themes to begin to notice in Luke’s gospel: 1) the role of women – particularly “marginal” women – in Luke’s Gospel; 2) the “Divine Man” motif – this is our first indication of who Luke’s primary intended audience probably is: Greek-speaking “Gentiles” (not Jews, as in Matthew) who would know little of the Jewish history and motifs (e.g., Moses) but would be familiar with the ubiquitous instances of “Divine Men” in Roman/Greek literature and culture. This will not be the last time in Christian history that a Christian writer has used cultural motifs to explain the Gospel in a way that hopefully reinterprets and “re-purposes” those motifs!

Some other themes to watch for in Luke:

- The emphasis on God’s love and care for “the poor,” and the “outsider” (cf. Mary’s Song at Luke 1:47-55). Luke’s gospel is full (more so than the others) of references to and stories about the faithfulness and God’s care for the poor, the sick, children, and “marginalized” people like the Samaritans.
- The role of women in the gospel – women “bookend” Luke. It is Mary and Elizabeth who begin the book and the women at the tomb who end it. And in

both cases it is women to whom the angels appear.

- Roman officials in Luke are invariably painted well or at least neutrally.
- The role of the Holy Spirit in Luke. (This is not yet the formalized notion of the “Trinity”; this comes much later in early Christian history).

The birth of Jesus - highlights, observations, questions (C.E.B. translation)

2:1-2 *“In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. 2 This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria.”* What might be the reason for beginning this way?

2:7 *“7 “She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.”* Corné J. Bekker says “Luke in his human focus, records the “homeless” status of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem, the special care given to the baby Jesus as he is born and how a lowly feeding trough becomes a crib.”⁴

2:8-10a *“8 Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. 9 The Lord’s angel stood before them, the Lord’s glory shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 The angel said, “Don’t be afraid!....”* The “Divine Man” motif turned upside down - the manifestation of the angels that attests to the divinity of this birth is made not to rulers or kings or leaders, but to shepherds (one of the “lowest class” occupations of that day)

2:15 *“When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened. Let’s confirm what the Lord has revealed to us.”* This is a subtle reinforcement of just how divine this birth is – after all, if all the shepherds leave the sheep the sheep are likely to get eaten by predators or wander off!

2:18 *“Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them.”* Once again, Jesus’ divinity is not validated by the reports from leaders/rulers, but by reports “from the margins.”

After Jesus’ birth

Circumcision and presentation at the Temple (Luke 2:21-23): *“21 When eight days had passed, Jesus’ parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus. This was the name given to him by the angel before he was*

⁴Ibid.

conceived. 22 When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (23 It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") Note the blending of Greco-Roman elements (the name being divinely given) and Jewish elements (the circumcision and presentation as required by the Torah). Note the subtle but important difference between the way Hebrew scripture is cited versus the way that Matthew uses Hebrew scripture: the tone in Luke is, shall we say, simply "informative," while in Matthew the Hebrew scripture is almost invariably cited as "being fulfilled" in Jesus. That would have meant little to "Gentile" audiences, but at the same time they would likely have found the "information" about why this happened helpful.

The story of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-36). Again, Jesus' divinity validated by "the least of these" – an old man and a widow.

Bekker's summary of the story in Luke: "*The beautiful birth narrative of Jesus in Luke's Gospel illustrates the complete kenotic⁵ act of God in Jesus, born amongst the poor and rejected, bringing good tidings of peace and goodwill to all.*"⁶

V. The Christmas Story in John

NRSV In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 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.

NKJV In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was

⁵ A from-the-Greek theological term meaning "emptying" – in the story, God fills Jesus with God's own Spirit

⁶ Ibid.

God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. 8 He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. 9 That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. 11 He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

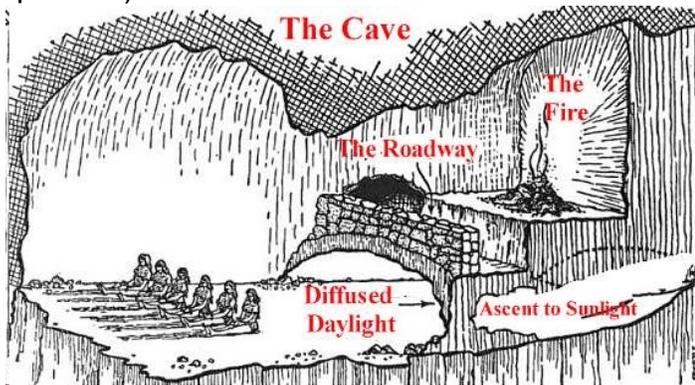
Hawaiian Pidgin Translation (Wycliff Bible Translators) Da time everyting had start, had one Guy. "God' s Talk," dass who him. Dat Guy an God, dey stay togedda, an da Guy stay God fo real kine. 2 Dass da Guy, da time everyting had start, him an God stay togedda. 3 God wen make everyting, but da way he do um, he tell dis Guy fo do um. No mo notting dis Guy neva make. 4 He da Guy, if you like come alive fo real kine, you come by him, cuz dat kine life come from him. Wen peopo come alive lidat, jalike dey stay inside one place dat get plenny light. Den dey can see an undastan. 5 No matta stay dark, da dark no can pio da light. Everytime get light. 6 Had one guy God wen send, name John. 7 God wen send John fo tell all da peopo wat he know bout God' s light, so dey can trus God cuz a him. Dass his kuleana. 8 John, he not da light. He ony come fo tell da peopo dat da light stay fo real. 9 Dat time wen John stay teaching, jalike da light dass fo real was coming inside da world. Dass da light dat show everybody wass true. 10 Dat time, da light dass fo real wen stay inside da world. Wen God wen make da world, he da Guy wen do um. But da peopo inside da world, dey neva know who him. 11 He wen come his own country, but even his own peopo neva take him in. 12 But everybody dat take him in an trus him, God give dem da right fo come his kids, cuz dey know who him. 13 Da way dey born, not da regula way, wit one guy fo dea fadda dat like get kids. Dey wen come God' s kids cuz God wen give um life inside. 14 Dat "God' s Talk" Guy, he wen come one guy jalike us guys. He wen stay wit us. We wen see how awesome he stay. He awesome, cuz he da one an ony Boy dat come from da Fadda. He like do plenny good stuff fo us, cuz dass how he stay. Everyting he say bout God, stay fo real.

What other book of the Bible begins the same way that John begins? What does that suggest to you? Three themes/contexts that can be seen in John's account of the "coming" of Christ:

- A new creation story. Order versus chaos. "Logos" and "wisdom." Echoes of the Hebrew Bible's notion of "wisdom"/"Sophia"
- The increasing sad separation between Christians and Jews at the turn of the

first century. (“Did not accept him.”)

- The theme of light both directly uses the ideas in Plato’s famous illustration “The Allegory of the Cave,” (as found in his The Republic, 514a-520a) and attempts to go beyond Plato with the claim about the nature of light and reality.



“Plato has Socrates describe a gathering of people who have lived chained to the wall of a cave all of their lives, facing a blank wall. The people watch shadows projected on the wall by things passing in front of a fire behind them, and begin to ascribe names to these shadows. According to Plato's Socrates, the shadows are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality. He then explains how the philosopher is like a prisoner who is freed from the cave and comes to understand that the shadows on the wall do not make up reality at all, as he can perceive the true form of reality rather than the mere shadows seen by the prisoners....” When a prisoner is freed and taken from the cave outside, he realizes *“that the Sun is the "source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing”*⁷

(In 1 John 1, the writer again returns to the themes of light and pre-existence: *“We declare to you what was from the beginning... concerning the word of life.... the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.... This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.”*)

“With God/WAS God” – A significant expansion of the understanding of who Christ is. Not simply “divine,” but actually God. John will complete this idea (which will then in the next several generations be explicitly formulated as “the Trinity”) later in his gospel when relates Jesus’ sayings about the coming of the Spirit after his death/resurrection.

This also sets the stage for what would be, by far, the most divisive and bitter fight among Christians in the history of the Church: Whether Jesus is of **“one substance with the Father”** or does the “substance” of Jesus **“proceed from the**

⁷From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_Cave While Wikipedia’s entries vary wildly in quality, this entry is pretty accurate.

Father.” Literally thousands of people perished in battles between these two factions in the early church, and the issue was finally settled by the Councils of the fourth century and the outcome can be seen in, for example, the Nicene Creed: *“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father **before all worlds**, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, **being of one substance with the Father....**”*

(Brief reminder of the nature of the “metaphysics” of the day and what “substance” means. The example of the pins and pin-cushion; the pins may change but the pin-cushion remains the same)

Some of the things we can take from John’s account

1. **Audience.** Given the blending of Greek philosophical themes and the unfortunate references to “His own” not receiving him, and given what we know of the persecutions of ~100 C.E., we can infer that John’s likeliest audience is “diaspora” (the dispersion of Jews, post-destruction of Jerusalem) Jews who are fairly well educated. (The elegance of the Greek grammar/syntax also attests to the latter). At the same time, given the references to Jesus being the light for “all men” and “everyone,” he also is attempting to be able to reach non-Jews who are familiar with current philosophical thinking)
2. The **movement** from Jesus being the **bearer** of the message of salvation/good tidings, to **Jesus Himself** being the message/**means** of salvation.
3. Unlike in (particular) Mark and Luke, John’s focus is almost entirely on the divine characteristics of Jesus. No mention of Mary, Joseph, etc.

VI. Some Extras....

Marcus Borg⁸ has some intriguing things to say about how our Christmas celebrations might look if pageants were based on either the Lukan or Matthean version of the story, but not a conflation of both as usually the case: *“Christmas crèches typically combine the two stories in a static tableau: a stable, Jesus in a manger, shepherds, and wise men. But what if we were to do two Christmas pageants, one based on Matthew and one based on Luke? Their content is also very different. Matthew’s is dominated by King Herod’s effort to kill the new-born Jesus.... Matthew’s story echoes Pharaoh’s decree of death for infants born to the Hebrew slaves in bondage in the time of the exodus.... Imagine a Christmas pageant based on Matthew alone. Dominated by*

⁸www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/12/two-christmas-pageants

*Herod's plot, it would be ominous, threatening. Imagine what kind of music might appropriately accompany it – perhaps the Darth Vader theme from “Star Wars” or the theme from “Jaws.” Matthew’s story anticipates the end of Jesus’s life when another Pharaoh, the Roman governor of Judea, would succeed where Herod had failed.... [But now] Imagine a Christmas pageant based on Luke alone. The content and mood are very different. There is nothing about Herod’s plot to kill Jesus, and no wise men.... Instead, an angel appears to Mary and tells her she will become pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Her response: ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ ... The mood of Luke’s story is not ominous but filled with joy. If we were to imagine appropriate accompanying music, neither Darth Vader’s theme nor “Jaws” would work. Instead, Handel’s “Messiah” might be perfect.... Imagine a Christmas pageant that did each story separately rather than combining them.... **From Matthew, we would learn that the rulers of this world always seek to destroy the one who proclaims a world in which the Pharaohs and domination systems are no longer lords. From Luke, we would learn that God’s passion is for a very different kind of world and that hope and confidence in God are to replace resigned acceptance of the way things are.”***

Non-Biblical Elements in Many “Popular” Characterizations of Christmas⁹

- **“We Three Kings of Orient Are.”** Matthew 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! (It is possible that the mention of the three gifts led to an assumption of three visitants.) The traditional names of the kings – Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar – don’t appear until manuscripts of the 6th century.
- Were there an **“ox and an ass”**? It was St. Francis who first added that detail somewhere around the year 1200.
- **“The Little Drummer Boy”** only made his debut into the story in 1958

Which one of the gospels are these carols primarily based on?

- *“I Wonder as I Wander”*

“I wonder as I wander out under the sky How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.” (Trick question: See, e.g., Mark 8:31)

“When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall, With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all. But high from God's heaven, a star's light did fall And

⁹Cf. <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Jesus-Birth.htm>

the promise of ages it then did recall.”

-- *“Angels We Have Heard on High”*

“Angels we have on heard high, Sweetly singing o’er the plains.... Come to Bethlehem and see Christ whose birth the angels sing....”

-- *“O Come, All Ye Faithful”*

“Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning; Jesus, to thee be glory given; word of the Father, now in flesh appearing: O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.”

-- *“Angels from the Realms of Glory”*

“Sages, leave your contemplations, Brighter visions beam afar. Seek the great desire of nations, Ye have seen His natal star....”

-- *“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”*

“Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming from tender stem hath sprung! Of Jesse's lineage coming, by faithful prophets sung.... Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the Rose I have in mind....”