

The Bible gives us two Christmas stories - one in Matthew and one in Luke. We tend to think of Christmas as one seamless narrative but that's because we have all grown up in churches where, every Christmas Eve, we take the two stories and "harmonise" them into one. We take bits and pieces from each gospel and we leave out other parts and we flip back and forth between them so that they sound like one smooth, uninterrupted story. It's a nice way to read the story on Christmas Eve. It gives us a great overall picture of what happened and it doesn't affect the integrity of either story.

But neither does it allow us to fully explore the depth of their meanings - their meanings for the original audiences who first heard them and for which they were written, and their meanings for us. Today with the beginning of the Nativity story in Matthew gives us the opportunity to take the Matthew story individually and explore it by itself, in its own context and see what kind of unique vision this Gospel brings to us.

St Matthew's Gospel was written about 85-90 AD, probably in Antioch, the capital city of Syria. His audience was the early Syrian Christian church made up of Syrian gentiles and Jewish Christians who had fled Israel after the Jewish revolution of 68-70 AD and the destruction of the Temple. St Matthew, writes in an erudite, upper class Greek that was usually reserved for the educated classes. He not only takes care not to offend gentiles, he is openly critical of the Jewish leaders. His Gospel is full of teaching scenes and not nearly as many healings and miracles as St Luke. St Luke's Gospel was written by Luke the physician, companion, and friend of Saint Paul, in about 75-80 AD probably in Ephesus or another part of Asia Minor (Turkey). It was written for the early Greek Christian church made up mostly of Jews but with a large minority of gentile converts as well.

As we might expect from two writers telling the same story from different traditions at different times in different parts of the world, they vary considerably on some of the details. In St Luke's version of the Christmas story Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth. They journey to Bethlehem to be counted for the census, then they return to Nazareth after Jesus is born. In St Matthew they start out living in Bethlehem where Jesus is born with no mention of a stable. They flee to Egypt and, upon their return, are diverted to Nazareth where Jesus spends his childhood. St Luke's account contains no Magi and St Matthew's account contains no shepherds. In St Luke's account the announcement of Jesus' upcoming birth is made by an angel to Mary.

St Luke and St Matthew have told the story differently. Today, we're going to look at the special, unique way that St Matthew tells the story.

St Matthew's Christmas story is a tale of fives: five men, five dreams, and five prophetic fulfillments. The five men are Joseph, Herod, and the Magi. One of the men in this story, Joseph, is a humble carpenter. He is probably illiterate, a Jew who follows the dictates of his religion as best he can, given his circumstances.

The second man, Herod, is a great king. In fact, that is the name history has given to him: Herod the Great. He is known for his building programs and his architecture. It was he who built the cities of Herodium and Caesarea Maritima. He built the fortress at Masada and the Second Great Temple in Jerusalem. He is a puppet of the Roman oppressors, true, but he is a powerful one. He commands

armies and is ruthless in his use of them. The Magi are scholars, scientists, theologians — probably Zoroastrian astrologers from Persia. They are Gentiles, non-Jews, unclean and, for most Jews, unacceptable to God. All five of these men will be confronted with and surprised by the Messiah. But they will respond in different ways, ways that will hint at what is to come and tell us what to expect in the rest of the gospel account, indeed from the rest of history.

Matthew's account is also the story of five dreams or visions and five prophetic fulfillments. Angels come to Joseph in dreams four times and to the Magi once. Each major action or turning point in the story is identified as the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy — one from Isaiah, one from Micah, one from Hosea, one from Jeremiah, and one from a source that has been lost.

Five men, five dreams, five prophecies — are you starting to see a pattern, here? If we always harmonise this story with St Luke's we miss the symbolic fives that occur in St Matthew.

Let's look at how the story unfolds and see what else we may have missed. We start with a walk through a long genealogy. St Matthew's gospel account and his story of the birth of Jesus begins with a long and, to be honest, rather boring, genealogy. And what an assorted lot they are. Here's Jacob the liar who cheated his brother, Esau, out of his birth right. There's Tamar who tricked her father-in-law, Judah, in to fathering a son with her after her husband died. And there's Ruth, a Gentile who married the good Jew, Boaz. David and his son, Solomon, born of Bathsheba. You all know that sordid little story. Then, in verse 18 the story gets underway and it begins with a scandal. Joseph and Mary are engaged to be married but they have not lived together. Joseph was a righteous man and he simply decided to relieve her of her commitment and send her off to her aunt in another town or something. That way she could have had the baby and returned home to her parents quietly without the public humiliation.

But before he could do this he had a dream which we hear today in which an angel appeared to him (first dream) and said “do not be afraid” to take her as your wife because the child she carries is of the Holy Spirit. She is going to have a son and you are to name him Jesus and he will save many people from their sins.”

Joseph acted by faith and obeyed the message even though it made no sense at all. He took Mary for his wife and when the child is born he named him Jesus. And that's all there is to the birth story as far as Matthew is concerned. No shepherds, no angel choruses, no stables, mangers, or anything. The drama, for Matthew, is not to be found in the birth but in the reaction of people to the birth. We have seen Joseph's reaction? It was in faith and obedience.

Now we will see another reaction; in fact, we'll see two different reactions. Chapter 2 opens with these words: “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea...” In other words, he is saying, “Later...” Not a lot later. It was still during the time of King Herod, but it was later, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. “... wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.” They asked around in the city about a child who had been born king of the Jews. They pointed out a star that they had seen and told everyone that their understanding is that this star is a sign of the birth of this new king and they have come to the capital city to see him.

They expected that the new king would have been the son of the current king. They came to the capital city to see the new prince and congratulate the king. But the king did not have a new son. And when he heard what the Magi said he became afraid. He was not born to the throne; he was appointed to it, so someone else could be appointed to it as well. Or a rightful heir might have been

born that would challenge his authority. So he called his advisors in and told them to find out what the story was about the messiah. Where was the messiah, the king who will lead his people to freedom, going to be born? They told him, Bethlehem, because that's what it says in Micah, chapter 5.

Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem with instructions to return and tell him what they had found so he, too, could go and worship the newly born king. The Magi followed the star and it took them to Bethlehem, where they discovered the baby Jesus. They paid him homage. They honoured him as one rightly did the newly born heir to the throne, and they offered to him some precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then they left to go home but not via Jerusalem. They had been warned in a dream not to go there so they went by way of another route.

That night, Joseph had another dream/vision and in it the angel's message is just the opposite of what it was in the first scene. Remember, in the first scene the angel said, "Do not be afraid." This time, the angel's message is "Be afraid." Get up, take the child and his mother and get out of here. Go to Egypt and stay there until I tell you. And here the story gets very grim, indeed and very familiar too. When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under... Have you heard something like that before? How about in the first chapter of the book of Exodus: "Then the king of Egypt spoke to...the two midwives who helped the Hebrew women give birth and said to them, 'kill the baby if it is a boy; but if it is a girl, let it live.'" And a few verses later, "Finally, the king issued a command to all his people: 'Take every newborn Hebrew boy and throw him into the Nile, but let all the girls live.'"

There are, in the Bible, two accounts that are referred to as the "Slaughter of the Innocents," and these are the ones. And both were issued by kings who were afraid — Pharaoh was afraid of the growing power of the children of Israel and Herod was afraid of the true and rightful heir to the throne of David.

Next, we are told that, after an undetermined length of time, Herod died and the angel returned with his original message to Joseph: "Be not afraid." It is safe, he told Joseph, to take your wife and child and return to Bethlehem. So Joseph arose, packed everything up, and headed back to Judea, but on the way he heard that the new king is Herod's son, Archelaus.

Joseph is afraid that the son might continue the search that the father began so, once again, the angel appeared and told him to "be afraid." Rather than going back to Bethlehem of Judea, he was instructed to go to Galilee to a town called Nazareth. And it is there that they settled down to raise their son, Jesus.

Five men. Five dreams/visions. Five prophecies fulfilled.

One man, a humble man, a poor man, a simple, uneducated man responds to the will of God with faith and obedience. The angel said "get up and go," and he got up and went. The angel said stay here, he stayed. The angel said don't be afraid, he was not afraid. He was the very model of righteousness. He heard from God, trusted God, and obeyed God. The second man was rich and powerful. And yet he was powerless to affect the things that were going on around him. His response was one of threat and fear. The only response he could come up with was that of violence. Like that other king, some 1,500 years earlier, he was threatened by even the most powerless before him. It was his fear that led him to atrocity.

Then there were the other men, the three Magi. They were outsiders. Wise though they might have been, they would be considered inferior infidels by everyone else in the story, unworthy of God's attention. Yet it is they who were the first to recognise and honour the true king of Israel.

Here is the new Moses. As the original Moses was given to us in the five books of the Torah, so this new Moses is introduced to us by five men who experienced five dreams and five prophecies. As the original Moses led God's people out of bondage to the Egyptians, so this new Moses leads God's people out of bondage to sin and estrangement. As the original Moses gave us salvation by way of the books of the Law, so this new Moses gives us salvation by grace as lived through the new, more exacting laws of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapter 5.

And all he asks of us is to respond as Joseph did in this story — earnestly, immediately, in faith, and with a sense of hope and joy. God grant us the faith and strength of Joseph this Christmas.

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