

The Two Nativity Stories



Matthew 2:9 "When (the wise men) had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (And) On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage."

Wait, what? 'On entering the **house**, they saw the child with Mary his mother'. I thought Jesus born in a stable. But the Greek word here is clearly οἰκίον, for house or home, and not στάβλος, for stable. And so began the slow unravelling of the Nativity story for me years ago, until at last, I came to realize that the New Testament contains not one Nativity story, but two, two very different accounts of Jesus' birth, and two accounts which agree with each other on only three matters, that

Jesus' parents were named Mary and Joseph, and that he was born in Bethlehem. That's it! Otherwise, the two accounts tell very different stories.

On Christmas Eve each year, we hear Luke's version of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and so it is the more familiar one to most of us. In those days, we are told, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. All traveled to their own towns to be enrolled. Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem. --- It is a quiet and simple story. Mary and Joseph huddling in a humble stable because there was no room for them in the inn. Their baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Lowly shepherds, who were keeping their flocks by night on neighboring hillsides, are told by an angel of the birth, and go off to Bethlehem in haste to see this thing that has happened. When they find the baby Jesus, they make known what had been told them about this child by the angel; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said. And the shepherds then return to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. -- This narrative of Jesus' birth in Luke's Gospel is one of the most lovely moments in all of the Scriptures: a gathering of angelic choruses and poor shepherds celebrating the "good news" and "great joy" of the birth of a baby "wrapped in swaddling

clothes and lying in a manger." Our quiet singing of "Silent Night" upon our knees in candlelight here on Christmas Eve may be the most appropriate reflection of the spirit of that account of Jesus' birth.

But the story of the Nativity as told in Matthew's Gospel has a very different feel to it, and sadly we only hear that story when there is a Second Sunday After Christmas Day, which happens infrequently, and so Matthew's story is less familiar and well known to us. After rehearsing Jesus' genealogy in chapter 1, we are told in Matthew's account that Mary was found to be with child, and that Joseph, her betrothed, planned to divorce her, but quietly, not wanting to expose her to public disgrace, but just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and encouraged Joseph to accept the child as his own. The next thing that happens in Matthew's story is that exotic Wise Men from the East arrive in Jerusalem and innocently ask King Herod "where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" This was very threatening news to King Herod. Indeed, we are told in the Scriptures that *all* of Jerusalem was frightened by this news. Herod then ordered the chief priests and scribes to the royal palace so that he could demand of them to know where the Messiah was to be born, and they told him in Bethlehem in the land of Judah, according to the prophet Micah. Then Herod secretly called for the wise men

again and learned from them the exact time that the star had appeared. Herod then encouraged the Wise Men to go, go and search diligently for the child in Bethlehem of Judea and then let him know when they have found him, so that he, King Herod, might come too and pay him homage. On entering the home in Bethlehem over which the star had suddenly settled upon, the Wise Men saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the wise men left for their own country by another road. Then after they had left, Joseph is warned in a dream to take Mary and the child and flee, flee to Egypt --- and so the Holy Family quickly escapes out of town under the cover of darkness. And when Herod realizes that he has been tricked by the Wise Men, he orders the slaughter of the innocents, the murder in Bethlehem of all children under the age of two. Why two, well remember Herod had asked the Wise Men exactly when the star announcing the birth of a new king had appeared. This murder of the Holy Innocents, we are told, is to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." After King Herod has died, the Holy Family returns to Israel, only, Joseph is warned in a dream not to

settle again in Bethlehem, so the Holy Family settles instead in Galilee, all for fear of Archelaus who succeeded Herod as the ruler of Judah.

Moreover, besides the different emotional feel of these two Nativity stories, there is a significant difference in where Jesus' parents lived when he was born. In Luke's Gospel, the parents of Jesus lived in Nazareth of Galilee, and so some specific reason had to be given as to why they were in Bethlehem, when the child was born --- ah, that famous census under Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled, a census that is otherwise unattested in the historical records of that time, and a census that oddly required individuals to be registered somewhere other than where they were living, again something never mentioned before in historical records. So, Joseph and Mary had to leave their home in Nazareth and had to travel to the city of David for the census, where there was famously no room for them at the inn, and Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem.

Matthew, on the other hand, tells us an entirely different story. In Matthew's Gospel the parents of Jesus lived in Bethlehem, lived in a house in Bethlehem, not a stable, and that Bethlehem in Judea was their homeland, not Nazareth in Galilee as in Luke. It is to this house in Bethlehem that the Wise Men came to find the child (2:5). Later Joseph and Mary and the

child had to flee that home in Bethlehem when the child was about two years of age, and escape to Egypt because of Herod's slaughter of the innocents, an incident which again is not otherwise historically attested in the vast recorded details of Herod's atrocities, and then as you may remember Joseph sought to return to their home in Bethlehem after Herod's death and is warned in a dream not to settle there, such that the Holy Family settled instead in a new place, in Nazareth of Galilee.

There is little doubt that Jesus grew up in Galilee. It is with Nazareth that Jesus' name is most closely associated. And there are numerous references to Jesus being known as a Galilean from Nazareth (Mk. 6:1, 4; Mt. 13:54,57; Lk. 4:23,24; Jn. 4:44), but there are only these two Gospel stories to suggest that he was instead born a Judean in that little town of Bethlehem. Even the crowd at the synagogue in his own hometown in Nazareth (Mk. 6:2-3), who were later amazed at his teaching, who seemed to know Jesus well, seemed unaware of his auspicious beginnings. "Is not this the carpenter," they said, "the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" None of his hometown friends and neighbors betrays any knowledge that Jesus had an extraordinary birth in the Davidic city of Bethlehem amidst supernatural signs and wonders and exotic visitors. These neighbors seem instead to be astonished that Jesus has become as famous as he was,

precisely because such fame was not evidenced by anything extraordinary in his previous family situation at Nazareth.

So why was it then later thought that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the City of David? Indeed, Bethlehem is not mentioned again in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and never mentioned in the Gospel of Mark, or anywhere else in the rest of the New Testament, with one exception. Perhaps there's the clue in the seventh chapter of John's Gospel (7:41-2, 52). Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Booths, and he is teaching in the courtyard of the temple. "Some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?'" One is reminded here of Nathanael's question to Philip sometime earlier, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" "Has not," the crowd in Jerusalem went on to say, "Has not the Scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" So, there was," we are told in this one passage from John's Gospel, "there was a division in the crowd because of him." (Jn. 7:40-44), although to be honest, the scripture passage about a ruler being born in Bethlehem in the prophet Micah, is often viewed as a reference to the future Good King Hezekiah, not to the Messiah (Micah 5:2), but it would appear in Jesus' day that

at least some of the Jews in Jerusalem read this passage as a messianic prophecy.

This question from the crowd in Jerusalem raised a serious and significant dilemma for the early Church, if indeed many of the Jews of Jesus' day did expect the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem, if that's how the Micah passage was being interpreted at that time. Thus, it has been suggested by biblical scholars that the stories of Jesus being born in Bethlehem were later simply made up to address these concerns, as they are not reflected anywhere else in the Gospels or the rest of the New Testament. The two Nativity stories of Jesus of Nazareth being born in Bethlehem were simply invented as a means of Christian apologetics against Jewish ridicule of a Messiah who came from Nazareth in Galilee. Thus, I am not at all sure that Jesus was really born in Bethlehem, despite all our lovely Christmas carols and crèche scenes. Similarly, to what I said two weeks ago, what difference would that make to us then if Jesus was indeed born in Nazareth? It won't change any of Jesus' teachings or parables or miracles. It won't change how Jesus interacted with others, with the poor, the sick, the lame, with women and Samaritans. It won't change the manner of Jesus' life or death, or the importance of his Resurrection.

But, would it change the meaning of Christmas for us, and if so, why, or how? Again, what is the story of Christmas other

than that of our God's great love for us, for us fallen and sinful human beings that we are, and how that God's incarnate love can heal our wounded souls, calm our troubled waters, mend our broken hearts, and raise us up to God's own glory and likeness, that God indeed has wrought for us a Savior and a Redeemer in Jesus of Nazareth. Come then, let us rejoice in that and be glad. AMEN.