

The Birth of Jesus: A Noble King or a Lowly Shepherd?

Explanation

At Christmastime, the accounts of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke are joyously celebrated. The universal appeal of this story derives from many spiritual sources. The hopes and fears of all the years are concentrated together in Christ that night.

As shown in charts 7-2 and 7-3, the New Testament Gospels take different approaches in proclaiming the eternal message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those differences manifest themselves in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke.

Matthew's purpose is to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah and King of Israel, and so his account of the birth of Jesus is filled with regal elements; the male and kingly predominate, with attention focused on Joseph, King Herod the Great, impressive wise men, Chief Priests, government, rulership, gold, swords, intrigue, and other such factors.

Luke's purpose, on the other hand, is to show that Jesus was the Savior of all mankind, bringing peace on earth. Accordingly, his account is populated with humble elements; the female and commonplace predominate, with attention placed on Mary, youth, piety, subjection, shepherds, salvation, peace, all mankind, and openness before God and the world.

The dynamic tension between these two accounts invites people from all stations in life into this story. The two are not mutually exclusive but reciprocally enhancing. Did Jesus come as a noble king or lowly shepherd? Like King David, in whose town Jesus was born, he was both. The Alpha and the Omega embraces and harmonizes both ends of the spectrum.

Reference

Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

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MATTHEW's ACCOUNT

An account filled with royal elements
Emphasis on Joseph's protection
Born in Bethlehem of Judea, then a powerful kingdom
During the days of "Herod the king," known for his grand style
Unstated why they were in Bethlehem
Important Wise Men visit him
No shepherds are mentioned
The magi are from the East, exotic, learned
They seek the King of the Jews
Chief Priests rely on interpretation of prophecies to tell where he was born
He will be a "Governor" and rule Israel
A star told the time and place of birth, standard omen of a portentous royal birth
The Wise Men worshiped him
They gave him gold, frankincense, myrrh
They found him in a house
The holy family departed in secret
Babies killed by Herod
Joseph kept the matter secret

LUKE'S ACCOUNT

An account emphasizing humble beginnings
Emphasis on Mary's nurturing
Born in the city of David, where as a youth David had been a shepherd
During the days of Augustus Caesar, known for his pious goodness
In Bethlehem as tax subjects
No Wise Men are mentioned
Humble shepherds visit him
The shepherds are from the same country, ordinary, simple
They seek a Savior, who is Christ the Lord
Shepherds rely on the angel to learn where he was to be found
He will be a Savior of peace and good will
The star is not mentioned, the glory of God shone all around and made them afraid
The shepherds praised God
No gifts or treasures mentioned
They found him in a manger
The shepherds made it known abroad
The baby circumcised openly at the temple
Mary kept all these things in her heart