The Birth of Jesus

In the bleak midwinter, Frosty wind made moan...

O come, all ye faithful, Joyful and triumphant...

Hark the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King...

Once in royal David’s city Stood a lowly cattle shed...

Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright...

In western countries Christmas Day must be the best-known day of the whole year. Families come together. It is the time of peace and goodwill. People give presents, eat turkey and watch television. They hang decorations and put up a tree. Christmas is the time of tinsel, bright lights, Santa Claus and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.

But 25 December is also the day when the Christian church celebrates Jesus Christ’s birth. It is a time for a different kind of rejoicing. Christians believe that in the person of Jesus, God became a human being. Christmas Day, therefore, is a very special date in the Christian calendar.

Was Jesus really born on 25 December?

We do not know the date when Jesus was born – and not all Christians celebrate Christmas on 25 December. The Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches have their Christmas on 6 January. That is when most other parts of the Christian church celebrate epiphany – the time when the wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus.

If we do not know the exact date when Jesus was born, why do we celebrate Christmas on 25 December? There are at least two explanations:

25 December is close to 21 December. That is the date of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. It is exactly the middle of winter. It is when pagan northern peoples used to light fires to celebrate the return of the sun. Light overcoming darkness is an idea strongly associated with Jesus.

The Romans used to have a festival called Saturnalia which took place towards the end of December. This was a time for throwing parties and giving presents – just like some aspects of Christmas today. In the early days of Christianity, Christians decided to try to ‘Christianize’ this pagan festival by celebrating the birth of Jesus at the same time.

Do we know the year of Jesus’ birth?

Christian countries have two ways of counting the years. They are:

BC – Before Christ.

AD – Anno Domini (this is Latin, meaning ‘In the year of our Lord’).

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The virgin birth is a story that grew up about Jesus after his death. Either way, the virgin birth is controversial, but several theological reasons have been put forward as to why Luke wished to present Jesus as being born of a virgin.

**Theology of the virgin birth**

- Luke's writing has a strong Greek interest. He also seems to be pro-Roman. Luke's Gospel may well have been for Gentile, non-Jewish readers. The Greeks and Romans had many stories about great heroes who were literally thought to be children of the gods. Often such children had an earthly mother and a heavenly father. Hercules is an example of this. The Egyptian king, the pharaoh, was also believed to be the son of the sun-god. He, too, had an earthly mother and a heavenly father. Many rulers and important figures in the ancient world, therefore, were thought to be in some way divine. It could be that in order to present Jesus as an extraordinary person, Luke wrote about Jesus as having a 'heavenly' birth from a virgin.

- In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God came upon prophets to inspire them. Then the Spirit left them again. But Jesus was born in the Spirit. He did not have to acquire the Spirit—he had it right from conception. Luke uses this point to emphasize Jesus' extraordinary nature.

- Jesus is the beginning of a new kind of humanity. He is a new kind of human being. His birth marks the fulfilment and end of the old age and the beginning of the new.

If you look at the two genealogies (family trees) of Jesus, in Matthew 1:1–16 and Luke 3:23–38, you can see that they are different. Matthew places his genealogy at the beginning of the birth story; Luke places his at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. If you compare Luke with Matthew, Jesus is not only the heir of David and the seed of Abraham. He is also the second or eschatological Adam and the Son of God. (The word eschatological is used to describe something that has to do with the end of the world.)

In the first century AD, about 5–600,000 Jews lived in Palestine. Three and a half million were scattered in other countries. Many of the Jews who lived in these other countries spoke Greek. They had their own version of the Old Testament in Greek, called the Septuagint. In Hebrew the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 says a young girl will give birth. The Hebrew word was translated into Greek as virgin. Perhaps Luke understood the word in this context—i.e. that Mary was a virgin.

Or did Luke include this story because it fulfilled the prophecy he found in Isaiah? Whatever view we take about whether Mary was actually a virgin, Luke makes it plain that God was about to do something new for the world with the birth of Jesus.

Artists down the ages have pictured the virgin and child. This is a twelfth-century portrait from Istanbul.

**Mary in the Gospels**

For all the importance that she has gained in the tradition of the church, Mary is not mentioned very often in the Gospels. In John's Gospel she is not even mentioned by name.

1. She is mentioned at the birth of Jesus—Luke 1 and 2. Matthew 1 and 2.
2. She looks for the boy Jesus at the Temple—Luke 2:41–52. (Here, and at the wedding feast at Cana are the only times we have on record when Jesus and Mary speak to each other.)
3. She is mentioned when Jesus is preaching—Mark 3:31.
4. She is mentioned when Jesus preaches
5. She is present at the wedding in Cana – John 2:1–11.
6. She is at the foot of the cross – John 19:25.
8. Mary is with the disciples as they pray in the upper room – Acts 1:14.
9. Paul mentions in his letter to the Galatians that Christ was ‘born of a woman’ (Galatians 4:4). It would have been unusual to mention this and perhaps it shows that Mary was already important to the early church. (The letter to the Galatians is one of the earliest New Testament documents. It was probably written around AD57.)

Jesus’ brothers, mentioned in Luke 8:19 and Mark 3:31, were cousins, or Joseph’s children by a previous marriage.

- **Immaculate Conception** – Mary had no sin like other human beings. In order to give birth to Jesus, who was perfect, in some way she had to be perfect herself.
- **Assumption** – Mary did not die like other people, but was taken directly into heaven.

### Some dates
- 1854 – the dogma of Immaculate Conception declared.
- 1954 – Mary declared Queen of Heaven.
- 1950 – the Assumption is made an article of faith by Pope Pius XII.

### Mary today
Mary is a very important figure in the Roman Catholic church. Protestant Christians, however, have never given her very much significance. If you go into a Roman Catholic church (and some Anglican churches) you will find a statue of Mary as well as a statue of Jesus. Mary is a mother – she is human. Because she is the mother of Jesus, and because she understands what it is to be human, many Roman Catholics ask Mary to pray for them. They divide her story into four parts, each with a special title:

- **Annunciation** – this is when the angel comes to tell Mary she will have a baby.
- **Visitation** – this is when Mary goes to see her cousin Elizabeth.
- **Nativity** – this is the story of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem.
- **Purification** – this is the account of Jesus’ circumcision eight days after he was born.

Roman Catholics also have four beliefs about Mary. These beliefs have grown up in the tradition of the church over hundreds of years. They are called *dogmas*.

- **Divine Motherhood** – Mary is the mother of God.
- **Virgin** – Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus and remained a virgin always.

### Follow-up

#### Question time
1. Explain what is meant by the old covenant and the new covenant.
2. How important is it for Christians to believe in the virgin birth?
   - It is very important for Christians to believe in the virgin birth. Because ____________ and if they do not believe it means ______________
   - It really doesn’t matter if Christians believe in the virgin birth or not. Because ____________
   - It is very difficult to believe in the virgin birth. Because if you do you have to ______________
3. How would a belief in the virgin birth help Christian believers today?
4. What theological reasons may Luke have had for including the story of the virgin birth?
5. How important is Mary in the church today?

#### To do
- Using both Matthew and Luke, imagine that Joseph kept a personal diary. What kinds of things might he have written when he discovered Mary was pregnant? Now do the same for Mary. What might she have felt and thought at this time?
We know certain facts from the Bible that we can check with other writers. We know:
- when Herod the Great ruled (he died in 4 BC)
- when Quirinius was governor of Syria (from AD 6–9)
- when Augustus was emperor of Rome (from 31 BC to AD 14)

Jesus was probably born between 6 BC and AD 6. But this is only a guess, based on the dates above. Scholars have tried to fit the story in the Bible with what we know of history at the time, and there are problems in discovering the exact year of Jesus’ birth.

Almost everyone knows the Christmas story. The popular version goes like this: Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem (Mary on a donkey). When they arrived there was no room at the inn. Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable and laid him in a manger. Afterwards, with the ox and the ass looking on, shepherds, wise men and angels gathered around to sing, rejoice and worship.

But wait a minute! The Christmas story, as told each Christmas, is a mixture of the accounts in Matthew and Luke. On top of that, centuries of tradition have added extra details—including some of the best-known ones. If you study Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, it is amazing how short it is.

Jesus is born

READ LUKE 2:1–7

This passage shows us three things about how Luke sees Jesus’ birth.

Luke stresses history
Luke places the birth of Jesus in history by mentioning real people like Caesar by mentioning real people like Caesar Augustus and Quirinius. Notice how Luke does not give Jesus’ birth a world setting. He does not do this for the birth of John the Baptist. Luke shows how God works even through the Roman Empire to bring about his ends.

Luke stresses prophecy
Micah 5:2 prophesied that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. David, Israel’s greatest king, was born there and Joseph is a descendant of David. It is important, therefore, that Luke shows the Messiah as being born in Bethlehem.

Luke stresses symbolism
- There is the symbol of Bethlehem—Jesus is the Messiah.
- There is the symbol of the manger—Jesus has a humble birth.
- There is the symbol of the shepherds (in Luke 2:8–20)—they represent the poor and the outcast whom God wants to welcome into his Kingdom.
- There is the symbol of the angels (in Luke 2:13–14)—they show God at work and the rejoicing in heaven at Jesus’ birth.

Shepherds and angels

READ LUKE 2:8–20

The shepherds were humble people. They were looked down on because their work kept them from joining in all the Jewish feasts and ceremonies. They appear in the story as the people God wishes to bring into his Kingdom. There are many others in Luke’s Gospel. The shepherds also show wonder. This is something Luke mentions again and again. There are many wonders to come.

The birth of Jesus: two writers
This is how Matthew records the birth of Jesus:
- Visit of the wise men and appearance of the star (Matthew 2:1–12). Matthew does not say that the wise men were kings or that there were only three of them.
There is much more about Herod in Matthew's account.

Matthew's account includes the escape to Egypt (Matthew 2:13–18). It also includes the slaughter of the innocents. This was when Herod killed all the boys under two years of age in and around Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16).

Matthew has very little about Jesus' actual birth. There is no census, no inn, and no manger.

**Luke's account** has the following elements:
- Luke has the census (Luke 2:1).

Luke's account of Jesus' birth may be short, but there can be no doubt that Luke treats these events as being very important. Jesus' birth, after all, was the beginning of a new era of God's activity in the world. But how is this expressed?

**The Spirit appears**
The Holy Spirit appears in power. This was the same Spirit, active in the Old Testament, who spoke through the Old Testament prophets. In the first two chapters of Luke (the chapters that deal with the birth of Jesus) the Holy Spirit is mentioned no less than six times (Luke 1:15, 1:41, 1:67, 2:25, 2:26, 2:27).

**Angels appear**
These messengers from God are signs of his extraordinary activity and they speak for God.
- Luke 1:11 An angel appears to Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist.
- Luke 1:26 Gabriel, the angel, appears to Mary, the mother of Jesus. He tells her that she will have a son.
- Luke 2:9–14 Angels appear to the shepherds. An angel tells the shepherds that Jesus has been born at Bethlehem. These lowly men are the first people to know about the birth of the Messiah.

**The church today – songs of gladness**
The birth of Jesus is accompanied by joy and gladness. There are many references to this. When they realize what is happening, Mary, Zechariah and Simeon (an old priest—see the next Unit), sing songs of joy. These songs are still used in many churches today. Together they are called canticles and each one has a special name:

- Mary's song is called the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55). It is based on the Song of Hannah (mother of the prophet Samuel) in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. It is also like Miriam’s song of praise after the defeat of the Egyptians in Exodus 15:20–21. It shows how Mary is like the *remnant of Israel*. In the Old Testament the remnant refers to the few people who have kept faithful to God's Law.
- Zechariah's song is called the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68–79).
- The angels' song is called the *Gloria in Excelsis* (Luke 2:14).
- Simeon's song is called the *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29–32).
Miracles in the Ancient World

In popular language, a miracle is something that does not have a logical or natural explanation or cause. Things happen that do not seem to follow the normal pattern of events, and are therefore called miraculous. However, as science comes to understand more about nature, the realm of the miraculous shrinks. For many modern thinkers, the miraculous is what remains outside the reach of scientific explanation. The modern reader, to understand the biblical sense of miracle, must see the world as the ancients saw it.

First, most people in the ancient world believed in miracles, or at least in the possibility of them. As for today, people hoped for miraculous cures for illnesses, or for better crops or success in life. Spiritual forces could influence the physical world, it was believed. For most Jews, a number of people were considered capable of performing miracles. They also thought that miracles were striking or significant occurrences but did not believe that this made the miracle worker divine or anything other than human. Rather, miracle workers possessed a particular power and one that made them a source of popular interest and attention.

Second, biblical authors saw the world through the eyes of faith. They often attributed the workings of the world - fire, flood, tempest, the growth of crops - to the action of God. Further, faithful Jews believed that not only did God work in nature, God was active in the whole of Jewish history. The liberation from slavery in Egypt was viewed as God's work in the history of the people. This series of miraculous actions on God's part saved the people from slavery and freed them for a life as God's chosen people. In this way of thinking, then, the miraculous was believed to be a sign of God's intervention in human history.

In ordinary life, this same belief could be seen. Many in the ancient world believed that illness was caused by demon possession. Those who could exorcise demons, and thus alleviate the cause of illness, were much in demand. Among the Jews around the time of Jesus, a number of miracle workers were acknowledged for their ability to exorcise demons and other miraculous acts. In fact, ancient people did not make the same distinction between the natural world and the supernatural that people commonly make today. They believed that individuals could influence the spiritual powers to intervene in the normal course of events.

For Jesus' contemporaries and for the first readers of the gospels, the question would not have been, could this miracle actually happen? Instead, they would seek to understand the religious significance and meaning of these miraculous reports.

Miracles in the New Testament

It is necessary to appreciate this ancient understanding of miracles, rather than a modern, rationalist understanding, in order to discern the meaning and significance of the miracle stories in the gospels. In the New Testament, the miracles worked by Jesus are described as "powers", "wonders" and
“signs” (Acts 2:22). The New Testament authors wished to communicate the entrance of the power of God that had occurred in the life and work of Jesus. For them, Jesus, the Son of God, is a sign of God’s power. So, this power is not just about working wonders to amaze the sceptical crowds. The gospel authors wanted to communicate that the power of God’s kingdom is being unleashed in the life and work of Jesus. The miracle stories, in this sense, are stories of the Kingdom of God.

The gospel authors made great significance out of the miracles in Jesus’ public ministry - almost one third of Mark’s gospel, for instance, is concerned with miracle narratives. In the gospels, the focus of the miracle stories is the activity of Jesus, whether it be a cure, an exorcism or control over the forces of nature. From the point of view of the gospel writers, the miracle stories are not told as a means of proving Jesus’ divinity. Until recently, many Christian commentators held this view: if Jesus could work miracles, he must be divine. Rather, the miracle stories are told for the purposes of faith: the gospel writers challenged their readers to faith in Jesus and the belief that God reigned in history.

Types of Miracle

There are two main types of miracle described in the gospels: the healing miracles and the nature miracles. The healing miracles describe Jesus curing individuals of various physical ailments such as blindness, paralysis or deafness. In the gospel accounts, faith is emphasised. The miraculous healing results from the faith of the person or someone or group of people closely related to them. In the stories of the nature miracles, Jesus is shown as having dominion over the natural world by stilling a storm on the lake, walking on water or feeding multitudes in the wilderness. Jesus is shown exercising the same authority over the natural world as people believed God exercises. In the accounts of the natural miracles, the gospel authors record little of the reactions or responses of the participants. The main question for those who considered Jesus’ miracles was whether it was God who acted through him.

The Kingdom of God

The gospel authors make much of Jesus’ miracles as signs of the Kingdom of God. The miracles are not merely displays of power but indications of God’s will for people to reclaim their humanity. The disciples of Jesus believed that, in Jesus, God was beginning the conquest of evil and its consequences. The healing miracles were shown to be closely related to sin and its consequences. Jesus is locked in battle with Satan and the forces of sin (see Mark 2:5). Healing required some faith in Jesus.

In the synoptic gospels, the idea of the Kingdom of God is used to identify the central theme of Jesus’ life and mission. The New Testament term, Kingdom of God, relies heavily on the Jewish understanding of the kingship of God as revealed to the ancestors of Israel throughout the centuries. In the synoptic gospels, the kingdom is a mystery not perceived by humans but which is revealed in the person and work of Jesus. Jesus has power to heal the sick, drive out devils, forgive sins and raise the dead.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans (14:17) the kingdom is characterised by righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit which is achieved by people submitting to the will of God. The faith of the New Testament authors was that Jesus was the inbreaking of God’s reign or kingdom. Signs, such as miraculous works of power, indicate this understanding. The miracle stories are not the only Kingdom narratives in the gospels. Explanations of the meaning of the Kingdom of God are contained in the parables, as well as in other narratives of Jesus in the gospels.
# Healing Miracles

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## Analysis/Interpretation