

Glad Tidings of Great Joy

There are still things we can learn about this most familiar of all scriptural stories.

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As we approach the Christmas season, the familiar picture of the stable scene returns to our hearts like an old friend. However, the scene we often depict in our Christmas crèches is a composite of two different biblical accounts, those of Matthew and Luke, which are often blended with as many elements arising from tradition and imagination as from scripture.

The narratives of Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 provide two different, but complementary, views of the Christmas story. Both accounts testify of the same basic truths: the coming of Jesus Christ into the world was long-prophesied, His mother was a pure and chosen vessel, His conception was divine, and His birth was miraculous.

However, the great significance of the Lord's coming lies in what he would accomplish at the *end* of His mortal life. Book of Mormon prophecies confirm these vital truths, strengthening our testimony of *who* Jesus was and helping us realize that glad tidings of great joy had as much to do with *what* He came to do.

MARY AND THE ANGEL, BY CARL HEINRICH BLOCH

Matthew's Account

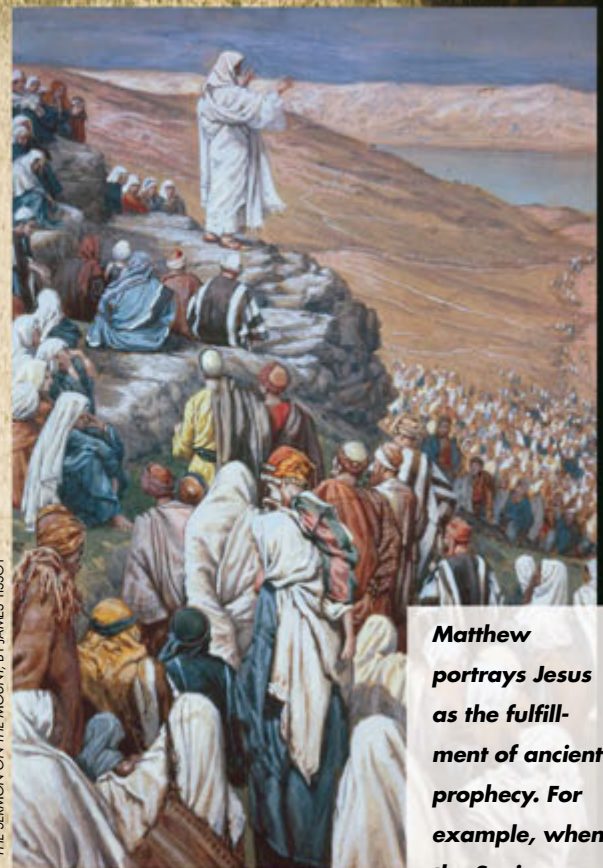
The infancy narrative of Matthew answers the question of who Jesus was by first focusing on Jesus as the promised Messiah of the line of David (see 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Psalms 89:4, 132:11; Isaiah 9:7, 11:1; and Jeremiah 23:5–6). Beginning with and descending from Abraham, Jesus's genealogy is broken into three sections: Abraham to David, David to the exile in Babylon, and from the exile to Joseph and thence to Jesus (Matthew 1:1–16). David thus plays a pivotal role in this succession of ancestors. The fact that Matthew uses 14 generations for each of these divisions stresses Jesus's Davidic heritage because 14 is the numerical equivalent of David's name in Hebrew, the original language of the text.¹

Mary also seems to have been of the House of David, which provides an important genealogical tie for the Savior.² By carefully noting that her child was “of the Holy Ghost” and by quoting Isaiah 7:14 that a virgin would conceive, Matthew establishes Mary's purity and the divine nature of her child's conception (Matthew 1:18, 23), points that Luke and the Book of Mormon also emphasize.

However, because kingship descended through the male line, this legal genealogy needed to be traced through Joseph to have the requisite

authority. Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, but by accepting Mary's son and giving Jesus a name, he legally claimed the child, thereby making Jesus an heir of the royal line. Moreover Matthew emphasizes Joseph's important role as Jesus's foster father. Joseph's actions of protecting his young family echo those of Joseph in Genesis. Joseph the carpenter also receives revelations through dreams and takes his family into Egypt to save them.

In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses prophesied that God would raise up a prophet “like unto me” that Israel should hearken to in all things. In his gospel Matthew portrays Jesus as this new Moses, as is seen later in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), but also as one greater than Moses. There, Jesus ascends a hill where He gives a “new” law just as Moses had ascended Mount Sinai to receive the old law. This association of Jesus and Moses helps explain why Matthew preserved the sad story of Herod's slaughter of children “from two years and under” in Bethlehem (2:16–18) when other historical and scriptural sources do not. Just as Pharaoh had killed all the Hebrew baby boys by drowning them in the Nile, thereby almost killing the deliverer, Moses (Exodus 1:15–2:10), Herod tried to kill the promised Savior, the



THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT BY JAMES TISSOT

Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. For example, when the Savior gave the Sermon on the Mount, He filled a role as a new Moses.

true King of the Jews.

The visit of the Magi, or “Wise Men,” supports Matthew's testimony that Jesus was the promised king, who came not only for his own people but for *all* the peoples of the earth. Although the Magi who came seeking Jesus might have been connected with the House of Israel, the wise men have traditionally been connected with the *magi*, or astrologers and wise men of Babylonia and Persia. While these wise men were certainly moved by the Spirit of God, if they were Gentiles, then their arrival to recognize and worship the newborn King of the Jews at least partially fulfills the

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prophecy of Isaiah 60:3: "And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising." Another example of how all peoples—not just ethnic Israel—were part of the Christmas story may be found in the inclusion of four women in the genealogy, each of whom also seems to have been from outside of Israel.

The arrival of the Magi during the last year of the reign of Herod the Great (ruled 37–4 B.C.) helps date the birth of Jesus, but the Magi's arrival in Bethlehem was considerably after Jesus's birth. They found Mary and the baby Jesus established in a house, not the temporary accommodations of a stable or cave. Herod's edict that all children two years and younger be slain also suggests that months, if not years, had passed.

But Jesus was more than just the promised king of David's line or a new prophet in the guise of Moses. Throughout his gospel, Matthew commonly connects prophecies from Jewish scriptures with the life of Jesus, showing who He truly was. Accordingly, in the first of five quotations from the Hebrew scriptures in his infancy narrative (Matthew 1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, and 23), Matthew sees the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. The promised babe is, in very fact, *Immanuel*, or "God with us."

Although Matthew's account focuses especially on who the Babe of Bethlehem was, the name that an angel directed Joseph to give Mary's son emphasizes what He came to do. The name *Yehoshua*, which through the Greek came into English as

"Jesus," means "Jehovah is salvation," explaining the command "Thou shalt call him JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Luke's Story

Luke's account gives more background, careful comparisons and contrasts, poetic expressions, and fully developed characters than Matthew's. Luke also includes historical details not preserved elsewhere. But above all else, in addition to making clear who Jesus was, Luke gives added testimony as to what He had come to do.

Luke's story begins with the promise of a child to the elderly Zacharias and Elisabeth, a story that provides a contrast to the promised advent of Jesus. Both conceptions are miraculous: John is born to a barren mother past



THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI, BY JAMES TISSOT

the age of childbearing and Jesus is explicitly the Son of God and of a virgin. Although John's birth is relatively quiet, aside from his father, Zacharias, regaining his voice. Jesus's birth is accompanied by glorious manifestations and angelic proclamations.

Luke is generally assumed to have been a "Greek writing for Greeks." He is nonetheless familiar with Jewish history and scripture and successfully connects his story with Old Testament scripture. For instance, Luke's characters are portrayed as righteous Israelites: three pairs—Zacharias and Elisabeth, Joseph and Mary, and Simeon and Anna—parallel Old Testament characters such as Abraham, Sarah, Hannah, Isaiah, and Huldah.

Also, while Luke does not explicitly quote Old Testament scripture in the same way Matthew does, he includes four poetic expressions that take the form of songs of praise or "canticles." These are known by their traditional names as the Magnificat (Mary, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," 1:46–55), the Benedictus (Zacharias, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel," 1:68–79), the Gloria in Excelsis (the angels, "Glory to God in the Highest," 2:14), and the Nunc Demittis (Simeon, "Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace," 2:29–32, emphasis added). These songs reflect

the sentiments of those who sang them, yet they also invoke greater meaning by reflecting Old Testament passages.

One of the most beautiful vignettes in Luke's narrative is his account of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, known traditionally as the Annunciation (Luke 1:26–38). Containing details that could only have come from Mary herself, this is a tribute to the young girl's purity, and special mission, and the reality that her child would indeed be the Son of God:

"Thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

"He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest . . .

"The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:31–32, 35).

This touching account is a testament to Mary's faithful willingness to do whatever God asked: "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38).

Mary's visit to Elisabeth likewise contains powerful testimony, both of the identity of Mary's unborn babe and of her own mission and faithfulness. When Elisabeth hears Mary's greeting, the Holy Ghost causes her own baby to leap in her



MARY'S VISIT TO ELIZABETH, BY CARL HENRICH BLOCH

When Elisabeth's baby leaped in her womb when she heard Mary's greeting, Elisabeth declared Mary to be "the mother of my Lord"

womb, and she declares Mary to be "the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43). Mary replies with an inspired expression preserved by Luke in a well-known canticle:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord,
"And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. . . .

"For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name" (Luke 1:46–47, 49). Mary's song goes on to describe the mercy and grace that the Lord will accomplish through her son, all of which is in accordance with the promises that God had made to Abraham and the other patriarchs (see



THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE BY JAMES TISSOT

At Jesus's presentation at the temple, Simeon gave thanks for the light and salvation the Savior had brought to Israel and Gentiles alike. Anna the prophetess gave thanks for the redemption of Israel.

Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 49:6; Abraham 2:9–11).

Whereas Matthew's account dates the birth of Jesus with a reference to the final days of King Herod, thereby putting Jesus's birth in a Jewish context, Luke connects it with events in the larger Roman world. He does this by mentioning a census, perhaps an enrollment done in preparation for taxation, during the governorship of Cyrenius.

But Luke also uses the enrollment to explain how Mary, the virgin from Nazareth, ended up giving birth in Bethlehem, the City of David. Joseph, being "of the house and lineage of David"

(Luke 2:4), took his wife to Bethlehem to be taxed. It was while there that she gave birth to the baby Jesus.

Joseph may actually have been a native of Bethlehem or had relatives living there. He and his little family stayed in a home in Bethlehem until fleeing to Egypt to avoid Herod's slaughter. It also seems that Joseph intended to return to Bethlehem with his family, but instead retired to Nazareth after learning that Herod's son, Archelaus, ruled in nearby Jerusalem (see Matthew 2:19–23).

The possibility of Joseph's kin living in Bethlehem may, in fact, explain the meaning of the word "inn" (Greek *katalyma*) in Luke 2:7. Traditional pictures of the Nativity portray the young couple arriving in a strange town, where they cannot find accommodations "because there was no room in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

But the word "inn" (Greek *katalyma*) can also mean "guest room." This is how Luke uses it in 22:11, referring to the upper room where Jesus and His disciples hold their last supper. Instead of the traditional idea of an inn, complete with a gruff innkeeper shouting "No room!" to the couple, Joseph might have been staying in his own family home or the home of a relative. However, because there were so many relatives visiting for the tax season, he may not

have been able to find a private room where his wife could give birth.

Accordingly, the manger into which Joseph and Mary put the newborn Jesus may have been in the animal quarters of a family home, rather than in the stable of an inn or the animal pen of a caravan camp, perhaps to afford them privacy at this special time. Although a manger presupposes the presence of domestic animals, the oxen and donkeys of our Christmas Nativity scenes are actually suggested by Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib." The Greek translation of this passage and Luke 2:16 use the same Greek word, *phatnē*, for "crib" and "manger." This cross reference emphasizes the fact that Jehovah's creatures knew and accepted Him whereas His people did not always do the same: while the donkey recognized "his master's crib, Israel my people doth not consider [understand]."

The two final canticles in Luke emphasize the extraordinary significance of the birth of Jesus. The song of the heavenly host celebrates the peace that Jesus will bring, and the prophecy of Simeon, given when Jesus is presented in the temple, emphasizes that the child came to bring salvation and light to Israelites and Gentiles alike.

Truths from the Book of Mormon

In addition to the accounts in Matthew and Luke, we are blessed to have prophecies in the Book of Mormon that confirm the most important facts about the coming of Jesus and also focus our minds more clearly on who Jesus is and how and why He came into the world.

For instance, 1 Nephi 11:16–21 teaches that Mary was a precious virgin from Nazareth. Caught away by the Spirit, she divinely conceived and later returned as a virgin now holding a child whom the angel identified as the Lamb of God, the Son of the Eternal Father. Not only does this passage confirm the message of Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation, it also teaches in more detail the doctrine of the condescension: that God literally became the Father of the mortal Jesus and that the divine Jehovah became the Babe of Bethlehem. Mary's role, and the fact that Jesus would be born near Jerusalem, the scene of His later atoning sacrifice, are also confirmed by Alma 7:10–13.

This emphasis on the divine identity and work of Jesus is also found in Mosiah 3:5–11, where Jesus Christ is called “the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning” (v. 8). But this glorious fact is also framed by prophecies concerning His healing ministry, His suffering for us, His Crucifixion, and His Resurrection. Indeed, prophecies of Jesus in the Book of Mormon focus more on His saving work than they do on His promised nativity.

As a result, as we commemorate and celebrate the birth of our Lord, we should also focus on what Jesus did at the *end* of His mortal life and ministry. President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) wrote:

“This is the wondrous and true story of Christmas. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of



Judea is preface. The three-year ministry of the Master is prologue. The magnificent substance of the story is His sacrifice, the totally selfless act of dying in pain on the cross of Calvary to atone for the sins of all of us. . . .

“There would be no Christmas if there had not been Easter. The babe Jesus of Bethlehem would be but another baby without the redeeming Christ of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the triumphant fact of the Resurrection.”³

During this joyous season when we celebrate the miraculous birth of our Savior, reading these familiar stories can help us better understand the circumstances and significance of our Lord's birth. But as we read them with Book of Mormon prophecies in mind, and as we consider them in the light of a modern prophet's admonition, we will strengthen our testimony of the vital truth of what Jesus, the promised Son of God, came to do: suffer, die, and rise again that we might all have eternal life. ■

NOTES

1. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (1993), 69–70, 74–81.
2. While it is not clear that Luke's genealogy (Luke 3:23–38) is that of Jesus through Mary, the fact that Joseph and Mary were apparently relatives supports the fact that Jesus was a literal, as well as adoptive, descendant of David. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 3rd ed. (1916), 85–86, 89.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Wondrous and True Story of Christmas,” *Ensign*, Dec. 2000, 5.