

Did the Wise Men Meet the Shepherds?

Why do the Gospels seem to give differing accounts of the Nativity?

By Steve Ray

A king was born. But He was born unlike most kings. There was no pomp and circumstance; there were no midwives or court attendants. There was only the bleating of sheep and the buzzing of flies. Birth in a manger was not like birth in a royal palace. When a king is born, proclamations ring out across the land. But few people knew about this exceptional birth. So angels sang it out.

They burst from the heavens, Luke's Gospel tells us, declaring the royal birth to a group of shepherds protecting their sheep (see 2:1-20). The darkness of night was rent with brilliant light encompassing the terrified men. One of the angels announced: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord" (vv. 10-11).

The king's arrival had been foretold from of old (see Mt 2:4-6). He was the long awaited Savior of the world. But why were shepherds the first to learn of His birth? Possibly because this king was also the anticipated Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world (see Jn 1:29). And who are the first to learn of a lamb's birth in the middle of the night? Shepherds, of course!

But the story recounted by Luke the physician is only one account of the miraculous birth. Another one was written by a former tax collector named Matthew (see chapter 2), who informs us that a very different group of men discovered this royal birth. Gentile (non-Jewish) magi — astrologers from the East — were also informed, but not by angelic choirs (see vv. 1-12).

These foreigners anticipated such a historic event through astronomical observations and consultation with the Jewish Scriptures. An unusual star led them to the infant Jewish king. They traveled at great risk for many months, arriving from lands historically hostile to Israel.

How amazing! The Magi brought gifts and fell on their faces before a helpless Child in an enemy land. It is often assumed there were only three magi because three gifts were presented (frankincense, gold and myrrh), but the number of distant travelers or the size of their entourage is actually unknown.

King Herod was in Jerusalem enjoying his palatial pleasures when the Wise Men arrived looking for the new king (Mt 2:1-3). Herod was worried. No one could help the Magi. But the star led them the last four miles to Bethlehem, where they found the Child and fell prostrate. They presented gifts appropriate to royalty (vv. 9-11).

Every Christmas crèche has the shepherds and the Wise Men all gathered around Jesus together. But none of the Gospel accounts speak of both groups of visitors: Luke says nothing about magi, and Matthew says nothing about shepherds. Are the Gospel stories contradictory? Are they describing different occasions? Did the Wise Men meet the shepherds?

Four Witnesses, Four Accounts

Luke and Matthew were not alone in writing accounts of the Christ. An old man named John, chosen by Jesus while still a young fisherman, wrote a personal account of his three years with the king. According to ancient tradition, Mark was Peter's "secretary," who recorded Peter's recollections of his years with Jesus.

Four witnesses wrote four accounts called the Gospels. Together they recount the one historical event from four different perspectives, just as in a courtroom four witnesses might testify about one case with four differing yet truthful accounts. Each Gospel writer had his own material, audience, emphasis and style.

As we have noted, for example, each author deals with the genealogy and birth of Jesus in very different and fascinating ways. Yet each account is true, consistent with the others, and essential to understand the whole story.

Matthew was a Jew writing to Jews. He adeptly demonstrated that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and King, fulfilling ancient prophecies, with royal pedigree through the lineage of King David to Abraham, the patriarch of Israel and the father of the Jewish nation (Mt 1:1-17).

Mark, on the other hand, penned Peter's Gospel from Rome and presents Jesus to the Romans as a servant with no genealogy. A key verse in Mark summarizes the whole Gospel: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). A servant's genealogy is irrelevant. Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus working. King and servant: no polar opposites could be more extreme. Luke, probably a Greek and perhaps the only non-Jewish author in the Bible, writes to fellow Gentiles portraying Jesus as the ideal of humanity with a genealogy going back to the first man, Adam (see Lk 3:23-38). Jesus Christ is revealed as the perfect Man to a Hellenistic audience steeped in Greek philosophy and struggling for human perfection and meaning in the aftermath of their failed "glory days."

Finally, John reveals a very different beginning or "genealogy." He fleshes out the full mystery of the eternal King starting with the words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:1,14). Jesus has no beginning — He is the beginning. John doesn't write to an exclusive ethnic group; rather, he writes for the whole world and proclaims that Jesus is divine — by His very nature, God, the One through whom all things and all people came into being. As God, the Word made flesh is eternal and therefore has no genealogy.

No science fiction has ever reached such heights. Truth is stranger than fiction — God has become Man. As St. Augustine said, Jesus was “the Revealer of His Father, Creator of His mother; Son of God from His Father without a mother, the Son of Man through his mother without a father.”

So the four Gospels present Jesus Christ as both King and Servant, both God and Man. Matthew and Luke tell the story of His birth; Mark and John do not.

The Gospels differ in other aspects as well. But such differing accounts with such carefully selected details do not imply contradiction. Rather, the differences provide the story with diversity, beauty and depth. As with a diamond, the many facets must be viewed and appreciated to glimpse the elegance of the whole.

Joseph’s Perspective, Mary’s Perspective

I think that Matthew seems to be telling the Nativity story from Joseph’s perspective, while Luke tells Mary’s story. That observation is shared by a number of biblical scholars. For example, Matthew alone records the angel’s appearance to Joseph, and the angel visits Joseph three, possibly four times (see Mt 1:20, 2:13, 2:19, 2:22). But in Luke the only angelic visit we read about is Gabriel’s visit to Mary (see Lk 1:26-38).

In Matthew, Mary’s virginity and honor are defended, as would have been the concern of a loyal and loving husband (Mt 1:18-25). Though no words of Joseph are recorded in Matthew, the Gospel does tell us his thoughts and his quick submission and obedience to the will of God. Mary’s submission and obedience to God are not mentioned in Matthew, but are clearly recorded in Luke, where it is her words and thoughts that are expressed. We could easily conclude that Luke spent a considerable time with Mary, interviewing her about the miraculous birth and surrounding events. He relays many details that Mary treasured and “pondered” in her heart (Lk 1:29, see also 2:19), things only Mary would have known.

It is Luke who records the words of the angel at the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38), Mary’s response and the glorious Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). He even begins the story with an account of Elizabeth, Mary’s relative (Lk 1:39-45). And while the genealogy provided by Matthew relates to Joseph’s ancestry, some scholars have considered the genealogy recorded in Luke to be Mary’s family tree.

In any case, despite the variety of information provided, these texts inspired by the Holy Spirit of God himself clearly proclaim the birth of Christ as a watershed event in human history. He is the Son of Man and Son of God, miraculously born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit in Bethlehem and cared for by His legal, adoptive father, Joseph.

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But we still haven’t answered the question: Did the Wise Men meet the shepherds? The tyrant King Herod died in 4 B.C., and he was alive at both the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi. So the Magi’s visit had to take place after the birth of Jesus and

before the flight to Egypt, since Herod died before the return of the Holy Family (see Mt 2:16-23).

Since “the East” in this text probably means modern-day Iraq or Iran, the journey up the Fertile Crescent and down through modern-day Syria and Israel would have taken a long time. The Magi must have calculated the time of birth rather accurately, arriving shortly after the birth but before the Holy Family fled to Egypt. So the time frame certainly allowed for them to meet the shepherds, even if their meeting didn’t occur the same night Jesus was born.

If I had been one of the Wise Men, I hope that I’d have been wise enough to cross one more field to visit the shepherds to get the whole story — which is exactly what the Gospels have provided for us.

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