

On the Birth of Jesus

Special Topical Lesson

I. Introduction

- a. Today is Sunday, December 25, 2022: Christmas Day in most of the world (generally in the West).
- b. There is a wide range of stances that Christians interested in the historic faith take regarding Christmas.
 - i. In some churches: full-blown use of the holiday and all kinds of traditions that have grown up with it (Christmas tree, Santa, reindeer, nativity scene, shopping for gifts, decorations, materialism, winter songs, carols, etc.).
 1. Some use it as an opportunity for evangelism, the one day lots of people think about Jesus and possibly even attend a church.
 2. Yet the blend of Christian and cultural pagan-type traditions can be rather confusing!
 - ii. Other churches (and Christians) make a point of ignoring the holiday altogether. They consider it to be pagan to the core. The holiday was especially rejected by groups like the Puritans and Quakers.
 - a. They often make claims such as:
 - i. Jesus could not have been born on 12/25. The shepherds watching their flocks by night, as stated in the account in **Luke**, precludes the possibility of a late December (winter) birth.
 - ii. This celebration came out of pagan Roman celebrations: Saturnalia and the celebration of the god 'Sol Invictus' (the invincible Sun).
 - iii. Many of the popular traditions (Christmas tree, Yule log, gift exchange, Santa Claus, etc.) bring pagan elements into the typical celebrations surrounding Christmas.
 - iv. Early Christians did not observe the birth of Christ; instead, they only observed His death and resurrection (each Sunday, and perhaps during the Passover/Easter season).
 - b. They either completely ignore and even ridicule the observance of Christmas, or else (in some cases) they will not mention it in church services, but members will observe it at home, on their own!

- c. **Question:** What should we do regarding Christmas?
- i. Ignore it, attack it, celebrate it in a limited way, or full-blown cultural adoption?
- d. Over the past ten years especially, I have struggled with this and wondered about it.
- i. We scaled back significantly at first.
 - ii. I assumed that the argument made by the opponents of Christmas on 12/25 was correct, then started listening to historical evidence and arguments from “the other side”.
 - iii. My conclusions, at this point, include:
 1. There is strong evidence for early Christians accepting the 12/25 date (in the West) and some accepting a 1/6 date (in the East). This evidence is much stronger than many critics of Christmas realize.
 2. I pointed to two prominent Christian authors (who had made statements like, “Everyone knows Jesus was *not* born on 12/25”. After presenting the counter-evidence, both authors reconsidered and have taken a much more careful position on this.
 - a. Includes early Christian writer Hippolytus, in his Commentary of Daniel, who stated his belief that Jesus was born on “the 8th day of the Kalends of January”, which on the old Julian Calendar corresponds to December 25.
 - b. Also, the Apostolic Constitutions (based on late second-century and early third-century practices in Asia Minor) mention the birth of Christ as well as the Passover as special feasts that Christians would observe.
 3. This does *NOT* negate the issues with materialism and paganism that have crept into the cultural observances so popular today (materialism, pagan type practices, etc.).
- e. My goal in presenting this message.
- i. Provide a mature, adult treatment of the story surrounding the birth and infancy of Jesus (as not just a children’s story), looking at **Matthew 1-2** and **Luke 1-2**.

1. Answer some questions that Christians have wrestled with, including how the events of **Matthew** and **Luke** (which might strike some as contradictory at first glance) can both be true.
2. Equip us to be better prepared to answer the critics and skeptics of the Christian faith, including the account of the virgin birth.
3. Take advantage of things we have learned from our prior studies in the Old Testament (including *even from the book of **Numbers***, which we are currently studying).
4. Uncover some practical lessons for us within these four chapters. Although Jesus is too young to speak, we can nevertheless learn from heroes of faith like Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Gabriel, the shepherds, and the magi (traditionally, the 'wise men').

II. From the Seed of David

- a. Read **Matthew 1:1-2**.
 - i. The very first thing we learn about Jesus is that He is *descended from King David*. The second thing we learn is that he is descended from Abraham (from whom all the Jews are descended).
 - ii. David's name shows up *twelve times* in the first two chapters of **Matthew** and **Luke**, where we find the events associated with the birth and infancy of Jesus.
- b. **Question:** Why do the gospel and infancy accounts begin with such a strong emphasis on David?
 - i. Eusebius, who became bishop of the church in Caesarea c. 314 AD, was asked many questions about the Bible by Christians in his day, for which he provided answers. Some of those questions are the same ones Christians ask today. Of those, in Q&A format, twenty have survived. An English language translation was published in 2010: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Gospel Problems and Solutions*. The first 16 of the 20 questions pertain to the events surrounding the birth of Jesus and the beginning of the gospels of **Matthew** and **Luke**.
 - ii. In one of the questions (*To Stephanus, No. 5*), Eusebius is asked: "Why does **Matthew** give precedence to David over Abraham in the words, "The book of the birth of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham."?"
 - iii. Eusebius responded to the question as follows:

1. "It is because it was to David first, and only to him, that a prophecy was given, confirmed by an oath, that the Christ's birth was, in physical terms, from him."
2. Then Eusebius proceeds to quote from **2 Samuel 7**, **1 Chronicles 17**, **Psalms 89** and **Psalms 132**, following the text of the Septuagint (LXX).
 - a. Read **1 Chronicles 17:11-15**. (The parallel account is found in **2 Samuel 7**.)
 - i. Here David has indicated he wanted to build a permanent temple building for the Lord to replace the tent-like tabernacle. However, through Nathan the prophet, the Lord told him 'No'. The Lord said that instead, it would be *one who would come from his body* who would build the temple.
 - ii. The promise made to David included the following elements:
 1. After David died and was laid to rest, the Lord would establish (literally "raise up", in the LXX; see the translation of the same statement in **2 Samuel 7** if reading in the OSB) one from his body.
 2. This one would build a house for the Lord, one that would last forever.
 3. His throne would last forever; he would reign over the eternal kingdom.
 4. The Lord said of him, "I will be his Father, and he shall be My son."
 - iii. In his answer to Stephanus, Eusebius pointed out that this promise *could not have applied to Solomon* for the following reasons.
 1. The line of kings from Solomon ended with Jeconiah and the captivity in Babylon. It did not continue forever.
 2. Solomon could not be called "God's son". He disobeyed the Lord by taking many foreign wives and ended up practicing their idolatry, worshiping other gods.
 3. It would be Jesus, not Solomon, who would reign over the eternal kingdom.
 - b. Read **Psalms 132** (designated **Psalms 131** in the LXX).

- i. Ephratha = Bethlehem (See **Genesis 35:19**, in the account regarding the death of Rachel.)
 - 1. It speaks of “worshiping in the place where his feet stood”.
 - ii. Recalls David’s desire to build the temple, God’s response, and the Lord “swearing an oath” to place one of his descendants on the throne over the eternal kingdom.
 - iii. The psalm refers to “the *anointed one*” = “*the Christ*” (*christos / χριστός* in Greek, in the LXX), in verses **10 & 17**.
 - iv. In **verse 6** it says in the LXX literally (same as in **2 Samuel 7** and **1 Chronicles 17**, and as quoted by Eusebius), “from the fruit of *your belly*” (not from the fruit of your loins).
- c. Read **Matthew 1:15-17**.
- i. The first chapter of the first gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus, through Joseph (the betrothed husband of His mother, Mary).
 - ii. It starts with Abraham, with the major divisions occurring at David and at the captivity in Babylon (with fourteen generations between each).
- d. Read **Matthew 1:18**.
- i. At this point, Mary is found to be pregnant, and the angel addresses Joseph.
 - ii. In the gospel according to **Luke**, an angel approaches Mary *before* she became pregnant. Therefore, the **Luke 1** announcement from Gabriel to Mary comes first chronologically.

III. Mary, a Virgin, will Conceive and Have a Son

- a. Read **Luke 1:5-7**.
- i. Zecharias the priest and Elizabeth his wife were “both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless”.
 - 1. They were both very good people, according to **Luke**. I will not criticize Zecharias for his one (rather understandable) mistake that follows in his interaction with Gabriel.
 - 2. It seems to me that this one statement alone can destroy the idea advanced by Calvinists that after the fall, *all people* thereafter became totally depraved (with nothing good whatsoever in them)!

b. Read **Luke 1:8-25**.

- i. The angel Gabriel tells Zecharias that he will bear a son “in the spirit and power of Elijah”, referring to the promise made at the end of **Malachi** that Elijah would come before the day of the Lord.
 1. Read **Malachi 3:22-23** from the OSB, which is based on the LXX. (This corresponds to **Malachi 4:5-6** in Bibles where the Old Testament is based on the Masoretic Text.)
 2. The statement by Gabriel here also reminds me of what it says in **Isaiah 40:3-5**, where it speaks of the voice of one who will cry in the wilderness. “Prepare the way of the Lord.”
 3. It will become clear later that Zecharias will understand the significance of his son’s role related to the Greater One who will follow.

c. Read **Luke 1:26-38**.

- i. The same angel Gabriel, who “stands in the presence of God”, goes to Mary in Nazareth (in Galilee).
- ii. She is a virgin, betrothed to Joseph, who is “of the house of David”.
 1. Recall that the genealogy of Joseph is provided in **Matthew 1**.
- iii. The greeting of the angel to Mary is: “Hail! The Lord is with you, blessed are you among women...”.
 1. (This is the opening line of a rather famous prayer many of us who came from Roman Catholic or similar backgrounds learned from childhood.)
- iv. Although she is a *virgin*, she will conceive and give birth to a son.
 1. He is the one who will fulfill the promises made to David, about 1,000 years before! The elements of the promise made by Gabriel all point to the fulfillment of the oath the Lord had made to David.
 - a. He will inherit the throne of his father, David.
 - b. He will reign forever; His kingdom shall have no end.
 - c. He shall be called ‘the Son of God’.
 2. Eusebius explained in his answer to Stephanus, No, 15:

- a. “Therefore the throne about which the great angel Gabriel gives the Virgin the good news, prophesying that it will be given to the One who is to be born of her, is the very same throne that God swore to give to David, the throne which is “as the days of heaven” and “as the sun before God” and “as the moon set for eternity”, with the whole nation praying for it to be established.
 - b. “...Gabriel is saying that the One who is to be born of the Virgin will receive the throne of David – that is to say, the throne promised to David, though not by any means actually given to him yet; the heavenly throne, the one lasting to eternity. This, then, was the actual fulfillment of the greatest prophecy delivered to David, awaited by the whole people and fulfilled in our Savior Jesus Christ, as Gabriel testified in the words: “And he shall reign for eternity; and of his kingdom there shall be no end”.
 - c. “That, too, is why our Lord and Savior himself said, in reply to the questioner who asked Him if He was king of the Jews: ‘My kingdom is not of this world’. The royal throne in store for him was nothing mortal or perishable, but was truly world-wide, shining as a light like the sun and set firm for eternity like the moon, illuminating understanding souls through his divine, celestial teaching.”
 - d. (Eusebius then proceeded to explain that the reference to being a king ‘over Jacob’ referred to reigning over all those who were inwardly Jews, who would receive the circumcision of the heart.)
3. He is to be given the name “Jesus”.
- a. **Question:** Why did the angel *insist* that He be given that particular name?
 - i. This was the special name given to Hoshea, the son of Nun, as it says in **Numbers 13:16**.
 - ii. He was the faithful successor to Moses, the One who completed the mission begun by Moses and delivered God’s people into the Promised Land.
 - iii. He was the One who was appointed by God, so that the people would not be left “like sheep having no shepherd” (**Numbers 27:16-23; Matthew 9:36**)
 - v. The problem with the plan announced by the angel Gabriel: Mary is a virgin! How could she possibly conceive a child in that state?

1. Gabriel says, “the Holy Spirit will overshadow you.”
 - a. For that reason, He will be called “the Son of God”.
 - b. He will be both Son of God and the Son of Man (fully human nature).
 - c. The final comment by Gabriel: “For with God, nothing will be impossible.”
 - i. In my opinion, this is one of the greatest lines in all the Bible. This is the ultimate closing statement in the face of any challenging situation.
 1. How can anyone who understands who God is argue with that?
 - ii. Mary’s response is priceless. It demonstrates total submission to God, even in the face of something beyond her understanding: “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be done according to your word.” (**Luke 1:38**)
 1. When Jesus taught us to pray the daily prayer, he included: “May your will be done, on earth as in heaven” (**Matthew 6:10**). Mary here provides the classic example of complete submission to the will and plans of God.
 2. While some churches may elevate veneration of Mary to the extreme, we do not need to overreact in the opposite direction. Mary is indeed worthy of being held up as a woman blessed by God, a humble woman of great faith who submitted herself entirely to the Lord’s will.
- d. **Question:** Joseph is descended from Jesus. However, Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus. So, how is Jesus descended from David?
 - i. This question was answered by Eusebius in his Response to Stephanus, No. 1. He provided two answers.
 1. First, devout Jewish men were expected to marry women from their own tribe, according to the Law of Moses.
 - a. This is explained in **Numbers 36:6-9**. Marrying someone from another tribe would complicate the inheritance of land.
 2. Second, the statement of Gabriel to Mary that her son would receive “the throne *of his father David*” (**Luke 1:32**) would make sense only if Mary herself was a direct descendant of David!

IV. More On the Virgin Birth

a. Read **Matthew 1:18-25**.

- i. An angel speaks to Joseph, after Mary has conceived.
- ii. Similar to what Mary was told, Joseph is informed that this is done by the Holy Spirit, and the son is to be named Jesus.
- iii. The virgin birth is in fulfillment of the prophecy of **Isaiah 7:14**:
 1. "So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us.'" (**Matthew 1:22-23**, NKJV)
 - a. This reference to the prophecy of **Isaiah 7:14** is quoted from the LXX. There the Greek word (παρθένος / parthenos) translated "virgin" refers specifically to a woman who has never had intimate relations with a man.
 - b. Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD, charged the Jews of his day of altering the **Isaiah** passage by changing it from "virgin" to "young woman", and challenged them: "For what great thing or sign should have been in this, that a young woman conceiving by a man should bring forth, - a thing which happens to all women who produce offspring?"
 - i. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 21; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 453)

b. **Question:** Besides **Isaiah 7:14**, are there *any other* prophecies that point to a virgin birth?

- i. **Genesis 3:15** speaks of the *seed of the woman* only (with Adam the man not mentioned) as the One to come in the future, who will crush the head of Satan.
- ii. Recall that rocks or stones in the Old Testament were used in several places to foreshadow the Christ. Irenaeus, in the passage referenced above, also pointed to **Daniel 2**, the prophecy about the stone that would smash the 4-part statue and ultimately become a kingdom that would fill the whole world.
 1. "On this account also, Daniel, foreseeing His advent, said that a stone, cut out without hands, came into this world. For this is what "without hands" means, that His coming into this world was not by the operation of human hands, that is, of those men who are accustomed to stone cutting; that is, Joseph taking no part with regard to it, but Mary alone

cooperating with the prearranged plan. For this stone from the earth derives existence from both the power and the wisdom of God. Wherefore also Isaiah says: 'Thus says the Lord: Behold, I deposit in the foundations of Zion a stone, precious, elect, the chief, the corner-one, to be had in honor.' (**Isaiah 28:16**) So, then, we understand that His advent in human nature was not by the will of a man, but by the will of God."

- a. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 21; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 453)
2. Irenaeus also pointed back to the prophecy of David we read earlier, from **1 Chronicles 17**, **2 Samuel 7**, etc.
 - a. Recall the odd wording: one who would come from the "*belly*" of David would become the great king over the eternal kingdom. Isn't that anatomically incorrect, in view of David being a *man*?
 - i. Some translators even try to correct this seemingly strange reference by substituting a term like "loins" for the literal translation "belly".
 - ii. The Greek word translated "belly" in those passages is *koilia* / *κοιλία*.
 - iii. This is the same word we saw recently in our study of Jonah, where the prophet goes to sleep in the "belly" of the ship, and later ends up in the "belly" of the whale.
 - b. This is the same word used in the New Testament when Elizabeth says to Mary, "blessed is the fruit of your *womb*" (= "from your *belly*") (**Luke 1:42**)
 - c. Irenaeus pointed out the significance of this term, related to the virgin birth of Jesus:
 - i. "And when He says, 'Hear, O house of David,' He performed the part of one indicating that He whom God promised David that He would raise up from the fruit of his *belly* [*Latin: ventris*] an eternal King, is the same who was born of the Virgin, herself of the lineage of David.
 - ii. "For on this account also, He promised that the King should be 'of the fruit of his *belly*,' which was the appropriate [term to use with respect] to a virgin conceiving, and not 'of the fruit of his loins,' nor 'of the fruit of his reins,' which expression is appropriate to a generating man, and a woman conceiving by a man.

- iii. “In this promise, therefore, the Scripture excluded all virile influence; yet it certainly is not mentioned that He who was born was not from the will of man. But it has fixed and established ‘the fruit of the belly,’ that it might declare the generation of Him who should be [born] from the Virgin, as Elisabeth testified when filled with the Holy Ghost, saying to Mary, ‘Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy *belly*’; the Holy Ghost pointing out to those willing to hear, that the promise which God had made, of raising up a King from the fruit of [David’s] belly, was fulfilled in the birth from the Virgin, that is, from Mary.”

- 1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 21; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 452–453)

V. Elizabeth and John the Baptist

a. Read **Luke 1:39-56**.

- i. As we discussed, the word generally translated “womb” is the same Greek word used in the promise to David in the LXX, where it is translated “belly”.
- ii. Mary will be called “blessed” by all future generations.
 - 1. Let us not overreact to groups that go overboard in veneration of Mary!
 - 2. She offers a wonderful prayer lifting up God.
 - 3. She sees Him as a long-term, promise-keeping God.
 - 4. Mary understood the fear of God in a way that Eve did not.
 - a. Mary says, “His mercy is on *those who fear Him*” (**Luke 1:50**)
 - b. Recall how Jesus (**Matthew 10:28**) and Peter (**1 Peter 2:10**) also upheld the importance of fearing God!
 - c. This is one of the reasons why Mary was able to overcome a trial, while Eve (who lacked such a fear of God) fell under Satan’s temptation.
- b. Zecharias, filled with Spirit, praises the Christ first, and more than his own son.
 - i. In his prayer, he lifts up holiness and righteousness.

VI. Jesus is Born in Bethlehem

a. Read **Luke 2:1-7**.

- i. For more information regarding the year and date of the birth of Jesus, see Ware, Steven L., *When was Jesus Really Born?* (2013). Note: although this book is out of print, it is accessible online at the Internet Archive website (archive.org). Some of the information regarding early Christian writers commenting on when Christ was born includes:
 1. Irenaeus (writing c. 160 AD) said this event occurred in “about 41st year in the reign of Augustus”, which would have been 3/2 BC.
 2. Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and other writers made similar statements.
 3. There was an early Greek tradition for a January 6 date for the birth of Jesus. (Ware, p. 24)
 4. The December 25 date for the birth of Jesus was an early western tradition.
 - a. Early Christian writer Hippolytus, in his *Commentary on Daniel*, said that he believed Jesus was born “on the 8th day of the Kalends of January” (= December 25).
 - b. ‘Kalends’ was the first day of a month, with days “of the kalends” counted prior to that date (and also including that first day of the month).
 - c. Augustine believed Jesus was conceived (and suffered) on March 25 and was born on December 25. (Ware, p. 26)
- b. Read **Luke 1:8-21**.
 - i. Origen commented on evidence he was able to observe in his day to corroborate the historical evidence for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. (See interesting discussion in *Against Celsus*, in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 418.)
 - ii. The Bethlehem birth was in fulfillment of the **Micah 5** prophecy, as explained in **Matthew 2:1-6**.
 1. That prophecy from **Micah 5:2** refers to His birth in Bethlehem, but also points to His divinity and His origins in eternity, “...whose origins are from everlasting”.
- c. Compare this to the events associated with the birth and infancy of Jesus as recorded in **Matthew 2** (involving the wise men and the flight of the family to Egypt).

- i. One of the traditions of Christmas I recall as a child was that we would set up a nativity scene in the home, with a creche, manger, ‘the star of Bethlehem’ and porcelain figurines for Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, the shepherds and the (three) wise men, as well as the animals.
 - 1. The traditional nativity scene portrays all the events of the **Matthew** and **Luke** nativity accounts occurring at the same time. However, if you think about it, that doesn’t appear to harmonize very well. There are differences between the two accounts that are hard to reconcile (assuming that both sets of events happened at exactly the same time).
- ii. However, according to Eusebius, the visit of the magi happened sometime after the birth of Jesus.
 - 1. The visit of the magi could have occurred *up to two years after* the birth of Jesus, in view of the time when the star appeared and considering the age range of the infants sentenced to death.
 - a. (See Eusebius, *Gospel Problems and Solutions*, To Stephanus No. 16)
- iii. The story of a wicked king issuing an edict to kill all the Jewish baby boys in the area and the infant Jesus may be seen in another prophecy.
 - 1. According to Peter and Stephen, the prophecy of **Deuteronomy 18:15-19** pointed to Jesus. There, it said that the Lord would, in the future, raise up a prophet “like Moses”. If we examine the life of Moses in detail, we will see amazing similarities with that of Christ.
 - 2. For example, **Exodus 1** speaks of a wicked king (Pharaoh) issuing an edict to kill all of the infant Hebrew males. However, while many baby boys ended up being killed, the baby Moses (like Jesus) managed to escape destruction.

VII. Take-Aways, for Us to Consider

- a. God keeps his promises, sometimes waiting over 1,000 years to do so.
- b. There are wonderful, very specific prophecies about the kingdom of God in the Old Testament.
- c. The virgin birth of Jesus really did happen, in fulfillment of several prophecies.
- d. We can learn many things from the faith of Mary, the mother of Jesus.
 - i. A healthy fear of God is still essential.

- ii. Nothing is impossible for God. If we see God as He is, this is not hard to believe.
- iii. Genuine faith involves complete submission to the will and plans of God.

VIII. Appendix – Links to Additional Resources in Support of the Traditional 12/25 Date for the Birth of Jesus

- a. <http://www.dec25th.info/Origins%20of%20Christmas%20and%20the%20Date%20of%20Christ's%20Birth.html>
- b. <https://taylormarshall.com/2012/12/yes-christ-was-really-born-on-december.html>
- c. <https://insidethevatican.com/news/lead-story/the-25th-of-december-pagan-feast-or-patristic-tradition/>