

THE CHRISTMAS STORY IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Matthew's is the most Jewish of the gospels, insisting on almost every page that Jesus fulfils the promise of the Old Law. Jesus is a second Moses who forms a new people of God, a second David, the messianic king of David's line. He wants us to understand and see Jesus in the light of the main themes of the Old Testament: Passover, Liberation, Exile, Restoration and Kingdom of God.

From the beginning we can recognise Matthew's theology. His genealogy has an artificial character about it. It is divided into 3 sections of 14. This is deliberate since he has to omit four kings to achieve this. The three sections are headed by Abraham the father of the promise on which the whole of the Old Testament is based; David the king on whom so many of Israel's hopes centred and the exile which marked the beginning of Judaism as it existed in New Testament times. We are to understand that Jesus was the fulfilment of that promise, that royal dynasty and is the crown of Judaism.

The story is then punctuated by five quotations from the Old Testament, all with a similar introduction "This took place to fulfil ..." None of these are predictions about the birth and childhood of Jesus but are used to show Christians with a Jewish background that Jesus fulfils all the promises which God made to their ancestors. The first one is from Isaiah 7:14 "the maiden is with child ...". It is the 8th century BC and Assyrian troops are massed on the Israelite border. The king in Jerusalem is childless and terrified that they will be overrun and the sacred line of David will come to an end with his death. Isaiah is angry with the king for having such little faith in God but also wants to reassure him. The prophet says that there will be a sign from God "the maiden is with child ..." There will be a son to continue the royal line to prove that God has not abandoned them. His very name Immanuel will signify that God is with them. That sign and promise is fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

In the continuing story the Magi ask where "the king of the Jews" is to be found. Matthew gives the answer through the second quotation, from the prophet Micah (5:1-2) "And you, Bethlehem ..." In a house in the village is to be found a king of David's line even greater than Solomon (Mt 12:42). He describes the homage due to the child using the story of the gifts of gold and spices brought to Solomon by the Queen of Sheba (1Kings 10: 10-13). A rabbinic elaboration of the story even mentions the Queen being guided by a star. So, Jesus is the new Davidic King greater than Solomon in all his glory. Two other texts used in the Christmas liturgy may have influenced the story (Isaiah 60:1,3,5-6) and Psalm 72:10-15.

The story continues with the flight into Egypt and uses the words of the prophet Hosea (11:1) "I called my son out of Egypt". The assurance given to Joseph by the angel was "those who wanted to kill the child are dead". This sounds very much like the assurance given to Moses who had fled from Egypt "all those who wanted to kill you are dead" (Exodus 4:19). It suggests that Matthew is thinking of Jesus as the new Moses. This reference to the Moses story may also throw some light on the massacre of the Innocents. The Pharaoh ordered the killing of Hebrew children to try to eliminate a possible Moses (Exodus 1:15-16). The rabbinical elaborations on the Moses story reveal other parallels. Moses birth is foretold in a dream, Pharaoh is forewarned and consults astrologers. Perhaps the reality Matthew seeks to convey is that through the providence of God, Jesus, like Moses, was raised up to be the Saviour of his people. Jesus is a new Moses.

The fourth quotation from Jeremiah 31:15 is about the brutal Assyrian invasion in the 6th century BC. Ramah was the burial place of Rachel the mother of the Joseph tribes and the place of a concentration camp where the deportees were gathered before their long march into captivity. If you read the whole passage, verses 2-33 you will see that it contains a strong hope and promise of restoration, a new exodus, a repeat of the experience by which Israel was created and saved. There is to be a new covenant. So, Matthew sees the birth of Jesus as the culmination of these two exoduses.

The last quotation "He will be called a Nazarene" doesn't come from any text. It is a play on words with Nazareth. The nazirate was a service whereby parents dedicated a son to God in a special way. Samson who had an angel-announced birth (Judges 13:3-7) was a famous nazir. Jesus is also seen in terms of the Judges, those consecrated leaders who defended God's people and liberated them from their oppressors.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

When we compare Matthew and Luke's accounts it is clear that we are not seeing chronicles or diaries because they don't fit in with each other. Instead we see two theologies or meditations on the Old Testament. They are so different because they do not choose the same texts.

Luke's gospel sounds so familiar because the joyful mysteries of the Rosary are based on it. In fact, he writes about two almost identical stories. One about John, the other about Jesus. Both sets of parents are named; the angel Gabriel appears; both Zechariah and Mary are disturbed; the angel reassures; there is to be a son; you must name him; he will be great and his task is described. How can they be sure? A sign will be given. Luke highlights the parallel between John and Jesus to underline how much Jesus towers over John who expresses this in Luke 3:16 "One is coming after me who is mightier than me."

But this account has strong similarities with another story, that of the birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:2-2:26). The childless Hannah prays for a son, God answers her prayers, she gives birth to a son, presents him in the temple and dedicates him to God's service and bursts into her Magnificat of praise. There are further echoes of these stories in the birth of Samson (Judges 13:2-5) and of Isaac (Genesis 21:1-7). The theme common to all of these stories is that Israel's leaders are a gift from God. Salvation does not come through the efforts of men. It is always a creation of God, a Godsend. For Luke the Samuel story is particularly important. Samuel marks the beginning of a line of prophets that finishes with John (Luke 16:16). It is Jesus who is the purpose for which the line of prophets existed. Samuel anoints King David, John anoints Jesus, the new David.

Luke along with Matthew has meditated on many Old Testament texts. But unlike Matthew does not quote specific texts but offers a wealth of allusions to Old Testament texts which illustrate his meaning (theology). Luke's account of Zechariah's prayer (Luke 1:8-11,19) is an echo of the prayer of Daniel pleading with God to bring redemption to his people (Daniel 9:20-25). Jesus is the redemption so longed for. John the Baptist is described as a new Elijah (Luke 1:16-17) which is an allusion to the final pages of the Old Testament (Malachi 3:23-24). Both seek to prepare the people for the 'day of the Lord' which will be fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus.

The greeting Mary receives and her response (Luke 1:28-31,49) is closely linked to the prophetic texts in Joel 2:21,23 and Zephaniah 3:14-17. The prophetic hope of a God who is no longer distant and remote but in the midst, in the very womb, of his people – that, Luke is intimating, is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. The promise made to Mary that the power of the Most High would overshadow her. (Luke 1:35) takes us back to Exodus 24:16, 40:35 and Numbers 9:18-22, where the cloud expresses the presence of God among the Israelites on their journey through the desert. Mary is being spoken of as the meeting-place where people come into the presence of God.

In the Magnificat (Luke 1:48-53), some of which is based on the Song of Hannah, we have the theme of poverty which runs through the later part of the Old Testament. This is not simply seen as an economic fact but as an essential condition for knowing God as he really is. The poor (anawim) are those who can no longer rely on their own resources but can only throw themselves on the goodness of God. There are many others in these two chapters in addition to Mary – Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna and the shepherds. Jesus the Son of Man with 'nowhere to lay his head' (Luke 9:58) is the most outstanding one, born in another man's stable, buried in another man's tomb. He is the homeless one, the wanderer always on the move to the Jerusalem that lies beyond, who will only be truly at home in the house of his Father.

There is a very strong emphasis on Jerusalem in Luke's gospel from chapter 9:51 'Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem'. For Luke Jesus' life is really one long journey passing over from his life among men to his true home with his Father. The climax is in Jerusalem where salvation had always taken place. The climax of the infancy story is also in Jerusalem with Jesus making his bar-mitzvah pilgrimage to Jerusalem to become a 'son of the law'. Luke puts on Jesus lips those mysterious words 'did you not know I must be in my father's house?' Where else would you expect to find him? The only place where he may be truly discovered is where his life finds its deepest meaning, in Jerusalem where salvation takes place.

(Based on 'The First Christmas' H.J.Richards. Collins)