

CHAPTER 5

JESUS' BIRTH, CHILDHOOD, AND YOUTH

These notes will follow the outline of Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry in *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels*. The titles of the parts and sections are those used in the *Harmony*.

[*Harmony*, Parts 1-3, pp. 29-41]

Part I: A Preview of Who Jesus Is

Sec. 1: Luke's purpose in writing a gospel

Luke's prologue (Luke 1:1-4) is intended to cover both Luke and Acts; it is one of the few sections of the NT written in classical Greek style. Virtually all the NT is written in the common Greek style used throughout the Roman empire of the time, often called Hellenistic Greek, or Koiné Greek. Luke shows how he used good historical methodology to present a reliable record of Jesus and the progression of the Christian faith from Jesus all the way to Paul's preaching in Rome.

Sec. 2: John's prologue: Jesus Christ, the preexistent Word incarnate

John's prologue, on the other hand, concentrates on Jesus himself—showing that he is the eternal Son of God, the Word, who became human (1:14) and brought the grace and truth promised in the OT to us. John emphasizes the deity of Jesus Christ more than the other gospels do.

Sec. 3: Jesus' legal lineage through Joseph and natural lineage through Mary

Jesus' genealogy is recorded in Matthew and Luke. As seen by the section title in the *Harmony*, it is their opinion that these are two separate genealogies (Joseph's and Mary's); other scholars believe they both are Joseph's (see discussion below of Harmonistic Problem #1).

[Note. Throughout these lessons there will be fuller discussions of various passages in the gospels, called here “harmonistic problems,” where there are difficulties harmonizing the material, or where critics claim there are contradictions. These will be labeled as we go along. These are not all of the problems, but are good illustrations of the types of problems one might have to face, and will give examples as to how these problems can be solved. Usually the solutions are easily apparent, and are caused by a lack of complete information, not by actual contradictions in the gospels.]

Harmonistic Problem #1: Genealogies of Jesus

[Thomas & Gundry, *Harmony*, 30-31]

The problem

Matthew 1:2-16 lists the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham to Jesus (41 names), with 28 names from David to Jesus. Luke 3:23-38 lists the genealogy of Jesus in reverse order from Jesus to Adam with 76 names, with 43 names from David to Jesus.

While the two genealogies agree up through David, they diverge afterward, and it seems impossible to harmonize them.

<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Luke</i>
David	David
Solomon	Nathan
(12 kings)	(18 names)
Jeconiah	Neri
Shealtiel	Shealtiel
Zerubbabel	Zerubbabel
(7 names)	(16 names)
Matthan	Matthat
Jacob	Heli
Joseph	Joseph
Jesus	Jesus

The solution

First, it should be noted that these are not complete genealogies. Note especially Matt 1:8; Jehoram to Uzziah skips three generations (Joram [Jehoram] to Ahaziah to Athaliah to Joash to Amaziah to Azariah [Uzziah], 2 Kgs 8:24; 11:1, 8, 21; 12:21; 14:21). This fact could account for the 15 fewer names in Matthew.

(1) First method.

One way to harmonize these genealogies is to assume that Luke presents Mary’s genealogy—the actual physical descent of Jesus (from Adam).

Luke 3:23 would read, “He was [the son, so it was thought, of Joseph,] the son [grandson] of Heli . . . “; or “Joseph, the [adopted] son of Heli . . . “ (assumes Mary had no brothers).

<i>Matthew--legal line</i>	<i>Luke--physical line</i>
David	David
Solomon	Nathan
Joseph	Mary
Jesus	Jesus

This method notes the fact that Jesus’ physical descent was through Mary, not Joseph. It sees the reference to Adam as indicating physical descent.

Another argument for this method is the curse placed upon the line of Jeconiah (Coniah; same as Jehoiachin) in Jer 22:24-30 (cf. Matt 1:11-12).

Examples of this argument: Norval Geldenhuys, *NIC on Luke* (1951, pp. 151-52); R. Larry Overstreet, “Difficulties of NT Genealogies,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2:2 (Fall, 1981), 303-26; Thomas & Gundry, *Harmony*, Essay 9: “The Genealogies in Matthew and Luke,” pp. 304-310.

(2) Second method

Another way to harmonize these genealogies is to assume that they both belong to Joseph, with one representing legal-inheritance descent, and the other physical-adoptive descent.

The two different fathers for Shealtiel and perhaps Joseph can be explained as involving Levirate marriages or legal adoptions, involving the inheritance of property. For example, see the similar case of Shealtiel and Zerubbabel—in 1 Chr 3:19 (Heb. text) Zerubbabel is the son of

Pedaiah and nephew of Shealtiel (vv. 17-18, Shealtiel and Pediah are brothers); elsewhere, he is his son (e.g., Ezra 3:2).

This method has several advantages:

1. Luke 1:27 and 2:4 emphasize Joseph as a descendant of David (but perhaps Mary also in 1:32; Mary is linked to the tribe of Levi in Luke, not to Judah; cf. Hippolytus).
2. Luke 3:23 is easier to exegete with this method.
3. The curse of Jehoiachin's line still is maintained, since Joseph perhaps would not be a physical descendant. This is a problem for the genealogies in both Matthew and Luke, since they both cross at Zerubbabel. The curse also could simply have meant that none of his immediate descendants or none of his descendants "descending from him by natural generation" would rule (thus excluding the Messiah from this curse).
4. The first method still has the difficulty of the cross of lines at Zerubbabel.

This second method is also the more traditional solution. It was first explored in extant writings by Julius Africanus ca. A.D. 220 (quoted in Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 1:7). See also Plummer, *ICC on Luke* (1901, pp. 103-04); Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (2nd ed., 1932), pp. 202-09.

Part 2: The Early Years of John the Baptist

Sec. 4: John's birth foretold to Zechariah

Most of the material about the early life of John the Baptist and of Jesus comes from Luke. He had access to many of the early witnesses of these events, perhaps including Mary herself, as well as many other early Christians.

The service of priests like Zechariah in the temple was regulated by the OT law and by the added Jewish laws. For a good survey, see Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple and Its Service*.

Gabriel the angel had already appeared to Daniel 500 years earlier (Dan 8:16).

Sec. 5: Jesus' birth foretold to Mary

Meanwhile, six months later, the scene changes to Galilee in the north, to Nazareth, the town of Mary and Joseph. Gabriel now announces to Mary the coming birth of her son Jesus. The main concern of Mary, of course, is her virgin condition. The virgin birth is extremely important historically and theologically. Because Jesus was conceived by a virgin by God's immediate act, he remains sinless, not inheriting the sin common to humanity otherwise.

Note how Gabriel tells her of Elizabeth, and Mary's faith and submission.

Sec. 6: Mary's visit to Elizabeth and Elizabeth's song

Mary immediately traveled to Elizabeth in Judea. When John leaped in Elizabeth's womb for joy, he gave his first testimony to Christ. (This text demonstrates that babies are living humans even before birth.)

Sec. 7: Mary's song of joy

The famous *Magnificat* of Mary is full of OT citations and allusions. Mary, even as a young girl of about 12 or 13, must have been well acquainted with Scripture. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months, or until about the time of John's birth.

Sec. 8: John's birth, Zechariah's prophetic song, and John's growth and early life

Jewish custom was to name a child after someone in the family. By obeying God instead of following this custom, Zechariah demonstrated his faith, and was healed of his dumbness. His song, the *Benedictus*, is another beautiful expression of true Jewish piety and OT knowledge recorded in these early chapters of Luke.

John grew up in the Judean desert (Luke 1:80). Some scholars have guessed that he was reared in the Essenic Qumran community by the Dead Sea, the remains of which have been excavated in the last sixty years. Yet there are too many differences between John's teaching and ministry and that found in Qumran (as evidenced by archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls found near there). Rather, John was a prophet inspired by God, in the tradition of other prophets, especially Elijah.

Part 3: The Early Years of Jesus Christ

Sec. 9: Circumstances of Jesus' birth explained to Joseph

Whereas Luke tells the story from Mary's perspective, Matthew does so from that of Joseph. The angel that appeared to him is not named, but may be Gabriel also. The angel quotes Isaiah 7:14, predicting the virgin birth of the Messiah. Note that Matthew quotes this verse using the technical Greek term for virgin (παρθένος *parthenos*) to translate the Hebrew word **אַלְמָנָה** (*almāh*), which some have translated as "young woman" in Isaiah (as the RSV and the NRSV).

He also specifies the name Jesus (Joshua in Hebrew)—literally, "he shall deliver." Another name is given, "Immanuel"—meaning "God with us." Both names declare Jesus' great person and mission.

Besides the clear narratives involving the announcements of the angel to Mary and to Joseph, the virgin birth of Jesus is taught in both Matthew and Luke, but in different ways.

Matthew says Mary was "pledged to be married" to Joseph (1:18, *μνηστευθείσης mnesteutheises*, "be engaged, betrothed"), that he "sought a divorce" (1:19, *ἀπολύω apoluo*, "put away, divorce"), that after Jesus was born Joseph "took Mary home as his wife" (1:24, *παρέλαβεν τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ parelaben ten gunaika autou*, "took along his wife"), and that he "had no union" with her until after Jesus was born (1:25, *οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν αὐτήν ouk eginwsken auten*, "he did not know her"). Matthew thus is explicit, saying that they had no sexual union, even though Joseph took her as his wife.

Luke says Mary was "pledged to be married" to a man named Joseph (1:27, *ἐμνηστευμένην emnesteumenen*, "be engaged, betrothed" [same word as Matt 1:18]), and that, even after she was expecting a child, she still was only "pledged to be married to him" (2:5, *ἐμνηστευμένη emnesteumene* [same word again]). Thus Luke implies the virgin birth by these constructions, by retaining the word "pledged" after the conception of Jesus.

The virginity of Mary continued until after Jesus was born (Matt 1:25). There is no need or Scriptural warrant to think her virginity continued indefinitely, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches.

Sec. 10: Birth of Jesus

As usual, Luke gives the current secular historical context. Roman censuses were conducted every 14 years. (For a discussion of Quirinius, see previous chapter on Chronology.)

Most assume that Jesus was born in a stable, because there was no room in the "inn" and that he was laid in a "manger." However, the first term could just as well be translated "guest

room,” and “mangers” were often found in the center of the family room in peasant houses, in a lower area, with a platform around for the family to use. This would fit better with peasant hospitality in that time and region; see Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology* 2:2 (November 1979), reprinted in *Bible and Spade* 20:4 (Fall 2007): 98-106.

Harmonistic Problem #2: Date and Place of Jesus’ Birth

[*Harmony*, 36-41]

The problem

Matthew and Luke are the only sources. Jesus’ birth is not specifically described in Mark, John, or the epistles (referred to in Gal 4:4).

Jesus was called a Nazarene (Matt 2:23; Acts 24:5) and was reared in Nazareth (e.g., Mark 1:9; Luke 4:16; John 1:45-46).

Many argue that the census described in Luke 2:1-2 (not mentioned in Matt 2) could not have taken place while Herod was king (Matt 2:1; cf. Luke 1:5). Herod would not have allowed it. Further, the census is misdated, not coming until A.D. 6/7 (see above, “Chronology of the Life of Jesus”), after Herod was dead ten years.

Matthew and Luke bring in Bethlehem to tie Jesus to the line of David, according to OT prophecy (Matt 1:20; 2:5-6; Luke 1:32; 2:4). This was the argument of D. F. Strauss in 1835.

Likewise, the trip to Egypt in Matt 2:13-15 (not in Luke 2) was added to match OT prophecy (Hos 11:1).

The solution

The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke can be shown to be completely independent of each other; yet they do not specifically contradict each other, both being based on sound and early testimony. Compare Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, esp. ch. 2-9; e.g., footnote on p. 196,

“It is enough for our present purpose if it can be shown that there are various ways in which, if our knowledge were more complete, the harmony between the two narratives could be exhibited.”

The census could have taken place as described, with the census of A.D. 6/7 as the second census under Quirinius (cf. “first” in Luke 2:2).

Luke does not mention the trip to Egypt, but the scantiness of his account at this point does not imply a contradiction with Matthew. Luke seems interested only in the fact that Jesus’ parents fulfilled the law before returning home (cf. Machen, pp. 196-97).

As far as Nazareth was concerned, Mary and Joseph and their children were “Nazarenes,” because that was their home (Luke 1:26; 2:4).

Sec. 11: Praise of the angels and witness of the shepherds

Luke alone records the angels’ appearance to the shepherds and the shepherds’ coming to the stable in Bethlehem. According to the best Greek MSS, the angelic proclamation is correctly rendered in most modern translations, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of [his] good will!” (UBS {A} rating).

Luke emphasizes the shepherds, as is typical of his gospel, which emphasizes the poor, the Gentiles, and the outcasts. Some have seen a hint of Jesus’ destiny in this visit by the shepherds, as Jesus came into the world as the Lamb of God (Edersheim *LTJM* even makes them the keepers of the sheep destined for sacrifice in the temple, but this seems far-fetched).

Notice in Luke 2:19 how Mary “treasured up in her heart” all these things. Perhaps Mary herself was one of the “eye witnesses” that Luke consulted in writing his gospel.

Sec. 12: Circumcision of Jesus

Recorded only in Luke 2:21. Circumcision took place when the infant was 8 days old. Jesus fulfills all righteousness, and is placed directly in the Abrahamic covenant. The distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem is a little over five miles.

His name “Jesus” is in Hebrew *Joshua*, meaning “the Lord saves.”

Sec. 13: Jesus presented in the temple with the homage of Simeon and Anna

After the birth of a male child, the mother was considered unclean for seven days; then on the eighth day the child was to be circumcised. The mother then was to continue 33 more days before she would be clean and able to enter the temple area (Lev 12:1-4). Thus Mary now entered the temple courts 40 days after Jesus was born, bringing an offering. Since Luke mentions that the offering was two birds instead of a lamb and a bird, we gather that she and Joseph were poor (Lev 12:8).

The words of praise from the elderly Simeon (the *Nunc Dimittis*) and the elderly widow Anna are filled with faith and rejoicing. They identify Jesus as the one who will fulfill all the promises made to the nation of Israel in the covenants and prophecies. Note that they spoke under the leading of the Holy Spirit, another of Luke's emphases.

At the end of this section the *Harmony* mentions that Joseph and his family may have returned to Nazareth at this time in order to get their household goods, and then came back to Bethlehem later to set up their permanent home, where they were found by the Magi. That would place Luke 2:39 as occurring immediately after verse 38. As the *Harmony* now stands, verse 39 comes later, after the sojourn to Egypt reported in Matthew.

Sec. 14: Visit of the Magi

This account is found in Matthew only. This is not surprising, since Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the king of Israel. Some critics have stated that this event is fictional, or a fanciful retelling of the shepherd story from Luke; however, the text gives no indication that this event did not actually occur.

The Magi were a class of wise men or astrologers in areas of Babylon and Persia in the East. It is possible that these particular men (traditionally 3, because of the number of gifts given by them) were familiar with the writings of Daniel, especially the Aramaic section (Dan 2-7, which spoke of the coming great king of Israel who would rule the world). They may have been immediately motivated by the remarkable star conjunction of 7 B.C. (see chapter on chronology). The fact that they reported to Herod the Great in Jerusalem shows they did not know of Micah's prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2).

King Herod was disturbed because he was extremely jealous of his office, and knew he was not of the proper royal line of Israel. "All Jerusalem with him" was disturbed, because they knew the viciousness of Herod's jealousy and the number of innocent victims that already had been killed by him.

Sent to Bethlehem, the Magi again saw the star over the house—perhaps a miracle, perhaps a super nova, perhaps another conjunction. The house, and the age of the children Herod

had killed, shows that this event was some time later than Jesus' birth. They honored the young child Jesus and gave costly gifts to him. These gifts no doubt were of great use to the family as they had to flee to Egypt and then resettle in Nazareth. The Scriptures give no special significance to what the gifts consisted of—gold, incense, and myrrh. In a dream God warned the Magi not to return to Herod; thus he was frustrated in his evil plan to kill the rival king.

Sec. 15: Escape into Egypt and murder of boys in Bethlehem

Matthew goes on to report how Joseph was warned himself in a dream, and took his family to Egypt for safety, a journey of several days. The prophecy referred to by Matthew (Hos 11:1) refers to Israel as a nation as the “son” of God. Matthew sees Jesus as the great antitype of Israel. As Israel was called out of Egypt, so the Son will be called out of Egypt. In his gospel Jesus is seen repeating the great acts of Israel, yet without the sin of Israel.

Meanwhile, Herod ordered the execution of all young boys in Bethlehem, two years old or younger. This crime is not reported in secular history, but fits well with his character and actions, especially in the last years of his reign (he died in 4 B.C.). The small size of the village and the relatively few babies killed would make his action here seem nothing out of the ordinary and not worthy of special mention by the historians. Yet in God's eyes his sin was great, and Matthew states it fulfilled the prophecy of Jer 31:15, the weeping of the mothers in Bethlehem, the burial place of Rachel, wife of Jacob.

Sec. 16: Return to Nazareth

Luke simply states that Joseph and his family returned to Nazareth. Matthew gives the details of his dream in Egypt announcing that Herod the Great was dead, his discovery that Herod's cruel son Archelaus had replaced him in Judea, and his subsequent decision to go back to Nazareth. Nazareth was in Galilee, under the rule of another of Herod's sons, Herod Antipas.

The prophecy Matthew refers to (Matt 2:23) is probably Isa 11:1, which calls the coming Messiah the “branch,” which Hebrew word has similar consonants to the town name of Nazareth.

Sec. 17: Growth and early life of Jesus

Luke in one verse (2:40) summarizes over ten years of Jesus' life. Note that there are no sensational stories, as were later supplied in many pseudepigraphical works, such as *The Infancy Story of Thomas*, which tells of many fabulous and senseless miracles and feats of wisdom supposedly done by the child Jesus. In actuality, Jesus “grew and became strong” as any young boy would do. He did not show his miracles until he began his public ministry.

Sec. 18: Jesus' first Passover in Jerusalem

Luke tells of Jesus' first Passover as an official adult. He remained behind to ask questions and listen to the doctors of the law. Luke does not say Jesus knew everything, but that the elders were amazed at the amount that he did know and his insight. Jesus had a keen interest in the Scriptures, and already a profound knowledge of God and men.

Mary rebukes him, mentioning his "father and I," which Jesus obliquely counters by speaking of "my Father" as being God.

Sec. 19: Jesus' growth to adulthood

Mary also remembered these events, and again may have been a source for Luke's gospel concerning the early years of Jesus' life.

Again in one verse (2:52) Luke summarizes many years of Jesus' life. During these years Jesus learned the trade of being a builder, probably saw his father Joseph die, and, as the oldest son, probably led in supporting his family. Luke also mentions that Jesus grew in wisdom, and in favor with God; this is speaking of his human nature, which was just like our own, except without sin.

For a detailed and interesting defense of Jesus' occupation being a builder, not only using wood, but primarily stone and other materials, see Ken M. Campbell, "What Was Jesus' Occupation?" *JETS* 48:3 (September 2005) 501-519. The Greek term is τέχτων *techtōn* (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3). The translation "carpenter" began with Tyndale in 1526, and has been changed in only the more recent translations.

Notice this interesting quotation from the *Harmony* (p. 41, n. u): "[Jesus] therefore seemingly continued to work at carpentry until the beginning of his public ministry. His frequent mention of articles of furniture, houses, plows, yokes, and the like in his teaching reflects an intimate acquaintance with items built by carpenters." As noted by Campbell in the article cited above, Jesus even more often spoke of building projects.