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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 4: THE BIRTH OF JESUS

The story of the nativity of Jesus is known by every Christian and even by millions of people of other faiths, yet it is a story that most Christians do not know as deeply as they might, and one which must be looked at closely if we are to obtain a better understanding of what the gospels teach.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus and its surrounding events are found in just a few chapters of the New Testament – Matthew 1 and Luke 2-3 – but these chapters contain a great deal of important information. Perhaps not surprisingly, much of what these chapters tell us has been challenged by those skeptical of the Bible. In this unit we will look at a number of the events surrounding the nativity story that have been questioned and also consider the light that history and archaeology can throw on what can be described as the greatest event in human history, when God and humanity were joined in the birth of Jesus – the promised Messiah.

The Genealogies of Jesus

Two of the four gospels – Matthew and Luke – give us genealogies of Jesus linking him to King David, from whose line the Messiah was to come (Jeremiah 23:5-6). Matthew, following the pattern found in the Old Testament, constructed his genealogy beginning with the earliest individuals and moving toward the most recent, while Luke, following the pattern of Greek and Roman genealogies, begins with the most recent and moves back to the most ancient. When we compare these genealogies given in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, we find that Matthew lists forty-two generations going back to Abraham while Luke has seventy-seven generations going back to Adam. But it is not just that Luke's list goes back further – the two accounts are noticeably different. For example, Matthew has twenty-seven generations from David to Joseph, whereas Luke has forty-two, with almost no agreement in the names given for that period.

There are two possible reasons for the differences in the two genealogies. *First, it may be that while Matthew gives the genealogy of Jesus on Joseph's side, Luke gives his biological descent through Mary.* This fits the fact that while Matthew bases his genealogy explicitly on Joseph, Luke says only that Jesus "was regarded as the son of Joseph" and Mary may be implicit in the account, although unmentioned. This fits the general pattern we find in the two gospels where Matthew tells us quite a lot about Joseph, while Luke largely ignores him and frequently focuses on Mary. Both Joseph and Mary were descended from David, but in different lines: Joseph was descended from Solomon, and Mary was descended from one of David's other sons, Nathan (2 Samuel 5:14; 1 Chronicles 3:5; 14:4). So, by including Mary's genealogy as well as that of Joseph, the gospels may have doubly affirmed that Jesus was the Christ promised to come from the line of David.

Another possibility is that Matthew's account gives Joseph's (shorter) legal ancestry, tracing just the heirs to the Davidic throne, while Luke gives his (longer) biological ancestry, tracing all his ancestors from David. This makes sense as it might seem unlikely for Luke's Gospel to give Mary's genealogy when it is Matthew's list that actually includes women. And the legal/biological nature of Joseph's ancestry traced respectively by the two lists would explain why Matthew states that Jesus' paternal grandfather was Jacob (Matthew 1:16) and Luke states that it was Heli (Luke 3:23) because – as has been realized since the early centuries of the Church – Joseph may have had both a biological father and an adoptive father.

Whichever of these two views is correct, the differences between the two genealogical lists are instructive in helping us to see the underlying themes of the gospel writers and important aspects of their portraits of Jesus. Matthew divides his genealogy into three sets of fourteen generations (Matthew 1:17), although there are, in fact, only forty-one names (not forty-two) in his list. There are only thirteen generations in the first set, presumably intending the unmentioned generation of Abraham to be included as the fourteenth. In the second set, four known historical rulers have been left out (the four generations descended from the evil Ahab who were discounted by God – 2 Kings 10:30). In the third set there are only thirteen generations, unless David is included in this set as well as in the second (Matthew 1:6), or the list includes but does not mention Jehoiakim (1 Chronicles 3:15-16), who was a puppet king installed by Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt. Whatever the reasons for the actual variations from the stated three sets of fourteen generations, many commentators believe that “fourteen generations” is simply a symbolic number (twice the “complete” number seven) and not intended to give an exact biological lineage. 1 Chronicles 1–2 lists fourteen generations between Abraham and David, and it is possible that Matthew structured the rest of the genealogy he gives according to that pattern – especially because he apparently wanted to stress only the legitimate kings from whom Jesus descended.

In a similar way, Luke lists seventy-seven generations from Adam to Jesus and that number was probably also symbolically constructed as the number seventy-seven carried a “double” significance of perfection or completion – as we see in the seventy-seven-fold vengeance of Lamech (Genesis 4:24) and the seventy-seven-fold forgiveness commanded by Jesus (Matthew 18:22). The purpose of biblical genealogies is usually to trace a line of ancestry from the origin of the line to the person under consideration, and every individual need not be included in such a list in order to indicate a path of descent. The genealogies given by Matthew and Luke are certainly both thematic – Matthew stressing Jesus' royal descent and Luke his human descent – with both utilizing symbolically “complete” genealogies.

A final important aspect of the genealogies of Jesus is that Matthew includes five women in his list – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. This is particularly striking because in the Jewish world, genealogies typically only mentioned men. Even more surprising, most of these women were gentiles (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and possibly Bathsheba), and *from the perspective of the time* all five of the women were of “questionable” character: a prostitute (Rahab), a woman who pretended to be a prostitute (Tamar), a widow who “offered” herself (Ruth), a woman guilty of adultery (Bathsheba), and an unwed mother (Mary).

If Matthew had simply wanted to affirm the importance of women, he could have included ones with whom his readers would have been most familiar – such as the patriarchal wives Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah. Instead, by including gentile women, Matthew demonstrated that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham – that through the Messiah all nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). So Matthew's reason for explicitly including these women (when he did not have to do so to construct his genealogy), as well as men, was clearly to show that Jesus was the Messiah for all the earth's peoples – representing male and female, the Jewish people and the gentiles, those who were considered sinful as well as those society deemed moral.

When Was Jesus Born?

Although the calendar system used in the modern world would indicate that Jesus was born at the beginning of AD 1, history and archaeology have shown that this is not the case. Both Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, who ruled 37-4 BC. But Luke also wrote that Joseph and Mary were required to go to Bethlehem for a census conducted by the Romans while she was still pregnant: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world ... while Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:1-2). This event has commonly been dated to AD 6 when a census is known to have been taken by Quirinius, who was governor of Syria and Judea AD 6-12 (see Note 1), although – as critics of the Bible have been quick to point out – this is ten years after Herod died in 4 BC. But rather than doubt Matthew and Luke's testimony, we should realize that Caesar Augustus ordered many censuses during his reign, and Luke's specific statement that "This was the *first* census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:2) indicates there were several such counts and that his account refers to the earliest of them. It is also important to realize that Luke does not use the actual title of "governor" (*legatus*) for Quirinius, but the term *hegemon*, signifying a ruling officer or official. This means that the Roman official Quirinius may have conducted his first census – the one mentioned by Luke – before he was the official governor of Syria and Judea.

So there is no reason to doubt that Jesus was born in Judea during the reign of Herod the Great, as Matthew and Luke agree, at some time before or during 4 BC. This actually fits well with all the evidence we have regarding this period of time. For example, Josephus (*Antiquities* 17.6.4) states that Herod's death was preceded by a lunar eclipse and followed by a Passover. An eclipse is known to have taken place in 4 BC on the 13th of March, about 29 days before Passover, and this is doubtless the eclipse Josephus mentions. By working backwards from the time Luke 3:1 tells us John and Jesus began preaching – during "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (AD 26-28; see Note 2) when Jesus was "about thirty years old" (Luke 3:23) – we also come to around 4 BC or shortly after for the birth of Jesus.

The time of year in which Jesus was born can also be estimated by various methods, and especially by observing the connection between his birth and that of John the Baptist who was six months older than Jesus. Luke 1 tells us that John's mother, Elizabeth, became pregnant with him after his father, Zacharias, who was from the priestly order of Abijah, completed his days of service in the temple. The order of Abijah was the priestly course (1 Chronicles 24:6-19) which served in the temple during the month of Sivan, approximately from mid-May to mid-June. We are also told that in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, the angel Gabriel visited Mary with the news that she would give birth to Jesus. The approximate month of Jesus' birth can thus be determined by counting from the date of Zacharias' priestly service until the birth of Jesus. If the conception of John occurred in June, as is likely, and we count forward six months to arrive at Gabriel's announcement of the conception of Jesus, then count forward nine more months till Jesus' birth, we arrive at September. Although Christianity later chose the date of December 25th to celebrate Jesus' birth, he was probably born sometime in September in the year we call 4 BC, as many of the details of the story indicate.

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UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The Gospel of Matthew summarizes the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus in a particularly important passage:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

When Matthew tells us that Mary was pledged (or, as older Bible versions say, “betrothed”) to be married to Joseph, he refers to the formal Jewish engagement which was considered to be as binding as marriage and which – like marriage – could only be annulled through divorce (vs. 19). After Joseph was divinely reassured that Mary was pregnant through the Spirit of God, he took her into his home as his wife and thus finalized the marriage (vs. 24), though he did not have sexual relations with her until after the baby was born. In this way Jesus had not only a virgin conception but also a virgin birth. The character of Joseph is seen in his being desirous not to put Mary to shame when he no doubt initially thought her child must have been conceived through adultery. Also, and just as much, it is seen in his standard of purity in waiting until the child was born to consummate their marriage. The fact that Joseph was addressed in the dream as “Joseph son of David” (vs. 20) places what he was told in the context of the Messiah who was to come from that line.

The name Jesus (Yeshua) that Joseph was commanded to give Mary’s son was a fairly common one at that time, but never more appropriately given, as in Hebrew it means “the Salvation of Yahweh.” The Old Testament taught that God’s people would be saved when the Messiah came (Jeremiah 23:5-6, 31:34), but first century Jews would have understood this salvation in a particular way. For them “salvation” primarily meant that their people would be delivered from the results of their national sins – and as a result, from their subjugation to foreign rule and oppression. But Matthew shows us that Jesus came not to offer national, political salvation but salvation from personal sin.

Matthew also tells us (1:22-23) more about the role of Jesus by quoting Isaiah 7:14, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). Although, in context, this scripture speaks of a young woman (the Hebrew *almah* can mean a virgin or simply a young woman; see Note 3) conceiving in Isaiah’s time (Isaiah 7:14-17), Matthew uses the scripture in its clear messianic sense – as a sign pointing to a greater future event in which One who would literally be “God with us” (the title Immanuel refers to both Jesus’ deity – *God* with us – and his humanity – *God with us*) would come and who also could be rightly called “Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6) – also clearly divine titles.

The name Immanuel, or God with us, is one of the most encouraging terms used of God in the whole Bible. Because it connotes not only God’s incarnation *among* us, but also the actuality of his being connected *with* us, the name shows clearly that God could add a human nature to his own and still remain God. That the human and divine could be joined in this way indicates that we are truly made in the image of God.

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

There are so many important details regarding the birth of Jesus that they cannot possibly all be covered here, but we will consider one more aspect of the Messiah's birth that is of central importance – the theological significance of *where* he was born. The gospels make it clear that Jesus was born in Bethlehem a few miles south of Jerusalem, and every Christian knows this, but many do not know why. There may actually be two reasons why Jesus was born in that small Judean village. First, it was foretold that the promised Messiah was to come from the house of David – to be a descendant of the young shepherd of Bethlehem who became king of ancient Israel one thousand years before the time of Christ:

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom ... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son ... Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever. (2 Samuel 7:12-16)

This prophecy could not have been completely fulfilled by David's physical descendants, but only by a messianic King who could rule "forever" (vss. 13, 16). That is why in the New Testament it was foretold of Jesus: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32), and why, of course, Jesus is called the "Son of David" throughout the gospels. So the Davidic sonship of the Messiah was one reason for his eventual birth in Bethlehem – the place where David was born, crowned, and his ancestral home (1 Samuel 17:12). As a descendant of David, Joseph, the husband of Jesus' mother Mary, was required to travel to Bethlehem for the census of Quirinius: "And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David" (Luke 2:3-4).

But there may be another reason for the Bethlehem nativity that speaks to the meaning and purpose of the Messiah's birth. The Old Testament book of Micah contains a fascinating prophecy of what was to occur in the fulfillment of God's promise:

And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come ... kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem ... But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. ... And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace. (Micah 4:8, 5:2-5 ESV)

This prophecy tells us that the messianic ruler who would shepherd his people was, like David, to come from Bethlehem (John 7:42) and that he would eventually reign "to the ends of the earth." But notice another detail. The prophecy is preceded with the enigmatic words "And you, O tower of the flock ..." for which the Hebrew is *migdal eder*. This tower is first mentioned in the book of Genesis (Genesis 35:21) and in New Testament times there may have been a tower there used to guard the flocks of sheep that were pastured in that area. The Jewish Mishnah (Shekalim vii. 4) indicates that sheep in the fields around Migdal Eder were controlled by the temple in Jerusalem and provided the animals sacrificed in the temple rituals.

A number of biblical scholars have pointed out that if the prophecy of Micah 4:8 was fulfilled literally, then Jesus may well have been born in some building in this part of the outskirts of Bethlehem. The word translated "manger" where the infant Jesus was placed (Luke 2:7) could also be translated as "stall" or any holding area for animals. This would also explain why the Gospel of Luke tells us that at the nativity, angels appeared to shepherds. The heavenly host could have appeared, of course, to a group of soldiers,

priests, travelers, or any other individuals, but we are told that they appeared to shepherds who were grazing their flocks in the area where Jesus was born (Luke 2:8-15). If Jesus was born in the area of Migdal Eder, the area where the sacrificial lambs were born and raised, the shepherds would naturally have been the people present in that area.

But regardless of the details of its fulfillment, the intent of the prophecy of Micah is clear. The promised Messiah who was the Lamb who would be sacrificed for his people (John 1:29) would also be their future Shepherd (Matthew 2:6). We see this principle throughout the gospels, which speak of Jesus in both his initial and later roles – as both the Servant and the future King, the Captive and the future Warrior, the Judged and the future Judge (Matthew 25:32; etc.). In every case, at his first coming Jesus fulfilled a lesser role, and at his second coming he will fulfill a greater role.

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And there is a lesson in this for us. As we read the gospel accounts and reflect on the life of Jesus, we should look carefully at how he carried out the initial roles he fulfilled as a human being. These lesser roles are recorded so that our present lives may be modelled on his – just as he promises to eventually share his greater roles with us if we are faithful in the lesser ones that we have now (Luke 16:10).

* Note 1: In his book *Antiquities of the Jews*, the Jewish historian Josephus (who wrote shortly after the time of Christ) states that Quirinius conducted a census circa AD 6; but this was doubtless a later census conducted some years after his first.

* Note 2: Tiberius' reign could be counted from the time he officially became emperor shortly after the death of Augustus, or from when he was granted equal power with his father a year or so earlier. We can presume that Luke is using this earlier form of reckoning for the beginning of Tiberius' reign.

* Note 3: Matthew's rendering of *almah* as virgin is completely justified because the Old Testament does not usually use the word in any context other than a virgin, and because the Septuagint translates *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 with the Greek word *parthenos* which can only mean virgin.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics: Briefly summarize the two possible reasons for the differences between Matthew's and Luke's genealogies of Jesus.

Beneath the Surface: Think about what the reason might have been that the birth of Jesus was announced to Mary directly by the angelic messenger Gabriel (Luke 1), but to Joseph by means of an unnamed angel in a dream (Matthew 1). Do these facts indicate that God's *direct* divine revelation in people's lives is only to the degree absolutely necessary?

Everyday Applications: In what ways are aspects of our lives similar to the roles played out by Jesus in his human life? How does this help us learn to be more like him?

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