

# Harmony Of The Gospels -- Lesson #4

## The Birth And Childhood Of John The Baptist And Jesus

*Matthew 1:18-2:23; Luke 1:5-2:52*

### I. **The Annunciation Of The Birth Of John The Baptist**

- A. Herod was a Jewish proselyte, an Idumean or Edomite by birth, founder of the Herodian family, king of Judea from 40 B.C. to A.D. 4. He was made king by the Roman Senate on the recommendation of Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar.
- B. John the Baptist was of the priestly race by both parents, a family distinction greatly esteemed among the Jews. Incense was offered evening and morning (Exodus 30:1-8), probably at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. (cf. Acts 3:1).
- C. Luke frequently tells of the ministration of angels (cf. 1:26; 2:9, 13, 21; 12:8; 15:10; 16:22; 22:43; 24:4, 23). There had been no appearance of an angel for about four hundred years.
  - 1. The angel stood in the Holy Place in front of the veil that hung between the Holy and Most Holy places.
  - 2. The altar of incense was a small table eighteen inches in breadth and length and thirty-six inches in height. It was made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold (Exodus 37:25).
- D. The words of vs. 16 were quoted from Malachi 4:6 and resumed the thread of prophecy which had been broken nearly four centuries before. John showed the spirit of Elijah in his dress and life (2 Kings 1:8; Matthew 3:4) and in his message of repentance (1 Kings 18:21-40; Matthew 3:2).
- E. In asking for a sign Zacharias showed his unbelief (Matthew 12:38-39). His question in the original language is four words. McGarvey wrote, "Four faithless words cost him forty weeks of silence." His inability to speak was a sign and it was also a punishment for having sought a sign.

### II. **The Annunciation Of The Birth Of Jesus To Mary**

- A. Luke alone tells us where Mary lived before the birth of Jesus. That Nazareth was an unimportant town is shown by the fact that it is mentioned nowhere in the Old Testament.
  - 1. The way in which Luke introduces Galilee and Nazareth shows that he wrote to those unfamiliar with Palestine.
  - 2. Galilee comprised the lands of Zebulun, Naphtali, Issachar and Asher.

- B. "Jesus" means "salvation is of Jehovah." It was one of the most common Jewish names, but was given to Jesus by divine direction because of its fitness.
- C. Jesus would not receive His kingdom as a bribe from Satan, nor win it by force of arms, but as the gift of God (Acts 2:32-36; Philippians 2:9-11; Matthew 28:18).
- D. The angel tells of Elizabeth's condition, that it may encourage the faith of Mary, and lead her to trust in Him with whom nothing is impossible. Mary uses the term "handmaid" to indicate her submissive and obedient spirit.

### III. ***The Song Of Elizabeth To Mary***

- A. At this point Luke combines the two strands about Elizabeth and Mary; in it he stresses Jesus' superiority to John. Even so, the pattern of alternation continues, giving John his own important place as the prophet who goes before the Lord.
- B. The "hill country" was a district of Judah to the south of Jerusalem, of which the city of Hebron was the center.
- C. In this beautiful narrative, the stirring of the unborn child becomes a joyful prelude to Elizabeth's being filled by the Holy Spirit, who enlightened her about the identity of the child Mary was carrying. What joy must have filled the hearts of these two women as they realized that one was to be the mother of the long-expected Messiah, and the other of His Elijah-like forerunner!
- D. "Blessed" describes the happy situation of those whom God favors. Elizabeth gave the blessing Zecharias' muteness prevented him from giving (cf. vs. 68-74). In her blessing Elizabeth called attention to Mary's faith and God's faithfulness. In vs. 45, Elizabeth may have remembered how her own husband failed to believe.

### IV. ***The Magnificat Of Mary***

- A. Mary speaks in a poetic tone. Her song closely resembles Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Her song is called the "Magnificat" from this word "magnify" in vs. 46.
- B. In her song, Mary speaks of herself and her adoration toward God for His blessing. Mary was blessed in her motherhood, Abraham in his promises, Paul in his apostleship, etc., but none of these human beings are to be worshiped because of the blessings they received.
- C. In the last few verses, Mary's expressions were hyperboles for the disappointment of the proud, the princely and the rich, in whose families the Messiah was expected.

D. God had passed these by and exalted a lowly one. The song closes with an expression of gratitude to God for His faithfulness in keeping His covenants.

#### V. ***The Birth And Childhood Of John The Baptist***

- A. Male children were named at their circumcision, probably because at that time the names of Abram and Sarai had been changed (Genesis 17:5, 12, 15; Leviticus 12:3; Philippians 3:5). Females were named when they were weaned.
- B. Family names were highly honored among the Jews. They had no liking of romantic and eccentric names. The crowd was surprised that both parents agreed upon an unexpected name.
- C. The miraculous phenomena attending the birth of John made the people so conscious of the presence of God as to fill them with awe. In vs. 66, we probably find an echo of this question thirty years later when John entered upon his ministry (John 1:19).
- D. Because of the word "blessed" in vs. 68, this hymn is referred to as the "Benedictus." After four hundred years of absence the Holy Spirit, as the spirit of prophecy, had again returned to God's people.
- E. The "horn" was a symbol of power (Daniel 7:7-8; 8:21). The reference to "the house of his servant David" indicates that Mary was of the house of David. "Holiness" is good conduct toward God and "righteousness" is good conduct toward men.
- F. Israel had a false idea that the Messiah's salvation would be from political evil. John was needed to tell them that it was from sin that God proposed to deliver them. Perdition does not consist in political wrongs, but in divine condemnation.

#### VI. ***The Annunciation Of The Birth Of Jesus To Joseph***

- A. The Jews were usually betrothed ten or twelve months prior to the marriage.
  - 1. So sacred was the relationship that unfaithfulness to it was deemed adultery, and was punishable by death by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23-28; Leviticus 20:10; Ezekiel 16:38; John 8:5).
  - 2. Those betrothed were regarded as husband and wife, and could only be separated by divorcement.
- B. Both Matthew and Luke are careful to mention Jesus' miraculous conception through the Holy Spirit. The act of the Holy Spirit in this case indicates that He is a personality, and not a mere influence.
  - 1. As a "righteous" man he could not complete his marriage, and thus stain his family name.

2. As a merciful man he did not wish to openly disgrace the one he loved. He wanted to act justly toward his own reputation, and mercifully toward the reputation of Mary.
- C. The Law of Moses gave the husband the power of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1). The bill of writing certifying the divorce usually stated the cause, and was handed to the wife in the presence of witnesses. Joseph evidently intended to omit stating any cause in the bill, that there might be no record to convict her of shame.
- D. The angel told Joseph to have no fear as to Mary's virtue and purity. He was to fear no disgrace in taking her as his wife. When the Lord was born, He would take the name "Jesus," which means "salvation is of Jehovah."
- E. The Sonship of Jesus demands a miraculous birth. Nature shows God above us; the Law shows God is against us; but the gospel shows God with us, and for us. In this world Jesus walked "with us" in human form (John 1:14); and because He did so, we, in the world to come, shall walk "with Him" in divine form (1 John 3:2; 1 Corinthians 15:49).

#### **VII. *The Birth Of Jesus***

- A. Octavius, or Augustus, Caesar was the nephew of and successor to Julius Caesar. He took the name Augustus in compliment to his own greatness; and our month August is named for him.
- B. Quirinius was harsh and corrupt as a governor, but an able and loyal soldier, earning a Roman triumph for successes in Cilicia, and was honored by a public funeral in A.D. 21.
- C. "Bethlehem" meant "house of bread." It was the later or Jewish name for the old Canaanite village of Ephrath, the Ephrath near which Rachel died (Genesis 35:19). It was marked by Micah as the birthplace of the Messiah (Micah 5:2).
- D. The newborn Jewish child was washed in water, rubbed with salt and then wrapped in bands or blankets which confined the limbs closely (Ezekiel 16:4).
- E. The inn was probably full because of the number who had come to be enrolled. Inns contained rooms for people and stalls for animals; there was no room in the former, but there was in the latter.

#### **VIII. *The Praise Of The Angels And The Homage Of The Shepherds***

- A. When the flock was too far from the village to be lead to the fold at night, shepherds would stay with them in the field, even in the dead of winter.
- B. The angel omitted the name Jesus, but gave the meaning of His name. Prophets, priests and kings were anointed. Jesus held all these three offices for all our race for all eternity.

- C. "Heavenly host" is indicative of the "army of the Lord" (1 Kings 22:19). God is referred to as the "God of Sabaoth;" that is, the God of hosts or multitudes (Romans 9:29; James 5:4; Revelation 5:11-12). But at this time God's army appeared to announce the coming of eternal peace.
- D. The angels invoked blessing on God and peace upon man.
  - 1. Christ effected peace between God and man, and ultimately peace between man and man.
  - 2. The love of God is shed abroad upon all, even the vilest of sinners (Romans 5:8; 1 Timothy 1:15); but His peace comes upon those who have accepted His Son, and in whom He is therefore well-pleased (Romans 9:11).
- E. The shepherds were moved to proclaim by the same spirit which compelled the lepers at Samaria (2 Kings 7:9). The silence of Mary contrasts with the talkativeness of the shepherds. But it is the duty of Christians both to ponder and proclaim.
- F. Only Mary could know the fact stated by "pondered them in her heart," which indicates that Luke got the opening parts of his gospel from her.
- G. Jesus came in exactly the manner in which His coming had been spoken of or described by the angels a few hours before; and also just as His coming had been spoken of or described by the prophets centuries before.

#### IX. ***The Circumcision Of Jesus***

- A. This rite was probably performed by Joseph and by this rite Jesus was "made like unto his brethren" (Hebrews 2:16-17).
- B. He became a member of the covenant nation, and became a debtor to the Law (Galatians 5:3).

#### X. ***The Presentation Of Jesus In The Temple***

- A. Purification took place on the fortieth day after the birth in the case of males, and eighty days in the case of females (Leviticus 12:1-5).
  - 1. Until it was performed the mother was not permitted to go to the temple, take part in any public service or even to leave her house.
  - 2. It seems that the members of her family were also ceremonially unclean, because they came in daily contact with her.
- B. By redemption money and sacrifice the life of Jesus was ceremonially redeemed from God the Father, that His consecration of it to the will of the Father might be perfect.
- C. The required offering was a yearling lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon for a sin offering. But the Law allowed a poor mother to substitute doves or pigeons for the lamb. We see here an early trace of the poverty of Him who had nowhere to lay His head (Luke 9:58).

- D. The "consolation of Israel" was a common name for the era of the Messiah, which was so called because the coming of Christ would bring comfort to His people (Isaiah 40:1).
- E. The hymn of Simeon is called the "Nunc Dimittis," from the two words with which the Latin translation of it begins. Simeon regards his death as now near, since he had seen that for which God had kept him alive.
- F. Joseph and Mary "marvelled" not because they heard anything which was really new, but because the words caused them to see the truth in a new way.
  1. They were also doubtless surprised to find that an utter stranger should speak in such a way about their child.
  2. Such manifestations of inspiration were no more common then than now.
- G. Christ's light has revealed the Father to the Gentiles. That Simeon should prophesy this is an evidence of the large spiritual knowledge given him since even the apostles were slow to grasp the fullness of Christ's mission (Psalm 98:2-3; Isaiah 42:6; 52:10).

#### XI. ***The Magi Visit Jesus***

- A. The term "wise men" designated an order of priests and philosophers (called magi) which existed in the countries east of the Euphrates, from a very remote period.
  1. We first find the word in the Bible at Jeremiah 39:13. It is also referred to in Daniel 5:11.
  2. The magi were, in many ways, the Levites of the East; they performed all public religious rites, claimed exclusive mediatorship between God and man, were the authority on all doctrinal points, constituted the supreme council of the realm and had charge of the education of the royal family. They were particularly famous for their skill in astronomy.
- B. They seemed to have expected to find all of Jerusalem knowing and worshipping this newborn king.
- C. Herod was troubled because his succession to the throne was threatened, and Jerusalem was troubled because it dreaded a conflict between rival claimants for the throne.
- D. It was generally known that Christ would be born in Bethlehem (John 7:42). The very group which officially announced the birthplace of Jesus subsequently condemned Him to death as an imposter.
- E. Duplicity was a well-known characteristic of Herod. He had Aristobulus, the high priest, drowned by his companions while bathing, though they seemed to be only ducking him in sport. In this case Herod concealed fraud beneath the appearance of piety.

- F. The return of the star assured them that God would lead them safely and surely to the object of their desires. It is safe to think that the manner in which they had been led to Jesus caused them to worship Him as divine.
  - 1. Their long journey and their exuberant joy at its success indicate that they sought more than the great king of a foreign nation.
  - 2. They had known Christ only one day; He had performed no miracles; He had none other to do Him homage; He was a helpless babe, yet they fell down and worshiped Him.
- G. Oriental custom requires that an inferior shall approach his superior with a gift. These gifts probably contributed to the sustenance of the parents and the child while in Egypt.

## **XII. *Jesus Is Carried To Egypt And The Children Of Bethlehem Are Slain***

- A. Egypt was a refuge of Israel when fleeing from famine and oppression. There were at that time about one million Jews in the Nile Valley.
  - 1. It was a severe criticism against Israel when Egypt, the house of bondage and the enemy of God's people, was regarded as a place of refuge.
  - 2. As Herod died soon after the flight into Egypt, the sojourn of the family of Jesus in that land must have been brief, for they returned after his death.
- B. The prophecy, no doubt, had a primary reference to the Exodus, and was an echo of the words of Moses in Exodus 4:22-23.
- C. This brutality was in keeping with Herod's character. Jealousy as to his authority led him to murder two high priests, his uncle Joseph, his wife and three of his own sons, along with many other innocent people.
- D. As Bethlehem was not a large place, the number of children could not have been large. According to Jewish reckoning "two years old and under" would mean all children from birth up to between twelve and thirteen months old, all past one year old being counted as two years old.
- E. Vss. 6, 15 and 18 give us three different kinds of prophecy.
  - 1. The first is direct, and relates to an event which was yet future.
  - 2. The second is a case where an act described is symbolic of another later and larger act.
  - 3. The third is a case where words describing one act may be taken as describing another later act, though the acts themselves may bear little resemblance.
- F. Why were there tearful mothers in Bethlehem? Because that which Christ escaped remained for His brethren, their children, to suffer. If

He would escape death, all His brethren must die. But He died that all His brethren might live.

- G. The image of the ancient mother of the tribe rising from her tomb to weep, and refusing to be comforted because her children are not around her is beautiful; and Matthew adopts the words of the prophet and says that they were here fulfilled.

### **XIII. *Jesus Is Brought From Egypt To Nazareth***

- A. This fourth dream and third mention of the "angel of the Lord" (vs. 19) continues the divine initiative in preserving and guiding Jesus. Although the whole land was before Joseph and he apparently hoped to settle in Judea (perhaps in Bethlehem), he was forced to retire to the despised Galilee.
- B. Probably Joseph had expected Herod Antipas to reign over the entire kingdom; but Herod the Great made a late change in his will, dividing his kingdom into three parts. Archelaus, known for his ruthlessness, was given Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Joseph, guided by the fifth and final dream, settled the family in Galilee.
- C. Luke takes another opportunity to mention the fidelity of Jesus' parents to the Jewish law. Joseph's obedience shows him a fit person for the momentous charge entrusted to him. Luke omits mention of the flight to Egypt (an event important to Matthew because it provided him with another example of fulfilled prophecy).
- D. The town Joseph chose was Nazareth, his former home and that of Mary (cf. 13:53-58). This final quotation formula, like that of vs. 15, should probably be understood as taking place "in order to fulfill the prophets." Matthew's wording here suggests he had no specific Old Testament quotation in mind; indeed, these words are found nowhere in the Old Testament.

### **XIV. *The Childhood Of Jesus At Nazareth***

- A. Luke 2:40 contains the history of thirty years. It describes the growth of our Lord as a natural, human growth; for, though Jesus was truly divine, He was also perfectly man.
- B. His life expanded like other human lives. He learned as other boys; He obeyed as other children.
- C. His life in Nazareth was undoubtedly a quiet life, but its sinless purity made John the Baptist feel his own unworthiness compared to it (cf. Matthew 3:14). Mary was full of confidence which led her to sanction, without reserve, any request or command which Jesus might utter (cf. John 2:5).

## **XV. *The Visit Of Jesus And His Parents To Jerusalem***

- A. Males were required to attend the passover (Exodus 13:7); but women were not. The great rabbi, Hillel, recommended that they should do so, and the practice was esteemed an act of admirable devotion.
- B. The passover took place at the full moon which occurred next after the vernal equinox. At it the firstfruits of the harvest were offered (Leviticus 23:10-15).
  - 1. Josephus tells us that the numbers assembled at this feast often exceed two million.
  - 2. The feast took eight days in all; one day for killing the lamb and seven days for observing the feast of unleavened bread which followed it (Exodus 12:15; Leviticus 23:5-6).
- C. Jews going to and from their festivals traveled in caravans for pleasure and safety. In the daytime the young children mingled freely among the travelers, and sought out whatever companionship they wished. But in the evening, when the camp was formed and the tents were pitched, the members of each family came together.
- D. Each part of a day was reckoned as a day when at the beginning and ending of a series. The parents missed Jesus on the evening of the first day, returned to Jerusalem and sought for Him on the second day, and probably found Him on the morning of the third day.
- E. The rabbinical method of instruction was to state cases, or problems, dependent upon the interpretation or application of the Law. The pupils then tried to solve the cases or problems (cf. Matthew 22:15-46).
- F. Obedience to His higher duties constrained Him to appear disobedient to His parents. It is interesting that the first recorded words of Jesus speaks of the Father and His last words upon the cross also speak of the Father (cf. Luke 23:46). The phrase, "I must," demonstrates the devotion of Jesus to the will of the Father.
- G. It may seem strange that Mary, knowing all that she did concerning the birth of Jesus, etc., did not grasp the meaning of His words, but we are all slow to grasp great truths; and failure to be understood was therefore a matter of daily occurrence with Jesus (Mark 9:32; Luke 9:45; 18:34; John 10:6).

## **XVI. *The Eighteen Years At Nazareth***

- A. Jesus is here set before us as a pattern of obedience which children should observe toward their parents.
  - 1. In these years Jesus learned the trade of his father (cf. Mark 6:3).
  - 2. He sanctified labor and showed that dignity and glory belonged to inward and not to outward conditions.
- B. He did not literally grow in favor with God. This is a phenomenal expression. The favor of God and man kept company for quite a while,

but the favor of God abode with Jesus when man's good will was completely withdrawn.

- C. Men admire holiness until it presses them to correct their life, and then they feel an antagonism against it as great as their previous admiration.