

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XIII : THE ANNUNCIATION TO JOSEPH -- WHO IS JOSEPHUS? -- DATING CHRIST'S BIRTH

Matthew 1:18-25	Mark	Luke	John	related passages
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Prior to beginning this week's lesson, it may be interesting to note a few of the differences some make in the early years of Christ's life. The following are the three main Harmony of the Gospels I have been using for reference. The chart shows how each author(s) placed the order of events with the exception of the prologues and the genealogies (since their order is arbitrary and has no relevance on the life of Christ). The obvious lesson is that we cannot be overly dogmatic in some of these areas.

<i>William Arnold Stevens / Ernest Dewitt Burton "Harmony of the Gospels for Historical study"</i>	<i>Benjamin Davies, "Baker's Harmony of the Gospels"</i>	<i>AT Robertson, "Harmony of the Gospels"</i>
	birth of John promised	
	annunciation to Mary	
annunciation to Joseph		
	Mary's visit to Elisabeth	
	birth of John	
		annunciation to Joseph
	birth of Jesus	
	angels and shepherds	
	Jesus' circumcision / presentation in temple	
	the Magi	
	flight into Egypt / Herod's cruelty / return from Egypt	
	Jesus at temple, age 12	
	ministry of John	
	baptism of Jesus	
	temptation	

The Annunciation to Joseph

v18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as His mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, : the betrothal period was much more serious than our present-day engagements. The bride and bridegroom pledged themselves together in the presence of witnesses, and this was *in a restricted sense* essentially the marriage, although there would be a period of time prior to their actual living together. Note Joseph is already called her husband (v19) and she was already considered his wife (v20). As brought out in a previous lesson (see lesson 10), any unfaithfulness at this point could be punished by death (Deut 22:23,24). Hendriksen however states that although the law was still on the record, there had been so many man-made restrictions to the law that the possibility of her actually being stoned was remote. The probable choices Joseph had to consider was limited to exposing Mary to great public disgrace and scorn, or filing for divorce and dismissing her quietly without involving any juridical procedure (Deut 24:1-4; Matt 5:31,32).

before they came together, : meaning both domestically and sexually.

she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. : as foretold by Gabriel to Mary, she was pregnant without the aid of a man but by the life-imparting power of the Holy Spirit. Note here the Holy Spirit is presented as a conscious living Person.

v19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. : coming to a realization of Mary's condition and formulating the natural conclusions, he was about to break off the marriage relationship. After all, had she not been unfaithful? "He loved Mary and wanted to have her with him as his wife, but, above all, he was a righteous person (Job 1:8; Luke 1:6), a man of principle, one who with his whole heart wanted to live in accordance with the will of God, the God who took so very seriously the breaking of the marriage vow." [Hendriksen, *Matthew*]

"a public example" is the same word used in Heb 6:6 "they crucify the Son of God afresh, and *put Him to an open shame.*"

v20 But while he thought on these things, : Joseph knew what needed done, he was just having problems putting his intentions into action. The hesitation was probably not long however, before the Lord intervened. Tasker quotes Knox's translation as "but hardly had the thought come into his mind when ...". [Tasker, *Matthew*]

behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, : prior to action being taken, the Lord sent an angel to Joseph which was to tell him what Mary had already been told. The angel is unnamed, possibly Gabriel.

saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. : the angel addresses Joseph as a son of David, making reference to the Messianic ties which would lend support to what follows. The child within Mary's womb was supernaturally conceived, which removed the only obstacle which was in Joseph's mind to marry Mary. "Fear not" gives the implication that his heart wanted her but in righteousness he knew he had to let her go. The angel is saying "don't hesitate to take her, she has not been unfaithful." Joseph serves as an example for all of us: *he had purposed to do right even though his heart wanted to do otherwise. God's word and God's ways supersede human emotions.* Note also that this is not said lightly, as all Christians know by experience it is often difficult to follow the Lord. But even as Joseph hesitated with this difficult decision, *he knew what was right and was determined to do so in the most loving manner possible. Joseph was going to obey, even if it was with a broken heart.*

"to take unto thee" is a translation of a single Greek word and could be rendered "to take to your side" or "to take into your home."

"is conceived" is the same word in vs 1 for "begotten," connecting the genealogy with Matthew's birth narrative.

v21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins. : the child's name was to be Jesus (who's name we've discussed, see lesson 10) meaning "Jehovah saves."

Note the limiting factor again mentioned: Jesus will not save everyone but He will save "His people," the sheep of John 10:11-16,26-28.

This salvation was to be spiritual in nature, a deliverance from the guilt, power, and punishment of sin.

v22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, : this is the first of at least forty formal OT quotations given by Matthew in his gospel. Note Matthew's view on inspiration: the quotation which follows found its source in the Lord, with the prophet's name not even being mentioned. The words were spoken *by* the Lord *through* the prophet acting as His mouthpiece.

v23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. : from Isaiah 7:14.

"No one will ever be able to fathom the riches of this grace whereby God, by means of Emmanuel, has come to dwell with sinners. In order to say at least something in the way of further explanation it is probably best to obtain this information from Matthew's own Gospel. It means that, in Christ, God came to dwell

with the sick, to heal them (4:23)

with the demon-possessed, to liberate them (4:24)

with the poor in spirit, etc., to bless them (5:1-12)

with the care-ridden, to rid them of care (6:25-34)

with the censorious, to warn them (7:1-5)

with lepers, to cleanse them (8:1-4)

with the diseased, to cure them (8:14-17)

with the hungry, to feed them (14:13-21; 15:32-39)

with the handicapped, to restore them (12:13; 15:31)

and over-arching everything else, with the lost, to seek and save them (18:11)." [Hendriksen, *Matthew*]

v24,25 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called His name Jesus. : Joseph and Mary withheld from sexual relations until the birth of Jesus. Why this is so is unknown; perhaps for the high regard for Him who Mary was carrying. Perhaps to be more ably refute any allegation that Joseph was the paternal father of the baby. There is no indication however this abstinence continued after the birth of the baby. Against the perpetual virginity of Mary is the following:

- the wording "knew her not *till* she had brought forth her firstborn son..." implies that they withheld sexual relations prior to the birth of Jesus, Jesus was born, then they began the normal marital relations. This is not conclusive by itself however since the wording does not *demand* that the situation reversed itself after Jesus was born.

- Jesus is stated to be Mary's *firstborn* child in this verse as well as Luke 2:7. Again the wording does not *demand* Mary

had other children, but taken with what follows, the natural implication apparently is the correct interpretation.

- Sexual intercourse in both the OT / NT is approved for married couples (Gen 1:28; 9:1; 24:60; Prov 5:18; Ps 127:3; 1 Cor 7:5,9). It is erroneous to attach spiritual significance to total abstinence or celibacy.
- the NT lists several who were the half-brothers and half-sisters of Jesus (Matt 12:46,47; Mk 3:31,32; 6:3; Luke 8:19,20; Jn 2:12; 7:3,5,10; Acts 1:14). We will further consider the family of Jesus in later lessons.
- considering the importance Catholicism places upon this teaching (“not till then and never at all, guarding the sacredness of the virgin’s womb”), Matthew would have been much wiser to have made himself more clear if this was in fact what he was trying to teach.

Taken together, the burden of proof rests upon those who would deny that Joseph and Mary had a normal marital relationship after the birth of Jesus.

WHO AM I? – Josephus

Best remembered as a historian, Josephus was a Levitical Jew and a general in the Jewish army when Titus advanced on Jerusalem in 70 AD. His works include **The Antiquities of the Jews** and **The Wars of the Jews**, both of which is of great historical value. His other more controversial works include his treatise against Apion and some essays of minor character. While not inspired and therefore not authoritative in that sense, their value lies in the firsthand information and eye-witness account of events current with the life of Christ and the apostles, as well as providing the Jewish perspectives on things at that time, much of which we might consider superstition.

What year was Christ born?

All dating is referenced to an important event. For example, we could state that our nation was so important that all dating would be referenced to the founding of the United States on July 1776. We would then not sign our checks “Dec xx, 1996” but “Dec xx, 220.” In Christian cultures we take the reference of dating to be the birth of Christ, and when we write checks “Dec xx, 1996” we are saying “Dec xx in the 1996th year of our Lord” (A.D. = anno Domini = Latin for “year of the Lord;” B.C. “before Christ”). Important in our study is A.U.C. “anno urbis conditae” (having to do with the founding of Rome?).

Our present era was fixed by Abbot Dionysius Exiguus in the sixth century who assumed the year of Christ’s birth to be 754 AUC, which is apparently about 4-6 years off. The date was first used as a reference in the historical works by Venerable Bede early in the eighth century. It was introduced in public transactions not long after that by the Frank kings Pepin and Charlemagne.

Clues to when Christ was born:

- Mt 2:1-6 **born during reign of Herod the Great**, not long prior to his death. According to Josephus, Herod died in the year of Rome (AUC) 750 just prior to the passover. This has been verified by an eclipse of the moon mentioned by Josephus just prior to Herod’s death. Astronomical calculations have dated an eclipse of the moon around Mar 12/13, 750 AUC, and no eclipse occurred the following year that was visible in Palestine.

Allowing for time of the temple visit, the killing of the babies in Bethlehem, the flight into Egypt and staying there till Herod dies, could not be less than 6 months. Some at this point state Jesus was born at least 2 years earlier due to Herod’s slaughtering of the infants in Mat 2:16, but that is unnecessary since Herod would probably have extended the limit to make sure he killed the right baby.

- another time reference is **John entering into ministry in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar** (Lk 3:1,2) and **Jesus entering ministry about thirty years old** (Lk 3:23). Augustus died Aug 29, 767 AUC. If we take the beginning of Tiberius’ reign at 767 AUC and add 15, we get that his 15th year of his reign began Aug 29, 781 AUC. 781 AUC minus 30 years for John’s ministry beginning = Aug 751 AUC and of course Jesus’ birth 3 months later, late Nov / Dec 751 AUC. We know that’s not possible due to the facts concerning Herod the Great.

If we reckon from the time that Tiberius was co-regent with Augustus, which is known to be as early as 765 AUC and possibly 764 AUC, then the fifteenth year of Tiberius’ reign would be 778 AUC. 778 AUC minus 30 years would put the date of John’s / Jesus’ births to 748 AUC, which would put it within the final days of Herod’s reign.

- Another dating reference is Jn 2:20 **“forty-six years was this temple in building”**. Josephus gives us two dates for when Herod began building his temple: in the eighteenth year of his reign and in the fifteenth year of his reign.

In another place Josephus gives Herod’s reign as 37 or 34 years, depending upon his reckoning from the appointment by the Romans or from the death of Antigonus. Herod was declared king of Judea in 714 AUC, and the 18th year of his reign would have been 731-2 AUC. If Herod would have been building the temple 46 years, that statement would have been said 778-9 AUC. If Jesus was 30 ½ years old at His first passover (April 779 AUC), that would make the date of His birth around Aug 748 AUC.

- Some writers state Jesus was 2/3 when Herod died (from Mt 2:16) and therefore assume He was born 747. “The same

year, A.U. 747, is also fixed upon as the date of Christ's birth, by those who, with Keppler, regard the star in the east as having been the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, which occurred in that year." [Davies, *Harmony*] A.T. Robertson also mentions that the Chinese record a comet in the year 749 AUC. He adds however that none of these could reliably be used for our dating: (a) the word used for the guiding star is aster "star" not astron "a group of stars;" (b) Rev C. Pritchard has shown by calculations that has been verified that the two planets never approached each other close enough to give the appearance of a single star. (c) the star is said to have stopped over the child Jesus; a natural phenomenon would have kept on going. Therefore it is best to maintain the star was a miracle from the Lord and therefore has no relation on our dating estimates. [Robertson, *Harmony*]

■ Questionable: according to a tradition of the Latin fathers of the first five centuries (Tertullian, Lactantius, Augustine, etc.), Jesus died "during the consulate of the two Gemini, C. Rubellius and C. Fufius, that is, in A.U. 782." [Davies, *Harmony*] If Jesus' ministry lasted 3½ years, that would make the date of His birth autumn 748 AUC.

All this taken together means that the birth of our Lord could not have been later than 749 AUC and may have occurred from 1-2 years prior to that.