



Infancy Narratives (The Christmas Story)

The birth of Jesus is recalled in two of the four gospels, Luke and Matthew. While there are similarities in the stories, there are also some important differences related to the author's purpose underpinning each narrative.

Both accounts have Jesus born in Bethlehem. This township is important as it was also the birthplace of King David and Jewish tradition dictates that the coming Messiah would be of the line of David. Additionally, the prophet Micah identified Bethlehem as the birthplace of the future ruler of Israel:

But you, O Bethlehem Eph'rathah,
who are little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. *Micah 5:2*

Here are some notable features of both accounts:

- Luke has the new-born Jesus laid in a manger (N.B a stable is never mentioned in either account). The image of a king and the Son of God laid in the feeding trough of animals is very striking and aligns with Luke's portrayal of Jesus as one who sides with the poorest of poor and the most vulnerable.
- A key feature of Matthew's gospel is his portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses. This is prominent in his infancy narrative which includes the murder of two year old boys (paralleling the killing of Hebrew firstborn by Pharaoh; an act connected to the birth of Moses, as recorded in the book of Exodus) and the flight *to* Egypt by Joseph, Mary and Jesus (juxtaposing the exodus *from* Egypt led by Moses). Early Christian readers would have readily made these links to Moses life.
- The visitation of the wise men in Matthew's account is an overture to a key theme of his gospel which highlights the mission of Jesus and his disciples as extending beyond Israel to the broader Gentile world and beyond, making "disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19)

The table below highlights key features of each infancy narrative:

Matthew	Luke
family live in Bethlehem	live in Nazareth
Jesus born in a house	Jesus laid in a manger
wise men pay homage to the newborn king	angels appear to shepherds
Joseph & Mary flee to Egypt	
the slaughter of children	
Joseph & Mary return from Egypt	Jesus taken to Jerusalem
Joseph & Mary settle in Nazareth	Joseph & Mary return home to Nazareth

From a teaching perspective, it is important to focus on each gospel separately to honour the integrity of both Matthew and Luke. When presenting the Christmas story, avoid combining the two accounts into one narrative, which dilutes the key messages found in both gospels.