

A Christmas Bible Study

Held at Church Gresley Methodist Church, Tues, 17th December 2013

Record and extra note by Rev Dr David G. Palmer

Firstly, we observed that each of the four gospels begin in different ways:

- 1) that Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus' baptism and that it was when he was baptised that Jesus was the first to be informed as to who he was, the Son of God;
- 2) that Matthew begins with a genealogy that ends with Abraham, as an earlier starting point than Mark's, and a story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem;
- 3) that Luke tells a different story of (and reason for) Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, linking it with John the Baptist's, and a different genealogy that ends with Adam and God which establishes an even earlier starting point than Matthew does; and
- 4) that John omits any story of Jesus' birth and links Jesus with God at a time before creation which is the earliest starting point of our four writers and the earliest that could have been chosen.

Secondly, we noticed that there were birth-dating issues between Matthew and Luke. We observed too that there were geographical issues between them. Also we were able to identify other differences: in the architecture of the birthplace, the visitors to the principal adults of the story and the visitors to the birthplace:

- 1) Given that we have the two stories of Jesus' birth, we compared their historical references to the dating of it. In Matthew's story, Jesus was born in the reign of Herod and therefore before 4 BC. In Luke's story, a first census was held in Judea (not the whole Roman Empire) in AD6/7. Further, Quirinius was not Governor of Syria until 6AD. Thus, Luke's date for Jesus' birth is at least ten years different from Matthew's. No day or month is mentioned in either story.
- 2) In regard to the journey routes: in Matthew's Gospel the story begins in Bethlehem, avoids Jerusalem, proceeds to Egypt and is completed as the holy family makes a new home in Nazareth (it is in Nazareth that Jesus' family is known, according to Mark and John); and in Luke's Gospel the story begins in Nazareth, proceeds to Bethlehem and *includes* Jerusalem before *a return* to the family's home town of Nazareth. The two journeys are incompatible, like the datings.
- 3) In Matthew's Gospel the place to which visitors come is 'a house'. In Luke's Gospel the place (mentioned emphatically three times in all) is 'a manger' (which suggests a 'stable'/an animals' room or space). Other differences include the ones to whom an angel speaks about the forthcoming birth: in Matthew, it is 'Joseph'; in Luke it is 'Mary'. Further, the visitors in Matthew's Gospel are magi; in Luke's they are shepherds.

Thirdly, we noted three influences on the telling of these gospel stories: the Fall of Jerusalem, the Old Testament itself and *midrashim* known to first century Jews:

- 1) The Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 is described by the Jewish historian Josephus. Because of a Jewish up-rising against Rome, Judea is attacked by Roman forces: villages and cities throughout

Judea empty as their residents flee to Jerusalem for protection. Among them is the fledgling Christian Church, a Jewish sect which is observant of the law and circumcision. A siege of Jerusalem results in the city being stormed and sacked. Its temple is destroyed. Nearly all the inhabitants are slaughtered. The earliest Christian Church, with its successors to a first generation of believers, is wiped out. The spoils of war, of the temple, and some slaves are paraded in Rome, where Jews and Christians alike are caused to reflect on the *bad* news. It surely meant the end of the Old Covenant and of Judaism. But no! It was *good* news! Hadn't Jesus established a New Covenant? And hadn't he said that the temple would be destroyed?! So Mark writes first. Matthew writes after and includes most of Mark's work, adding material specifically for Jews. Luke then writes, reworking both Mark's and Matthew's material preparing a Gospel for Gentiles. John then engages in his own way, telling how Jesus' own people, the Jews, rejected him, but the Gentiles, the nations, received him.

2) The Old Testament writings that Matthew chose to work with in his early narrative, to reach Jews with the Good News, come widely from the Law, the Prophets and the Writings: for example, Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Judges, I Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Micah and Malachi. Luke's choice is still wide-ranging, to reach Gentiles, but he is mostly influenced by Judges, I Samuel and Isaiah (Exodus and Leviticus, only, for the law on presentation/the first-born's consecration). Isaiah 1.2-3, 7.13-14 and 9.6-7 are key to Luke's purpose. With Jesus comes both judgement and salvation. In focusing on the 'manger' Luke demonstrates a powerful link between his work and that of Isaiah. In comparing two births, those of John and Jesus, Luke shows that John is born to an 'Abraham and Sarah' kind of couple who were righteous under the law. He contrasts God's choosing of Mary and Joseph to be the parents of Jesus: Joseph is of the line of David; Mary is 'fully-graced by God's taking the initiative to look to her for cooperation' in his plan for the salvation of the nations. 'The Holy Spirit will come upon' her and 'the power of the most high will overshadow' her, just as at the last, in the telling of his Gospel, Luke speaks of Jesus' own disciples as being asked to 'wait in Jerusalem' until they similarly 'have been clothed with power from on high'. Luke contrasts the workings of law and grace. And as he begins his narrative, so also he ends it, in the temple in Jerusalem: he is telling a story which is not exactly 'history'; rather it is 'eternally true' for the would-be believer.

3) Two sets of rabbinical stories, i.e. *midrashim*, appear to have much influenced Matthew's choice of story line and detail: one set of stories is based on Exodus 1 and 2, the Birth of Moses; the other is based on I Kings 10, the Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, Son of David. In the first, prophecies exist which tell of the birth of Moses and how he will save his people, as a result of which Pharaoh hears about him, trembles and consults astrologers. The second set exhibits details of a journeying Queen of Sheba who has reasons aplenty to visit King Solomon: she sets up her camel train, includes appropriate gifts and is guided by a star. Matthew chooses to tell his first century Jewish audience that Jesus is the awaited new Moses. He is a freedom-fighter, the leader in a new exodus, the new law-giver, and his death occurs before his followers enter the new promised land which is the kingdom of heaven. He is also the new Son of David, whose kingdom will have no end. Matthew, like Luke after him, is telling 'evangelical' truth.

I am inspired by David Friedrich Strauss who, in the early 19th century, stood alone for reading the Gospels for their evangelical truth. Histories they were not. They were myths. HJ Richards, in *The First Christmas*, Collins, Fontana Books, 1973 spoke of the Christmas stories as principally portraits of Jesus. They tell who he is, not what actually happened at his birth. The church for the major part today contents itself with a superficial reading of the Christmas stories. Congregations in every generation listen to sermons in which their preachers elaborate on what 'supposedly happened' at the first Christmas. And adults satisfy themselves and their participating children with a Nativity tableau which leaves two great gospels in tatters! In each new lectionary year also, preachers fill their time similarly, thus destroying the appointed gospel!! Enough! Enough, I say! The Gospels are evangelical/evangelistic documents. They are not histories.