The Christmas Story in Luke (3 Movements)

A Closer Look at the Gospels of Advent and Christmas
Matthew & Luke

- While each evangelist tells very different stories, there are significant and important similarities:
  - In each gospel, in the first chapter, there is the story of an angel annunciation to one of the parents (Joseph in Matthew; Mary in Luke)
  - The angel announces the forthcoming birth of their child who will be the Messiah
  - In the second chapter, there is the telling of the birth of the child
  - This is met with divine annunciation. In Matthew, it is to the Magi; in Luke it is to shepherds in the fields with their flocks
  - Each audience is guided by the revelation to Bethlehem where they find the child with his parents
  - They praise God for their experience; the Magi bring gifts and pay him homage, the shepherds praise God for what they have seen and heard
  - They return to where they came from
Backwards Movement of Christological Identity

- When and How did people come to understand that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ? So, they would believe and follow?
  - At the resurrection?
    - When Jesus rises from the dead and visits his disciples, they understand his crucifixion and the message of the Reign of God
  - At a miracle?
    - Was it the miracle at the wedding in Cana, the loaves and fishes, raising the son of the widow of Nain, or the raising of Lazarus? Or was it to the three disciples at the Transfiguration at the top of the mountain?
  - At the baptism?
    - Did it happen when the heavens opened, a dove appeared and voice said, this is my beloved son. When John understood and identified him to others?
  - At his birth?
    - Do the events that surround his entry into this world at his birth, identify who he is and what his life will portent for humanity?
The Manger and the Shepherds
The First Movement
The Census

- The Need
  - His understanding is that Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth
  - But the tradition and prophecy is that the Messiah is born in Bethlehem
  - He needs to get them from their ‘own city’ to Bethlehem

- There are problems
  - No other historical source mentions a census
  - The timing
Timeline of the Players

- Caesar Augustus
  - Reigned from 31 BC to 14 AD
  - Pax Augustus 29-9 BC
- Quirinius as Governor
  - Mention of a census that brought about the rebellion of Judas the Galilean in 6-7 AD
- Herod the Great
  - Herod died in 4 BC
- The birth of Jesus
  - By a miscalculation, Denis the Little (Dionysius Exiguus) miscalculated the year of the birth, which should be 0, but most scholars put it at 7-4 BC
The Census in Jewish History

- David ordered a census and incurred the wrath of God (2 Sam 24) with a pestilence.
- The census of Quirinius provoked Judas the Galilean and created the Zealot movement which brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.
- Luke presents the parents of Jesus as faithful for the demands of a census that brings about the Prince of Peace.
The Birth of Jesus
Luke 2: 6-7

- She gave birth to a son, her first-born
- She swaddled him in strips of cloth
- And laid him in a manger
- Since there was no place for them in where travelers lodged
- Luke will return to this description in the message of the angels to the shepherds
Distractions that are not in the story

- Luke does not tell us why there is no room in the lodgings
- There is no mention of an innkeeper
- Or of the couple being sent away from any inn
- Luke’s interest is in the symbolism of the manger
The Manger

- Isaiah 1: 3: “The ox knows its owner and the donkey knows the manger of its lord; but Israel has not known me, and my people have not understood me.”
- When the shepherds are told and come to find the baby lying in a manger and praise God
- God’s people have come to know the manger of their Lord.
The Shepherds

- Luke shifts the reference to the “city of David” from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.
- His reference to shepherds may be a connection to David who was a shepherd before he was king.
- They have come through the biblical story as images of the common man and the poor.
The Annunciation of the Angels

- An unnamed angel
- Structure of a royal proclamation
- The third canticle: “Gloria”
- The sign given to the shepherds
  - The City of David
  - A baby wrapped in swaddling clothes
    - Word is uncertain
    - Repeated at the resurrection
  - Lying in a manger
    - Food box for animals
The Reactions of the characters

- The shepherds, the main characters of this movement, follow the instructions of the angels, and find the sign promised, the promised Messiah, an infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.
- Those who hear the shepherds report who are astonished
- Mary, who “kept with concern all these events, interpreting them in her heart” (2: 19)
  - The model of discipleship
  - The only character from this part of the life of Our Lord who is carried into his adult life
The Presentation in the Temple

The Second Movement
Matthew vs. Luke

- In Matthew’s gospel:
  - Following the nativity, there is the story of the star and the Magi
  - The involvement of Herod and his slaughter of the innocent
  - A passion narrative shifted to the infancy narrative

- In Luke’s gospel:
  - There is the peaceful narrative of the presentation in fulfillment of the Law
  - The prophecies of Simeon and Ana present similar themes of opposition and conflict
  - Both need to move beyond the birth to set the stage for what will follow in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus
The Circumcision
Luke 2: 21

- Jewish sign of the covenant with Abraham
- Occurs on the eighth day
- Shows the faithfulness of his parents
- The first shedding of blood by Christ
- Naming of the child according to Jewish custom and law
The Purification
Luke 2: 22

- Luke is confused in thinking that it involves both parents
- By Jewish law, it was only the mother that needed to be purified
- Completed forty days after the birth
- She had issued blood in childbirth
- She was to offer two young pigeons or doves (Leviticus 12: 1-8)
The Presentation
Luke 2: 23-23

- The first male child is to be presented to the Lord
- In place of his sacrifice, the child is bought back for five shekels
- Influenced by the primitive practice of infant sacrifice to gods (Abraham and Isaac)
- Luke shows the parents as faithful to the laws of God as they were to Roman law in the census
Simeon and Anna

- This presentation was the original conclusion to the Infancy Narrative
- Beginning and ending in the Temple, fulfilling the prescriptions of the Law
- The opening is Zechariah and Elizabeth, the closing is the pair of Simeon and Anna
- The canticle of the Benedictus is balanced with the Canticle of the Nunc Dimittus
First Oracle

- Simeon has been promised to not see death until he had seen the Messiah
- Guided by the Spirit, he comes to the Temple
- This canticle as seen before is a text Luke has inserted into the text of his gospel
- Foresees the gospel as being announced to the Gentiles, to whom Luke addresses his gospel
Second Oracle
Luke 2: 34-35

- Addressed to the mother
- Like the canticles could be a reference to any aspect of the public ministry of the Lord
- This is strongly futuristic and quite appropriate to a child whose work has not yet started
- Simeon, holding the baby in his arms, now sees as he peers into the future and sees the blessing and the contradiction that the child will be for Israel
The Loss and Finding in the Temple
The Third Movement
A Christmas Story?

- Since Jesus is at the age of 12, most do not consider it an ‘infancy narrative’
- However it is of the hidden years, that is, before the public ministry of our Lord
- Most likely was a separate tradition. The genre is different from the other aspects of the accounts of Matthew and Luke
- It frames this section as Jesus claims God as his Father
A Separate Tradition

- There are not the Semitism in this narrative that are in the other stories.
- The references to his parents seem to not have the knowledge of other stories.
- The confusion of his parents that God is his Father.
- Perhaps comes from a tradition that Jesus’ awareness of his identity was an adolescent reckoning.
An outline

- 40: Framework: about Jesus's growth, his wisdom and favor
- 41-42: Geographical introduction: Jesus and his parents had gone up to Jerusalem
- 43-45: Setting: The parents lose the child Jesus and search for him
- 45-50: The core: The parents find the child, they are amazed. The Lord Jesus answers them stressing his role with his Father
- 51: Geographical conclusion: Jesus and his parents go down to Nazareth
- 52: Framework: Jesus’ progress in wisdom, maturity and favor
Three Days

- Traveling conditions in the first century for the festival
  - Families and town together
  - Men first, then women and children
  - Age of 12, child’s choice

- Three days:
  - Jonah and the whale
  - Hidden in the tomb
Luke’s emphasis

- The PIETY of Jesus and his parents. They are faithful and obedient to the Law
- The WISDOM of Jesus. Framed with two references to his growth, this is to highlight the amazement of those who listen to him in the Temple
- The PRIORITIES of Jesus. As will be seen in his adult ministry and his interactions with his family, Jesus is more preoccupied with his right relationship with his Father than this earthy family
Last thoughts before public ministry

- Mary keeps these things in her heart (reiteration of Luke 2: 19). Her role is not just to be a birth mother, but to be a model of discipleship.
- Jesus is obedient. Returning to Nazareth, no one suspects that he is the Son of God. This obedience foreshadows his obedience to the Father to the Cross.
Christmas to the Cross

- Jesus is in the world
- Hidden to non-believers
- Revealed to those who are faithful
- He is about the work of our salvation
- This will be fulfilled in his passion and Cross