

## **A-level work Christianity Part 2**

### ***The Historicity of the Accounts – Are the Birth Narratives historically accurate?***

One of the main criticisms of Matthew and Luke's Birth Narratives and whether Jesus is God 'Incarnate' is whether they can be believed based on historical facts. Scholars have studied the history of Early Christianity and some have criticised whether Matthew and Luke's accounts are factually accurate. Read the following passage:

*Matthew gives little historical detail, but he does mention Herod's massacre of the children of Bethlehem. Because this massacre is not reported anywhere else in history, some people think that this massacre was invented by Matthew in order to draw a parallel between Jesus and Moses (an Old Testament hero whose life was threatened by a slave owning Pharaoh in Egypt). However, even though some Historians think Matthew made up this massacre, the massacre itself is not out of character for Herod, and can be agreed that it would be something he 'would' do. We know this because he murdered one of his three sons to protect his power!*

*Luke insists on the historical accuracy of his Gospel, however the Chronology of Jesus' birth appears to be mistaken. Historians suggest Jesus was born between 6-4 BCE (Before common era), but Luke writes that Jesus' birth happened when Quirinius was the governor of Judea and Syria (a nearby country). Historians believe Quirinius governed between 6 CE to 12 CE (Common Era), so this does not match up as that is between 10-12 years later. Luke claims he was governing in 'The Days of Herod' who died in 4 BCE (10 years before Quirinius), so either Quirinius served a previous term in office, or Luke got Quirinius mixed up with Saturnius, who governed from 9 BCE to 6 CE. This shows that Luke's chronology/understanding of the timeline is erroneous.*

*Furthermore, Luke includes 3 hymns in his Birth Narrative; Mary's Song, Zechariah's Prophecy and Simeon's Song. Historians say that these hymns were already being used by early Christian communities before Luke attributed them to these biblical characters!*

#### **Task – Answer these questions on the historicity of the Birth Narratives**

- 1.) Briefly explain in your own words the issues of historicity in Matthew's Birth Narrative and give your own opinion on whether you think it is accurate or not.**
- 2.) Make a brief, historically accurate timeline of government in the years leading up to and after Jesus birth and in a different colour mark down Luke's errors.**
- 3.) Which biblical narrative do you think is the most suspect?**
- 4.) Overall, do you think Christians can still gain truth from the Birth Narratives even though some say they are historically erroneous?**

### ***Do the supernatural events in Birth Narratives prove that Jesus was the Son of God?***

Go to this website: [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com), you will once again be using the two Birth Narratives for your first task.

- Matthew 1:18-2:23
- Luke 1:26-2:40

Study these Birth Narratives again, and make a list of the ‘supernatural’ events for each account like so:

Supernatural events in Matthew’s Birth Narrative	Supernatural events in Luke’s Birth Narrative

**In your opinion, do the supernatural events strengthen or weaken the historicity of the Birth Narratives?**

### ***Redaction Criticism – Historical Accuracy may not be relevant***

Have you ever been tempted to ‘bend the truth’ from time to time for your own benefit? For example, a friend might ask you how you got on at a particular football game, and because they weren’t there, you may exaggerate your performance, even though you may have been pretty average. You might have done this for a number of reasons, maybe because you wanted to impress your friend, or make them jealous, and so on. Scholars believe that New Testament writers such as Matthew and Luke did something similar, they ‘altered’ pre-existing material to suit their own purposes. They collected material about Jesus and interpreted/alterd it to address a particular situation or reach a particular audience. This is called Redaction Criticism – the theory that New Testament writers changed existing material about Jesus to suit their own agenda. Redaction Criticism can be used to argue that Luke and Matthew weren’t necessarily concerned with historical accuracy, as they were writing from particular points of view, *using* existing historical material, rather than transcribing events *exactly* how they happened.

Redaction Criticism began in Germany in the late 1940’s. It assumes that the original stories or ‘traditions’ about Jesus circulated as separately and independently amongst different groups. Each gospel writer (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) chose the material that suited their own interests and made significant additions/omissions, changing the wording to make their own theological message.

#### **Redaction Criticism of Matthew’s Gospel**

It is argued that Matthew’s Gospel was aimed at Jewish readers. He really wanted to prove that Jesus was connected to the significant religious characters in the Old Testament, particularly King David. He tells the story from Joseph’s point of view because Joseph was a Jewish man from ‘The city of David’. The Old Testament promises Jews that a Messiah will come to earth, so Matthew’s agenda when writing this gospel was to prove to Jews that Jesus was this Messiah. This can be seen in Matthew’s gospel as it contains four quotations from Old Testament prophets (Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and Hosea as well as quotations from Old Testament books such as 2 Samuel. It is important to note that Matthew believed Jesus came to the world for everyone, not just Jews.

#### **Redaction Criticism of Luke’s Gospel**

Luke is also convinced of Jesus’ significance, however, he was a Gentile (non-Jew), and aimed his gospel writings towards this group of people. Luke’s Gospel contains ‘Simeon’s Song’, in which it states that Jesus is ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles’. This is in contrast to Matthew, who wrote specifically for a Jewish audience. The ‘flavour’ of Luke’s gospel is not Jewish, he doesn’t refer to the Old Testament as much as Matthew, and when he does, he quotes from the Greek version as opposed to the Hebrew version. He also writing from Mary’s viewpoint as opposed to

Joseph's, and this could show that Luke wasn't that anxious about appealing to a Jewish audience through Joseph. It also suggests that Luke sympathised those being marginalised by society at this time, such as women. This is also seen in Luke's interpretation of the 'good news', which was not given to sophisticated Wise Men, but to poor Shepherds.

### **Questions**

**1.) Using what you know about Redaction Criticism, how would you explain these three differences between Matthew and Luke's Birth Narratives:**

- Angel appearing to Joseph in Matthew and Angel appearing to Mary in Luke
- Good news given to the Wise Men in Joseph and Good News given to Shepherds in Luke
- Simeon's Song present in Luke's Gospel whereas not in Matthew's Gospel

**2.) Overall, do you think Redaction Criticism can help Christian understand the Birth Narratives better?**

**Extension: Watch the first episode of Darmaid MacCulloch's 'History of Christianity' BBC Documentary on this link:**

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x38nlpm>