In two previous posts I’ve detailed what happens in Luke’s version of Jesus’ birth and then in Matthew’s. I will assume those two previous posts in the comments that I want to make in this one. The problem people have with reading these two accounts, usually, is the problem they have reading the Gospels (and the Bible as a whole) generally. Or at least this has been my experience. It’s the problem of assuming that one account is basically saying the same thing as some other account.

People do that with the Bible all the time. With the New Testament, people tend to read Matthew as if he’s saying the same thing as Mark; John as if it’s the same thing as Luke; Paul’s letters as if, at heart, they’re the same thing as James; Revelation as if it’s the same thing as John. And on and on and on.

One of the most important tasks I have as an undergraduate teacher of the New Testament is to get students to see that each of these authors – and indeed, each of the books of the New Testament – has to be read on its own to see what its message is. The message of Mark may be different from John; Matthew may be different from Paul; Acts may be different from James; and so on and on. Even when two authors are talking about the same subject – in fact, *especially* when they are – they may be saying very different things about it.

This is why it is so important to introduce students (not to mention their parents!) to the discrepancies of the Bible. Many of my students never really get the point of why we talk about discrepancies. They think the *point* is that we can then come away from the Bible and say, “So, it’s full of contradictions!” And the subsidiary point then is, they think, “Therefore we cannot trust it.”

In fact, for me, neither one of these is the point. The point is rather this:

*To see the rest of this post, you will need to belong to the blog. If you don’t belong yet, there’s no time like the present! You’ll get tons for your money and all the money goes to charity. So why not???

The point is rather this: if there are discrepancies in two accounts, it means that they are trying to say, teach, affirm, assert, claim DIFFERENT THINGS. It is only when you see that two accounts cannot be reconciled that you realize, with full force, that you have to let each one say what it wants to say, rather than assume that they are saying the *same* thing. Because if they are at odds, they are indeed saying different things. And if you want to interpret each one properly, you have to see what it – and not some other account – is trying to say. In other words, discrepancies are a KEY TO INTERPRETATION. And so they have positive, not only negative value.

I should also say that from a different angle, the discrepancies are important for historical (not just interpretive/literary) reasons. If two accounts are at odds with one another, they cannot both be historically accurate. Either one of them is accurate and the other is not, or they both are not.

With that as a set up, let me just affirm what many of you have already long known, and many others have picked up from my previous posts. Matthew and Luke are at clear odds in their infancy narratives in important ways. They also have interesting and important points of agreement as well, and these need to be given very serious consideration. Most significant, in my view, is their agreement that Jesus was *born* in Bethlehem even though
he *came* from Nazareth. But the way they both make it happen is not only different but at odds, showing that we need to interpret each on its own merits, and recognize that either one or both are historically inaccurate. (The historical point: both of them KNEW that Jesus was from Nazareth; but they both WANTED him to be *born* in Bethlehem. So they told stories to make it happen. But the stories are at odds, showing that the desire is being driven by an agenda rather than disinterested reportage.)

Some of the most famous differences are simply differences: Luke tells some stories and Matthew tells others. Luke has the Annunciation to Mary; Matthew has the dream of Joseph. Luke has the trip to Bethlehem; Matthew has the flight to Egypt. Luke has the shepherds; Matthew has the wise men. You could say - if these were the only differences - that Luke told part of the story, Matthew the other part, so that if you want the full story you need to combine the two - as happens in this season’s Christmas pageants.

But there are not just differences between the two, there are also discrepancies. Here I’ll name the three biggees:

- **The genealogies.** Both Matthew and Luke give Joseph’s genealogy. And they are different genealogies. It’s easy to see. Simply read Matthew 1 and Luke 3, and ask who Joseph’s father is. And grand-father. And great-grand-father. And great-great-grand-father. They are different, all the way back to David. And it’s not that one is giving Mary’s genealogy and the other Joseph’s. They both claim to be Joseph’s, explicitly.
- **The home town.** As I showed in my previous post at length, in Matthew Joseph and Mary come from and are resident in Bethlehem. They relocate to Nazareth only a couple of years after Jesus’ birth, because of the dicey political situation in Judea (where Bethlehem is). Luke is even more crystal clear: they are from Nazareth and only happen to be in Bethlehem because of that census under Caesar Augustus in which “all the world” had to be registered. After they did their duty, both political and religious, they returned home.
- **The aftermath.** Luke is clear that Joseph and Mary returned home immediately after they fulfilled what the law requires of a woman who has given birth. This is a reference to Leviticus 12. Thirty-two days after giving birth, the woman has to perform a sacrifice in the Temple for ritual cleansing. Mary does. They go home. But Matthew has them still in Bethlehem until the wise men arrive months, or up to two years, later, and then they don’t move to Nazareth but flee to Egypt. If Matthew’s right that they went to Egypt, Luke can scarcely be right that they returned right away to Nazareth.

Conservative Christian readers from Protestant fundamentalists to the Pope have worked hard to reconcile these various discrepancies, but doing so, in my opinion, is a big mistake. If you put all your energies into reconciling them, then you are failing to consider the importance of the discrepancies for understanding each account. And you are making the mistake of assuming that both accounts are historically accurate. They’re not accurate and they’re not saying the same thing. It’s the discrepancies that show that, and that open up avenues for proper interpretation.

**The Virgin Birth in Matthew and Luke**

**Jesus’ Birth as “The Fulfillment of the Prophecies”**