



Jesus' Birth

WJEC A level R.S. Unit 1A Christianity Theme 1A

Key Concepts:

- Only two Gospels (**Matthew 1:18-2:23 & Luke 1:26-2:40**) contain the **birth narratives**.
- Luke focusses on Mary and includes the accounts of John the Baptist's birth, the shepherds, the inn/manger and three poems/songs of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon. Matthew's focus is on Joseph and includes accounts of the Magi, the slaughter of infants and the flight to Egypt.
- The accounts are similar: they each approach Jesus as a saviour who was born during the reign of Herod as a fulfilment of prophecy.
- There are many differences between these two accounts in terms of characters, locations and perspectives.
- Luke focuses heavily on the birth John the Baptist, and later in the Gospel clarifies how John the Baptist was a forerunner to Jesus. Matthew focuses on Jesus' Jewish ancestry and on him as a fulfilment of Israel's hopes. One event in Matthew that could potentially have been widely known (the slaughter of infants) is not mentioned in Luke.
- **Redaction criticism** is the science of examining how source material has been edited (redacted) by editors to reflect their point of view. When we report a common story, it will inevitably reflect something of our concerns, pet issues and biases.
- Redaction critics of the birth narratives suppose that both Matthew and Luke shared a common story, but told it in ways that reflected their theological concerns and audiences.
- Redaction critics note the many references to the Hebrew scriptures in Matthew's account infer he was a Jewish believer writing for Jews who needed to be convinced that Jesus was the fulfilment of Jewish prophecy. By contrast, Luke wrote for a non-Jewish audience, thus emphasizing Jesus as a universal saviour ('a light to lighten the gentiles').
- Do the birth narratives teach the doctrine of the **incarnation** (i.e. that Jesus was God in the flesh)? This doctrine includes the concept of the **'hypostatic union'**: Jesus was a union of human and **divine**, fully God and fully human.
- One way of understanding incarnation is the **substantial presence** model which says that Jesus possessed all the attributes of God - that is he was omniscient, omnipotent, etc. at every moment. A different way of understanding the incarnation is the **kenotic model** (Greek for 'emptying'); in being born, Jesus surrendered some of these attributes.
- The birth narratives could be seen as kenotic in terms of the fragility of Jesus or the danger he faced. Or, as reflecting the 'substantial presence' model (the miraculous good fortune around the birth of Jesus). Students will want to find further evidence of each approach.

Key arguments/ debates:

- Some scholars believe these accounts are ancient myths reflecting a tendency to ascribe a supernatural birth to important figures. The 'virgin birth' may be based on a translation error (the Greek version of Isaiah 7:14 speaks of a 'virgin birth' whereas the Hebrew has 'young woman').
- On the other hand, some find it powerful that (i) there are two independent accounts of the same events and (ii) that the birth of Jesus is consistent with later Christian beliefs about Jesus.

Key questions:

- Do the birth narratives have too many differences to be reconciled with reality?
- Can the doctrine of the incarnation be found in the birth narratives?
- Does redaction criticism mean that there was nothing miraculous in Jesus' birth?
- What do the differences in the birth narratives say about each of the audiences to which these accounts were written?

Key quotes:

"Why would Mark ... fail to mention this doctrine [the **virgin birth**] if it was widely believed in the last part of the first century?" (M. Martin)

Redaction criticism is "the collection, arrangement, editing, and modification of traditional material." (N. Perrin)

"...who, though he was in the form of God...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness..." (Philippians 2:6-7)

"God from God, light from light, very God of very God, begotten not made of one being with the Father." (The Nicene Creed)

Key words:

Birth Narratives | redaction criticism | hypostatic union | substantial presence | incarnation | divinity | kenotic model | virgin birth | Matthew 1:18-2:23 | Luke 1:26-2:40

