

The Birth of Jesus:

Comparing the Gospel Infancy Narratives

by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D.

Introduction to Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2:

The birth of Jesus is narrated at the beginning of the **Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke**, but is not mentioned in Mark, and alluded to very differently in John. Although the story may seem familiar, a close analysis shows that there are *many significant differences* between the Matthean and Lukan accounts, with *hardly anything in common* between them. The following are the only commonalities, and even these contain significant differences in the details:

Common Elements in Both Infancy Narratives:

- Main characters: *Mary, Joseph, Jesus*
- Supporting characters: *Angels, Holy Spirit*
- Titles attributed to Jesus: *Christ, son of David*
- Heritage: *children of Abraham/Israel, house of David*
- Place names: *Nazareth in Galilee, Bethlehem in Judea*
- Historical period: *during the reign of King Herod*



Eleven Points Shared by the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke (from Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, pg. 34):

1. The parents are to be Mary and Joseph who are "betrothed" (legally bound to be married), but have not yet come to live together or have sexual relations (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:27,34).
2. Joseph is of Davidic descent (Matt 1:16, 20; Luke 1:27,32; 2:4).
3. There is an angelic announcement of the forthcoming birth of the child (Matt 1:20-23; Luke 1:30-35).
4. The conception of the child by Mary is not through intercourse with her husband (Matt 1:20,23,25; Luke 1:34).
5. The conception is through the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18,20; Luke 1:35).
6. There is a directive from the angel that the child is to be named Jesus (Matt 1:21; Luke 1:31).
7. An angel states that Jesus is to be Savior (Matt 1:21; Luke 2:11).
8. The birth of the child takes place after the parents have come to live together (Matt 1:24-25; Luke 2:5-6).
9. The birth takes place at Bethlehem (Matt 2:1; Luke 2:4-6).
10. The birth is chronologically related to the reign (days) of King Herod the Great (Matt 2:1; Luke 1:5).
11. The child is reared at Nazareth (Matt 2:23; Luke 2:39).

Different Contents of the Two Accounts:

Matthew 1–2 (only 48 verses, including genealogy)	Luke 1–2 (total of 132 verses, plus 16 more in genealogy)
1:1 - Title of the Gospel	1:1-4 - Literary introduction to the Gospel
1:2-17 - The Genealogy of Jesus (from Abraham to King David to Exile to Joseph)	(Genealogy included later, in Luke 3:23-38)
-	1:5-25 - Angel Gabriel announces John the Baptist's birth
1:18-24 - An unnamed angel announces Jesus' birth to Joseph in a dream	1:26-38 - Angel Gabriel announces Jesus' birth to Mary while awake
-	1:39-56 - Mary visits Elizabeth (incl. Mary's "Magnificat")
-	1:57-58 - Elizabeth gives birth to her son (John the Baptist)
-	1:59-80 - John the Baptist is circumcised & named (incl. Zechariah's "Benedictus")
-	2:1-5 - Joseph & Mary journey to Bethlehem for the census
1:25 & 2:1a - Mary's son is born in Bethlehem of Judea, and he is named Jesus	2:6-7 - Mary gives birth to her son in Bethlehem of Judea (but the infant is not named until v. 21)
-	2:8-14 - Angels appear to some shepherds (incl. the angels' "Gloria")
-	2:15-20 - Shepherds visit Mary & Joseph & the infant lying in a manger
-	2:21 - The infant is circumcised & named Jesus
-	2:22-38 - Jesus is presented to God in the Temple (incl. Simeon's "Nunc Dimittis")
2:1b-12 - Magi from the East come; they first visit Herod, then Jesus	-
2:13-21 - Joseph & Mary flee to Egypt with the child Jesus; the Innocents are murdered; the Holy Family returns to Israel	-
2:22-23 - They journey to Nazareth (for the first time)	2:39-40 - The family returns to Nazareth
-	2:41-52 - At age twelve, Jesus & his parents visit the Jerusalem Temple

Different Theological Emphases of Each Narrative:

	Matthew 1–2	Luke 1–2
Driving Force:	Hebrew Scriptures are fulfilled (1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23)	Holy Spirit is at work (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-27)
Jesus' Heritage:	* Son of David , son of Abraham (1:1-17) * Legal son of Joseph, but child of the Holy Spirit (1:18-25)	* Son of God , son of Mary by the Holy Spirit (1:26-38) * Heir to David's throne, over the house of Judah (1:32-33; 2:4)
Names & Titles:	* Messiah (1:1, 16-18; 2:4) * Jesus: "For he will save his people from their sins" (1:21, 25) * <i>Emmanuel</i> : "God with us" (1:23) * <i>King of the Jews</i> (2:2) * "A ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel" (2:6) * Nazorean (2:23)	* Jesus (1:31; 2:21) * Son of the Most High; Son of God (1:32, 35) * He will be great, holy, full of wisdom and grace (1:32, 35; 2:40) * "Of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:33) * A <i>Savior</i> is born... who is Messiah and <i>Lord</i> (2:11, 26) * A light for revelation to Gentiles and for glory to Israel (2:32)
Characters Emphasized:	Men: King David, Joseph of Nazareth, Magi from the East, King Herod, chief priests & scribes, Ethnarch Archelaus	Women: Virgin Mary of Nazareth, Elizabeth, Anna Poor & Aged: Shepherds, Zechariah, Simeon
Geography & Chronology:	Starts in Bethlehem , where Joseph evidently lives. Magi enter the "house" to visit Mary and the "child" (toddler?). Family fees to Egypt (how long?) & return from Egypt (when?). Move north to Nazareth in Galilee (for the first time).	Gabriel appears to Mary, who is living in Nazareth (Galilee). Family journeys south to visit Bethlehem due to the census; "Baby" (infant!) is laid in a "manger" (no mention of "house"). Return to Nazareth shortly after Presentation in Jerusalem Temple.
Themes:	obstacles, conflict, fear, murder, politics	glory, praise, joy; poverty, humility, faith
OT Parallels:	Dreamer Joseph (<u>Genesis 37–41</u>) Baby Moses (<u>Exodus 1–2</u>)	Birth of Samson (<u>Judges 13</u>) Birth of Samuel (<u>1 Sam 1–2</u>)
Number Symbolism:	[King] David = 14 (DVD = 4+6+4); three groups of 14 generations in genealogy; focus on royalty	70 weeks from Gabriel's first Annunciation to Presentation in Temple? related to 70-week prophecy by angel Gabriel in Daniel 9:24-27?

Old Testament Quotations and Allusions in Matthew's Infancy Narrative:

Matthew's Gospel	Old Testament Texts
Matt 1:3b-6a - [direct quotation of ten generations from Perez to David]	Ruth 4:18-22 - [ten generations from Perez to David]
Matt 1:22-23 - All this took place to <u>fulfill</u> what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel ," which means, " God is with us ."	Isaiah 7:14 - "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel ." Isaiah 8:8b, 10 - "It [the Assyrian army] will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel ... / Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us ."
Matt 2:2 - [Magi ask Herod]: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (cf. 2:8)	Numbers 24:17-19 - "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near-- a star shall come out of Jacob , and a <i>scepter shall rise out of Israel</i> ; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites. / Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly. / <i>One out of Jacob shall rule</i> , and destroy the survivors of Ir."
Matt 2:5-6 - [scribes tell King Herod where the Messiah will be born]: "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: / 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"	Micah 5:2 - "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."
Matt 2:11b - Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold , frankincense , and myrrh.	Isaiah 60:3, 6 - "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense , and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD."
Matt 2:14-15 - Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, / and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to <u>fulfill</u> what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, " <i>Out of Egypt I have called my son</i> ."	Hosea 11:1 - "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and <i>out of Egypt I called my son</i> ."
Matt 2:17-18 - Then was <u>fulfilled</u> what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: / " <i>A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more</i> ."	Jeremiah 31:15 - "Thus says the LORD: <i>A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more</i> ."
Matt 2:23 - There [in Galilee] he [Joseph] made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be <u>fulfilled</u> , "He will be called a Nazorean ."	Isaiah 11:1 - "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (nezer) shall grow out of his roots."

Source: <https://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Jesus-Birth.htm>

Readings for the Sundays of Advent

NOTE: The new "Liturgical Year" always begins on the First Sunday of Advent (Nov. 27 - Dec. 3), not on Jan. 1:

*Advent 2021 was part of the 2022 liturgical year (Sunday Cycle C), which began on November 28, 2021.
Advent 2022 will be part of the 2023 liturgical year (Sunday Cycle A), which begins on November 27, 2022.
Advent 2023 will be part of the 2024 liturgical year (Sunday Cycle B), which began on December 3, 2023.
Advent 2024 will be part of the 2025 liturgical year (Sunday Cycle C), which begins on December 1, 2024.*

See the [Calendar of Lectionary Cycles and Movable Liturgical Feasts](#) for other years.

Date	#	Sunday	First Reading	Responsorial Psalm	Second Reading	Alleluia Verse	Gospel
12/1/19	1	1 st Sunday of Advent - A	Isa 2:1-5	Ps 122:1-2, 3-4a, 4b-5, 6-7, 8-9	Rom 13:11-14	Ps 85:8	Matt 24:37-44
12/8/19	4	2 nd Sunday of Advent - A	Isa 11:1-10	Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17	Rom 15:4-9	Luke 3:4+6	Matt 3:1-12
12/15/19	7	3 rd Sunday of Advent - A	Isa 35:1-6a, 10	Ps 146:6c-7, 8-9a, 9b-10	Jas 5:7-10	Isa 61:1 (cited in Lk 4:18)	Matt 11:2-11
12/22/19	10	4 th Sunday of Advent - A	Isa 7:10-14	Ps 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6	Rom 1:1-7	Matt 1:23	Matt 1:18-24
11/29/20	2	1 st Sunday of Advent - B	Isa 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7	Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19	1 Cor 1:3-9	Ps 85:8	Mark 13:33-37
12/6/20	5	2 nd Sunday of Advent - B	Isa 40:1-5, 9-11	Ps 85:9ab+10, 11-12, 13-14	2 Pet 3:8-14	Luke 3:4+6	Mark 1:1-8
12/13/20	8	3 rd Sunday of Advent - B	Isa 61:1-2a, 10-11	Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54	1 Thess 5:16-24	Isa 61:1 (cited in Lk 4:18)	John 1:6-8, 19-28
12/20/20	11	4 th Sunday of Advent - B	2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16 (<i>diff</i>)	Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27+29	Rom 16:25-27	Luke 1:38	Luke 1:26-38
11/28/21	3	1 st Sunday of Advent - C	Jer 33:14-16	Ps 25:4-5, 8-9, 10+14	1 Thess 3:12-4:2	Ps 85:8	Luke 21:25-28, 34-36
12/5/21	6	2 nd Sunday of Advent - C	Bar 5:1-9	Ps 126:1-2a, 2b-3, 4-5, 6	Phil 1:4-6, 8-11	Luke 3:4+6	Luke 3:1-6
12/12/21	9	3 rd Sunday of Advent - C	Zeph 3:14-18a	Isa 12:2-3, 4bcd, 5-6	Phil 4:4-7	Isa 61:1 (cited in Lk 4:18)	Luke 3:10-18
12/19/21	12	4 th Sunday of Advent - C	Mic 5:1-4a	Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19	Heb 10:5-10	Luke 1:38	Luke 1:39-45

Notes:

- **Dates in the first column** are linked to the full text of the readings provided on the website of the [USCCB](#), if available.
- **Numbers in the second column** are the official reading numbers from the *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, second typical edition, 1981; they are identical to the corresponding numbers from the first edition, 1969.
- **Readings that are new or different from the 1970 Lectionary** are marked in the table above; click on the underlined links (*new*) or (*diff*) for detailed explanations.

Seasons of Advent and Christmas

The Season of Advent:

Advent is not usually a full four weeks, but between three and four weeks long, depending on what weekday Christmas is in a particular year. Advent begins on the Sunday between Nov. 27 and Dec. 3. Thus, the readings listed here for the "Third Week of Advent" might not all be used, since the last eight days before Christmas use the readings assigned for Dec. 17-24, as listed at the bottom of this table.

2021	Lect. #	Day	First Reading	Responsorial Psalm	Alleluia Verse	Gospel
11/29	175	1st Week of Advent – Mon	Isa 2:1-5 (<i>or</i> , in Year A, Isa 4:2-6)	Ps 122:1-2, 3-4b, 4cd-5, 6-7, 8-9	See Ps 80:4	Matt 8:5-11
[11/30]*	176	1st Week of Advent – Tues	Isa 11:1-10	Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17	[no bibl. ref.]	Luke 10:21-24
12/1	177	1st Week of Advent – Wed	Isa 25:6-10a	Ps 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6	[no bibl. ref.]	Matt 15:29-37
12/2	178	1st Week of Advent – Thurs	Isa 26:1-6	Ps 118:1+8-9, 19-21, 25-27a	Isa 55:6	Matt 7:21, 24-27
12/3	179	1st Week of Advent – Fri	Isa 29:17-24	Ps 27:1, 4, 13-14	[no bibl. ref.]	Matt 9:27-31
12/4	180	1st Week of Advent – Sat	Isa 30:19-21, 23-26	Ps 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6	Isa 33:22	Matt 9:35—10:1, 5a, 6-8
12/6	181	2nd Week of Advent – Mon	Isa 35:1-10	Ps 85:9ab+10, 11-12, 13-14	[no bibl. ref.]	Luke 5:17-26
12/7	182	2nd Week of Advent – Tues	Isa 40:1-11	Ps 96:1-2, 3+10ac, 11-12, 13	[no bibl. ref.]	Matt 18:12-14
[12/8]*	183	2nd Week of Advent – Wed	Isa 40:25-31	Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 8+10	[no bibl. ref.]	Matt 11:28-30
12/9	184	2nd Week of Advent – Thurs	Isa 41:13-20	Ps 145:1+9, 10-11, 12-13ab	See Isa 45:8	Matt 11:11-15
12/10	185	2nd Week of Advent – Fri	Isa 48:17-19	Ps 1:1-2, 3, 4+6	[no bibl. ref.]	Matt 11:16-19
12/11	186	2nd Week of Advent – Sat	Sir 48:1-4, 9-11	Ps 80:2ac+3b, 15-16, 18-19	Luke 3:4+6	Matt 17:9a, 10-13
12/13	187*	3rd Week of Advent – Mon	Num 24:2-7, 15-17a	Ps 25:4-5ab, 6+7bc, 8-9	Ps 85:8	Matt 21:23-27
12/14	188*	3rd Week of Advent – Tues	Zeph 3:1-2, 9-13	Ps 34:2-3, 6-7, 17-18, 19+23	[no bibl. ref.]	Matt 21:28-32
12/15	189*	3rd Week of Advent – Wed	Isa 45:6c-8, 18, 21c-25	Ps 85:9ab+10, 11-12, 13-14	See Isa 40:9-10	Luke 7:18b-23
12/16	190*	3rd Week of Advent – Thurs	Isa 54:1-10	Ps 30:2+4, 5-6, 11-12a+13b	Luke 3:4+6	Luke 7:24-30
x	191*	3rd Week of Advent – Fri	Isa 56:1-3a, 6-8	Ps 67:2-3, 5, 7-8	[no bibl. ref.]	John 5:33-36
2021	Lect. #	Day	First Reading	Responsorial Psalm	Alleluia Verse	Gospel
12/17	193**	December 17	Gen 49:2, 8-10	Ps 72:1-2, 3-4ab, 7-8, 17	[O Antiphons]	Matt 1:1-17
12/18	194	December 18	Jer 23:5-8	Ps 72:1-2, 12-13, 18-19	[O Antiphons]	Matt 1:18-24
[12/19]*	195	December 19	Judg 13:2-7, 24-25a	Ps 71:3-4a, 5-6ab, 16-17	[O Antiphons]	Luke 1:5-25
12/20	196	December 20	Isa 7:10-14	Ps 24:1-2, 3-4ab, 5-6	[O Antiphons]	Luke 1:26-38
12/21	197	December 21	Cant 2:8-14 <i>or</i> Zeph 3:14-18a	Ps 33:2-3, 11-12, 20-21	[O Antiphons]	Luke 1:39-45
12/22	198	December 22	1 Sam 1:24-28	1 Sam 2:1, 4-5, 6-7, 8abcd	[O Antiphons]	Luke 1:46-56
12/23	199	December 23	Mal 3:1-4, 23-24	Ps 25:4-5ab, 8-9, 10+14	[O Antiphons]	Luke 1:57-66
12/24	200	Dec. 24 (<i>morning Mass</i>)	2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16	Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27+29	[O Antiphons]	Luke 1:67-79

Source: <https://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/2002USL-Weekdays-AdventChristmas.htm>