

God in the Manger: The Miraculous Birth of Christ

John MacArthur

Thomas Nelson, 2001

192 pages

A Brief Book Summary from TGC

By Casey Croy

Overview

God in the Manger contains exegetical studies of the nativity narratives within Matthew and Luke's Gospels and other passages related to the birth of Jesus. MacArthur has also concluded this book with an exposition of Hebrews 1 to ensure that the readers understand the full importance of the baby born to Mary and Joseph in that Bethlehem manger over 2000 years ago. The chapters in this book could best be described as sermon-like since they not only contain exegetical discussions but illustrations and application as well. MacArthur, who is concerned that many people in our culture no longer understand what is celebrated during Christmas, demonstrates that Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, who is God incarnated. Throughout this book, MacArthur ties the birth of Jesus closely to his sacrificial death which delivers everyone who repents of sin and believes from the wrath of God.

Table of Contents

Introduction

- 1 The Amazing Fact of the Virgin Birth
- 2 A Look At Jesus' Family Tree
- 3 The Angel's Announcement To Mary
- 4 Will This News Really Come True
- 5 A Humble Birth In Bethlehem
- 6 The Heavenly Announcement Of Jesus' Birth
- 7 The Testimony Of Shepherds
- 8 The News Travels Fast
- 9 Righteous Parents
- 10 Simeon's Eyes Of Faith
- 11 The Superiority Of Jesus Christ

Summary

Chapter 1

The Amazing Fact of the Virgin Birth

The virgin birth provides a key for understanding who Jesus Christ was and why he died. Although numerous people have attempted to subvert the reality of the virgin birth, Matthew 1:18–25, in a clear and concise narrative, clearly proclaims this essential tenant of the Christian faith.

Regarding the Virgin Birth

Sinful humanity has always resisted Scripture's clear testimony concerning Jesus' virgin birth, as they have with all essential beliefs of the Christian faith. Satan has attempted to nullify the uniqueness of the virgin birth by allowing similar, counterfeit stories to multiply within ancient religions. Additionally, the emergence of modern and postmodern theologies within the modern, scientific age has eroded confidence in the virgin birth of Christ. The Holy Spirit confronts this opposition at the outset of the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew declares the divine lineage of Jesus in Matthew 1:18–25. His account reveals five aspects of the virgin birth which are discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

The Virgin Birth Announced

Matthew announces Christ's virgin birth in one verse (1:18). The veracity of his claim is accentuated by his refusal to elaborate concerning the details of this occurrence. His audience only needs to know that this was a divine act. Likewise, Matthew shares little information concerning Mary and Joseph. They abstained from sexual relations throughout their engagement, indicating their godliness. More importantly, however, Mary's virginity affirms the deity of Christ which supports the truthfulness of his teaching and makes possible the salvation of sinners.

Joseph's Response to the Virgin Birth

Upon learning that Mary was pregnant, Joseph determined that he could not marry her (since he was not the father of her child) and that he would put the matter of her assumed infidelity to rest quietly (1:19). Yet, after an angel revealed Mary's chastity, Joseph obeyed the angel's instructions by marrying Mary and becoming the legal father of her son, Jesus.

The Angel Clarifies the Virgin Birth

In addition to revealing Mary's chastity, the angel also announced that she would bear a son and that he would be named Jesus. Jesus' name encompasses his mission. A Hellenized form of the Hebrew name Joshua, Jesus' name means "Yahweh will save."

The Virgin Birth Prophesied

The angel's announcement of Jesus' virgin birth should not have been completely foreign to Jews. The Old Testament contains some hints that the Messiah would have an unusual birth (Genesis 3:15; Jeremiah 31:22). Matthew 1:22–23, however, claims that Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, which claims that a virgin will give birth to a son.

The Occurrence of the Virgin Birth

Most of Matthew's explanation of the virgin birth is contained within Joseph's dream. After he awoke, Joseph obeyed the angel. He married Mary but did not know her intimately until she had given birth to Jesus. The uniqueness of Jesus' birth helps us make sense of his sinless life and sacrificial death.

Chapter 2

A Look at Jesus' Family Tree

Though perhaps overlooked, Jesus' two genealogies contain important elements for establishing him as the Messiah.

The Importance of Genealogies to the Jews

For the Jews, the importance of genealogies extended beyond mere curiosity, recreation, or even family or religious solidarity. The Jewish people valued genealogies for four reasons: 1) ancestry determined how land was allocated, 2) ancestry determined rights to inheritance, 3) ancestry was used for taxation records, 4) ancestry determined claims to the priesthood or royalty. Matthew and Luke include their genealogies to verify Jesus' credentials as the Messiah.

The Two Genealogies of Jesus

Jesus' genealogies can be found in Matthew 1:1–17 and Luke 3:23–38. Matthew traces Jesus' paternal lineage, and Luke traces Jesus' maternal lineage. These different approaches result in some differences between the two genealogies which critical scholars claim undermine the truthfulness and reliability of the witness of these two Gospels. Jesus' contemporaries, however, never made any allegations concerning his ancestry negating the claim that he was the Messiah, thus undermining the critical position.

Highlights of Luke's Genealogy

Luke words the beginning of his genealogy to emphasize the virgin birth and to follow Jesus' maternal lineage. Luke's genealogy highlights four God-ordained credentials of Jesus: 1) Luke asserts that Jesus is the Son of God (divinity), 2) a Son of Adam (humanity), 3) a son of Abraham, and 4) a son of David (important biblical figures).

Chapter 3

The Angel's Announcement to Mary

Luke records the appearance of the divine messenger, Gabriel, announcing to a divinely chosen servant, Mary, concerning the birth of humanity's divine savior.

The Divine Messenger

The angel, Gabriel, announced the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth to Mary. Gabriel is one of two angels named in the Bible, the other being the archangel, Michael. Gabriel's role within Scripture is to bring great and glorious announcements from God (Daniel 9). The announcement of Jesus' upcoming birth occurred in the Galilean town of Nazareth, which is remarkable because it was known more as a Gentile area than a Jewish center. The promised Jewish Messiah is the savior not only of the Jews but of all who will believe.

The Person of Divine Choice

We know very little of Jesus' mother, Mary. Her name means "exalted one," and Luke describes her as a virgin. Given the customs of her time, she likely became engaged to Joseph when she was twelve or thirteen years old. God's choice of a young, unknown maiden from an obscure town to be the mother of the Messiah can only be described as remarkable.

The Divine Blessing to Mary

Gabriel began by announcing that Mary had been blessed by receiving God's grace. As a sinner, Mary was aware she needed God's grace for the forgiveness of her sins. This is evident because Mary was afraid of Gabriel's presence. All righteous people are afraid when they face God or his angels because they are aware of their sin. Mary was undeserving of God's blessing, but he determined to bless her because it suited him and his perfect plan.

The Divine Child

The fourth part of Gabriel's announcement divulges that she will be the mother of the divine king and redeemer named Jesus. It may have been challenging for the young virgin to understand how this could be, but Gabriel does not allow Mary to speculate how these words will be fulfilled. She will conceive from the Holy Spirit. Gabriel's announcement challenges us to understand all that was said to Mary. Her child would be the savior of sinners, perfectly manifest the glory of God, share in God's same essence, and fulfill the Old Testament anticipation of an eternal king.

Chapter 4

Will This News Really Come True

Mary sought to confirm Gabriel's message and was through another miraculous conception.

A Case of Incredible Similarities

Luke also records another conception miracle: Mary's close relative, Elizabeth, who was at least in her sixties, would give birth to her first child, who would be known as John the Baptist. The two miraculous conception stories share several similarities: 1) Both begin by introducing the child's parents, 2) both discuss obstacles to childbearing, 3) the angel Gabriel announces both births, 4) both recipients of Gabriel's message are fearful at first, 5) and finally, both contain a guarantee from Gabriel that his announcement would come true. These similarities exist for Mary's benefit.

Encourages Mary

Mary wanted to visit Elizabeth in order to verify that God could accomplish a conception miracle. Seeing Elizabeth's miraculous conception would have provided a personal confirmation for Mary of what Gabriel had said. Furthermore, it would confirm that she would have Elizabeth's support through what would have been a difficult ordeal. Mary also received a physical confirmation when Elizabeth's baby leapt in her womb upon hearing Mary's voice. Mary then received a prophetic confirmation through Elizabeth's spirit filled blessing. Elizabeth blessed Mary, her child, herself, and all those who would believe.

Chapter 5

A Humble Birth in Bethlehem

God providentially arranged the birth of Jesus to fulfilled the messianic prophecy of Micah 5:2 and to illustrate the depths to which he must go to save humanity from their sin.

The World Setting for Christ's Birth

God providentially arranged the historical circumstances of Jesus' birth to fulfill the prophecy in Micah 5:2. Micah 5:2 was interpreted during this time to mean that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph, however, lived in Nazareth. During this time, the Roman Empire was led by Caesar Augustus, a very capable leader who brought about an extensive period of peace within the empire known as the Pax Romana. This period of peace allowed for Caesar Augustus to command that a census be taken of the entire Roman Empire, probably for taxation purposes. As reported in Luke 2:1, this census meant that Joseph and Mary had to return to Bethlehem because Joseph was from the line of David, thus creating an opportunity for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, fulfilling Micah 5:2.

The National Setting for Christ's Birth

Joseph and Mary's trip to Bethlehem would have led them through many significant places within Old Testament history. Although the designation "city of David" was typically used to refer to Jerusalem where David reigned, Luke refers to Bethlehem as "the city of David" because it was the place of David's birth. Although Luke never mentions Micah 5:2, he emphasizes that Jesus' birth fulfills an important national prophecy, thus making his birth relevant for the nation.

The Personal Setting for Christ's Birth

Although God had arranged for the world and national settings to be arranged so that Jesus' birth would fulfill Micah 5:2, it is the personal setting of Jesus' birth that gives the nativity narrative its charm. Bethlehem was crowded due to the imperial decree. The word Luke uses for "inn" typically refers to a two-story building in which the travelers would lodge in the upper level while their animals were kept on the lower floor. Since there was no room in the inn, Joseph and Mary were forced to stay on the lower level with animals. This is the setting where the savior of the world was born. Though Gabriel had previously spoken to Joseph and Mary, it must have still been difficult for them to believe that the savior of the world, the Son of God was born to them that night. Mary wrapped him in swaddling clothes just as any mother would wrap her new born child. That Christ entered the world in filthy, uncomfortable conditions demonstrates the wonder of the incarnation. The Son of God departed the glory of heaven and came into the world in the humblest way imaginable.

Chapter 6

The Heavenly Announcement of Jesus' Birth

Jesus' birth was announced to local shepherds in a manner which revealed the child's extraordinary purpose within God's plan of salvation.

The Proclamation of the Good News

The birth of Jesus was announced by an angel. Their news of great joy, however, was not first heralded to the rich and "important" people in Israel. Instead, the angels appeared to shepherds, who were some of the most unappreciated and even disdained people in Israel. This would illustrate an important aspect of the salvation to be provided by Jesus. Jesus came to save undeserving sinners. When the glory of God was revealed to these shepherds, they were afraid, which illustrates that they were aware of their own sinfulness and need of a savior.

The Pervasiveness of the Good News

The angel proclaims that the good news they announce will be for all people. “All people” primarily refers to the people of Israel and is a ratification of the promised New Covenant. But “all people” also extends to the Gentiles as was revealed by Isaiah (60:1–3) and would be revealed by Simeon eight days later. Jesus would save everyone who believes, without qualification.

The Person of the Good News

The good news announced by the angel centered upon a specific person who the angels identify as Christ the Lord. The title “Christ” means “anointed one” and recognizes Jesus’ role as a prophet, priest, and king, the three main figures who were anointed in the Old Testament. The title “Lord” can be used to recognize human authority, but within this context, “Lord” is a divine designation which recognizes Jesus as God.

The Purpose of the Good News

Upon announcing the good news of Jesus’ birth, the angel is joined by myriads of other angels giving glory to God. In addition to praising God, the angels proclaim “peace on earth, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14). The phrase “peace on earth” refers to peace with God, meaning genuine salvation. The phrase “goodwill toward men” should be translated “peace among men of his good pleasure,” and means that salvation may not be merited by humans but granted by God.

Chapter 7

The Testimony of Shepherds

The shepherd’s response to what they were told by the angel should resonate with all who have been saved: they received God’s revelation, they responded in faith, they witnessed joyfully, and they grew in their understanding of Jesus.

The Shepherds’ Plan of Action

The shepherds’ response to this angelic announcement was to verify what they had been told. So, they went to Bethlehem to see this “thing.” The word translated “thing” is the typical Greek word for “word” or “reality.” The shepherds believed they had been given a word from God and sought to verify what they had been told by going to see the child.

The Shepherds Respond in Faith

God had prepared the shepherds’ hearts for what he had revealed to them. Their response demonstrates that they were true, believing Jews who were awaiting the Messiah.

The Shepherds Bear Witness of Christ

After finding Jesus, the shepherds expressed what they had seen and heard concerning him. Those who heard their report were amazed, which was the typical reaction Jesus would invoke later in his ministry. Yet, unlike the shepherds, these people did not respond in faith and go to see the child. Although Jesus will always inspire people, this is not the same as having saving faith in him.

The Shepherds Move on to an Obedient Life

The shepherds continued to praise God even as they returned to their fields. God commands believers to continually praise him for what he has done, and the shepherds did so obediently.

Chapter 8

The News Travels Fast

Matthew's account of the Magi demonstrates three possible responses to the good news of the Messiah: rebellion, indifference, and adoration.

The Magi Seek Jesus

The Magi were a tribe of the Median nation in eastern Mesopotamia. The book of Daniel reports that they were high ranking officials within the Babylonian court, and because of his position among them, Daniel undoubtedly taught them much about the God of Israel and their belief in the Messiah. The wise men who came to see Jesus had learned about the Jewish belief in a Messiah, probably from Daniel. The Magi must have been shocked upon arriving in Judea and realizing that no one knew about the birth of the Messiah, whom they had come to worship. The star the Magi followed has been the subject of much speculation, but it should likely be understood as a manifestation of the glory of God.

Herod's Anxiety Toward Christ

Herod the Great responded with anxiety concerning the Magi's news of the birth of a Jewish king. Herod, who was charged by Rome to maintain peace in the area, had many difficulties with rebellions and invasions. Thus, although he was aware of the promised Messiah, he saw his coming as a threat and did not respond in saving faith in the same manner as the Magi. After failing to determine the exact identity of the Messiah, he had all the baby boys two years and younger slaughtered. Like many people today, Herod's response to the good news was hateful rebellion.

The Indifference of the Religious Leaders

A third group represent a third response to the good news of the Messiah. When the religious leaders were approached by Herod concerning the birth of the Messiah, they knew of the prophecy in Micah 5:2 concerning the place of his birth. These religious leaders, however, responded with indifference and failed to recognize Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. Like so many apathetic people today, these religious leaders gave lip service to what they knew to be true but did not believe or obey God.

The Magi Worship Christ

Unlike Herod and the religious leaders, the Magi responded to Jesus in the way God desires for all people: with adoration and worship. Matthew's description of their response to Jesus includes multiple superlatives to emphasize the emotion of their response. The Magi also gave gifts to the Messiah, including gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which emphasize Jesus' royalty, divinity, and humanity. The Magi responded in faith to the little revelation God made available to them and were saved.

Chapter 9

Righteous Parents

Matthew and Luke present Joseph and Mary as righteous characters, both explicitly and implicitly.

The Righteousness of Joseph and Mary

Luke explicitly announces Joseph and Mary's righteous character so that his readers would know they could trust their testimony. This was important because during this time many groups within Israel held various political and theological viewpoints which were opposed to what God had revealed in Scripture.

The Testimony of Joseph and Mary

Joseph and Mary's devotion to God is also apparent in how they are obedient to God's ordinances after childbirth. They circumcised and named Jesus on the eighth day after his birth. Mary observed a purification period after childbirth. She also made a sacrifice to officially end the time of her uncleanness.

Chapter 10

Simeon's Eye of Faith

God promised that Simeon would live to see the Messiah. Upon seeing Jesus, Simeon would sing praises to God which both amazed and bewildered Jesus' parents.

The Man Simeon

Luke introduces a man named Simeon when Jesus was presented at the temple. Luke describes Simeon as just and devout, indicating that he was very cautious about matters related to God. He was also waiting for the arrival of Israel's Messiah, based upon his understanding of the book of Isaiah (e.g. Isaiah 49:8–10). Additionally, Simeon had a special anointing from the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:25).

Simeon at Last Meets Christ

Simeon's lifelong hope is ratified when God ordains an opportunity for him to meet Jesus as his parents presented him at the temple. The occasion filled Simeon with great joy.

Simeon's Song of Praise

Upon meeting the long-awaited Messiah, Simeon proclaimed a rich song. The most shocking element of Simeon's song was that he proclaimed that the Messiah would be a light for the Gentiles. Simeon's thoughts are again rooted in the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 9:1–2).

Parent's Response to Simeon

As with the rest of the events surrounding Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary were likely amazed by Simeon's words. Their amazement, however, would have quickly turned to shock upon hearing Simeon's concluding words. What could this man have meant when he said that many in Israel would fall and that a sword would pierce Mary's soul? Simeon's words allude to the conflict which would erupt from Jesus' ministry, the opposition he would face, and the emotional affliction Mary would experience personally.

The Revelation Simeon's Words Predict

Simeon's revelation predicts that Jesus' life would put every soul on trial. Jesus would expose human sin. Those who would repent of sin may receive forgiveness, but those who refuse to repent will die in sin and go to hell.

Chapter 11

The Superiority of Jesus Christ

The book of Hebrews illustrates as well as any other biblical book the importance of the birth of the Messiah. Jesus is the climax of revelation and the preeminent being within creation.

A Brief Introduction to Hebrews

Hebrews was written to show how Christ fulfilled the Messianic promises and how he is superior to the pictures and types which pointed to him in the Old Testament. Although the recipients of the letter were afraid to give up their Jewish traditions, nothing could match the atonement of sin and access to God which Jesus offered.

The Preparation for Christ

The author of Hebrews affirms that the Old Testament prepares believers for Christ because Christ is its main theme throughout. This preparation, however, is fragmentary. It does not present the entire picture but instead contains the first steps of a progressive revelation of the coming of Christ.

The Presentation of Christ

This progressive revelation is brought to completion in Christ, who is the full revelation of God. At the time of Christ, God stopped giving partial revelations of his plan and established Jesus as the fulfillment of all that had been previously revealed.

The Preeminence of Christ

Upon establishing Jesus Christ as the full revelation of God, the author of Hebrews presents Jesus as preeminent over all things. To confess Christ is to affirm that he is preeminent.

Jesus Christ is Superior to the Angels

In order to demonstrate the extent to which Jesus was preeminent, the author claims that Jesus is preeminent over angels. Angels were prominent beings within Jewish society. They delivered the Old Covenant and its laws to Moses. Yet, the writer of Hebrews establishes that Jesus is superior to angels in every way.