

The Earliest Outreach

"Unraveling the Missiological Instructions of the Nativity"

by:

Victor W. Matthews, Jr.

Abstract

There has been a lot of discussion concerning the biblical foundation of missions. It is very necessary and dynamic work, especially among evangelicals who were for many years considered to be weak in the theology department. This paper attempts to add a small scrap of evidence to the increasing pile by looking closely at the time of the nativity. If the bible is indeed a missiological book and the life of Jesus a missiological lesson, it only makes sense that there must be instructions concerning this field of endeavor in the time of His birth. This essay suggests that not only do the first stories of the life of Christ from the books of Matthew and Luke provide some missiological clues, but they are in fact completely missiological. In essence, we receive all the instruction we need concerning the great commission and the focus of mission in these first few stories concerning the good news of the birth of our savior. This paper presents additional evidence that the placement and structure of these stories also indicates the primacy of these missiological themes within the New Testament. Finally, this importance and the clarity of these ideas makes our instructions clear and provides a significant biblical foundation for mission that should be included in a base understanding or core of missiology. Simply put, the story of the nativity is the story of the foundation of missions, and as the beginning of the life of our Lord, so it is the beginning of our missiological destiny.

Introduction [Puzzle Theory]

As Biblical Scholars, Active Pastors, Mission Theologians, or simply attentive Christians, we have a primary need to understand the “missio Dei”, that is, God’s Plan for us, our church and our purpose in this world. If we are Christian, then it follows that we must learn from the life of Christ and take our instructions from His guidebook, the Bible. At the center of the vast information and instruction within this Book is the story of Christ Himself, His life and lessons, and as you might imagine, it is in these “Gospels” specifically that our most direct instructions arise. Within these four books we have a variety of commonality, but each text also contains

proprietary material. The depth of the study of these similarities and differences, in light of the synoptic gospels specifically, is a field of endeavor all its own, and we do not plan to delve into that here; except to observe that if the Bible is divinely inspired, then these four gospels and how they approach the story of Christ must be relevant. In other words, we need to know “why” they present the information and ideals in a certain order and in certain ways. The result is a clear picture that the gospels are a puzzle; a puzzle made up of four sections and hundreds of pieces, all a little different, but all with direct purpose to teach us certain things. It is with this “puzzle” mentality that we approach the specific sub-section of the gospels known as the Nativity. “Nativity” is defined in most dictionaries as the circumstances, place, and conditions of a birth, and for the purposes of this paper that time frame in the life of Jesus extends about one or two years to the arrival of the Magi and the flight of Joseph’s family to Egypt. If we are looking for a “core”, a heart to our mission studies, surely directions will be found in the birth of our Savior. It is of interest that only two gospels refer to this timeframe, and as scholars this means we must analyze the material we have closely word by word. This is what we will attempt in this essay. Through careful analysis of the time of the Nativity we will unravel these initial missiological instructions in order to understand better the core of our discipline, namely outreach to the poor and the importance of other cultures. We contend that not only does a missiological core of instruction exist in the Nativity, but that it is specific in its multi-cultural, pluralistic altruism. Even though we are only dealing with 40 verses out of the New Testament’s nearly 8000 (including 3779 in the gospels, a total of which are the 2222 of Matthew and Luke), this makes their lessons all the more vital, and the Shepherds and Magi will show us the way.

To begin, let us locate our primary sources. The 40 verses in question lie in Matthew between 1:18 and 2:12, and in Luke 2 from 1-20. The first set of verses occur in what scholars

refer to as “M”, that is, the material existing only in Matthew and not repeated anywhere else. The second set of verses is in “L”, meaning it is unique to Luke. Unfortunately, this gives us no ability to cross-reference biblically. We will look at other commentaries, but as a biblical purist this means we must take the few words we have very seriously. As we proceed in this paper and come to even more specific sub-sets of verses that prove our thesis, we will look at them in at least ten different translations and versions (KJV, Vulgate, Codex, NIV, etc.) in order to discover any nuances that may have suffered over time. That is not to claim one version is better than another, but we must look nearly microscopically at the few words we do have. Having located the “Nativity” and noticed how truly brief it is; we then come to understand that it really consists of two specific stories. It is in these stories that we will find our missiological instructions, and our earliest outreach.

There are very few parts of the two Nativity stories that are similar. The authors have specific reasoning and are exact with their words. Matthew begins with the genealogy, but when the story gets specific at Matthew 1:18 he also provides an explanation of the Virgin Birth. It is of interest that this is the only direct reference within a nativity story, although both do confirm that this was Mary’s firstborn child (Matt 1:21; Luke 2:7) and that His name was Jesus (Matt 1:21, Luke 2:21). Luke does explain the virgin birth a little earlier in 1:27 through a prophetic angelic visit to Mary. So, the two gospels agree in fact, but not form. Immediately after explaining the birth, Matthew goes straight into the Magi (Matt 2), which happened as much as two years later. Luke stays with the story, and enters into the section about the Shepherds (Luke 2:8). This is extremely relevant for two reasons. First, we have proof of the “puzzle” theory mentioned earlier. There is no repetition at all even though they are telling the same story. Matthew handles the genealogy, but Luke handles the taxation reason to travel to Bethlehem.

Matthew handles the virgin birth and why Joseph accepted a pregnant fiancé (angelic visit in Matt 1:20), while Luke explains the manger (“no room in the inn” Luke 2:7). But TOGETHER we have a complete story. It seems obvious that this puzzle technique is a central divine reason for the four gospels, especially the synoptic gospels. And second, these stories must be chosen for a reason. As we get into the exact sub-area of interest for this paper, namely the Shepherds and Magi, we discover that this is indeed the case. The two gospels fill in each other’s blanks and more importantly, they are incredibly exact. Imagine the Nativity without the explanation of the immaculate conception or the manger. Every word matters. So, it is no accident that the two Nativity sections contain a central story in addition to the birth itself. It is WHAT they choose that is most important.

The Missional Nativity

Let us finish our frame. It has rarely been expressed exactly how small the Nativity story is, and that means the central story included in the two appropriate gospels must comprise a significant central theme for their portion of the Nativity. We will discover that this central theme is in fact missional. After the Shepherd’s tale Luke goes straight to the Simeon story and then Jesus is twelve. After the Magi visit, Matthew explains the flight to Egypt and return upon Herod’s death, and then moves quickly into the emergence of John the Baptist. Analytically, this means that the vast majority of the Nativity is concerned with these two central thematic tales. In the case of Matthew, out of the twenty verses comprising the Nativity section, more than half, from 2:1-12, concern the story of the Magi. And in the case of Luke, 2:8-20, or 13 of the 20 verses, 65%, concern the Shepherds. There is simply no way around it. The two gospel nativity stories each have a very specific central story and theme, and together, we get the full picture of the Nativity’s message framed by introductory and concluding materials. But as the story opens

up we see that it is as simple as our age-old nativity scenes: Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the Shepherds, and the Wise Men (maybe a sheep or two). Now that we know the central thematic focus story of the two gospels, we are forced to ask “what do they mean?” Theologically their importance as the majority of the Nativity cannot be denied; therefore we are forced to ask “**why** are they the focus?”

We contend that the Nativity, as the birth time of Christ, is of obvious vital theological importance, and that the few words used to describe it within the Bible must be central to our understanding of the *missio Dei*. Furthermore, we have identified two integral focal stories, one within each gospel, that constitute the majority of the Nativity and therefore must logically define its central theme. The story of the Magi within Matthew and the Shepherds within Luke are theologically significant, and so much so that they form the definitive theme of the Bible’s story of the birth of our Lord and Savior. Now that the significance of these two stories is undeniable, let us move into a closer look at each one and discover their common overarching theme, which is in fact, the focus of the entire Nativity. We will start with the day of Jesus’ birth, and look into Luke.

Luke: Missio Dei ad Pauperes [The Mission of God to the Poor]

It is no doubt that with these stories all mixed together during our favorite holiday season, to the point of having the Magi incorrectly present in the manger scene, which takes place probably the wrong time of year and more than likely was not even a stable or inn; well, it is no wonder there is confusion. But, as we pull it all apart starting with Luke’s Shepherds it should begin to make sense. We are going to answer the question “why?” Why are the Shepherds so important that they dominate the story of the birth of Jesus? The answer is that Jesus was about teaching, and this was a lesson, an early lesson in outreach. Let’s take it line by line.

From Luke 2, King James Version, verses 8-20:

- ⁸And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.
⁹And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.
¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.
¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.
¹²And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.
¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,
¹⁴Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.
¹⁵And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.
¹⁶And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.
¹⁷And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.
¹⁸And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.
¹⁹But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.
²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

It is of great interest that this passage has not been approached more often from a missiological standpoint. Few passages in the Bible are more important or more missional. The most significant overarching point of these 12 verses is that the very first people to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the very first Christians if you will, were these lowly shepherds. This is hugely important because it could have easily been royalty, or at least the rich and famous. But the Lord chose his very first appearance on this earth to be witnessed and glorified by poor country shepherds.

For the Poor

Verse eight carries the same tone in all translations. A look at the Greek, Latin Vulgate, Luther's Bible from 1545, and a dozen newer translations from the King James 1611 to the 1769 version to the NIV and the English Standard as well as Zondervan's "Comparative Study Bible" (which puts the four most common and accepted versions side by side), all indicate the same basic story with little to debate. Whether it says: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (King James, 1611) or "et pastores erant in regione eadem vigilantes et custodientes vigilias noctis supra gregem suum" (Latin

Vulgate, Jerome 405) or "Und es waren Hirten in derselben Gegend auf dem Felde bei den Hürden, die hüteten des Nachts ihre Herde" (Luther, 1545) or "και ποιμενες ησαν εν τη χωρα τη αυτη αγραυλουντες και φυλασσοντες φυλακας της νυκτος επι την ποιμνην αυτων" (Stephanus, 1550) it all means basically the same exact thing. Even if we go back as far as possible, to the text of the Codex Sinaiticus (there are other fragments a little older, but nothing as relevant before 200 AD), our first complete copy of the gospels from the mid 4th century, we read: "τω καταλυματι και ποιμαινες ησα εν τη χωρα τη αυ τη αγραυλουντες και φυλασσοντες φυλακας της νυκτος επι την ποιμνην αυτων" which with only very minor grammar changes translates the same as all the rest. This is very good news as we are beginning to eliminate the possibility of translational error confusing our analysis and we are able to focus on the theme itself. From beginning to end we see the hand of God guiding the translations and allowing very little alteration (none relevant). There is no debate that this is indeed the country and these are indeed shepherds. This tells us all we need to know initially, and this continuity of translation exists for the whole passage.

We are not denying that there are many important translational debates, nor do we intend to skip all the way to the end of our ecumenical argument and say everything is exactly the same, however, in respect to the Nativity and these specific passages relevant to our thesis we have a virtually unbroken line from our oldest fragments to our newest printings. With this agreement of texts comes a level of comfort that our analysis has a strong backbone and an ability to move forward in our assertions with confidence. The Bible means what it says, and that is when Jesus was born there were shepherds nearby tending their flocks. An angel of the Lord came to them and they were very afraid, but the angel told them not to fear, that there was great news; a baby had been born that was the Messiah, and where He was and how to recognize Him. Then the sky

opened up and a whole heavenly host rejoiced at this birth. Of course, they went immediately to see the baby and worship Him, returning to spread the news. The missiological relevance of these passages jumps off the papyrus.

For All People

Look closely at the end of verse 10. This good news “shall be to ALL people” (my emphasis). Even in the earliest moments of our Lord’s life, before all the wonders unfold, the vastness of the evangelical mission is being explained. This universal message is unmistakable. The next verse explains the point of this story, “for unto YOU is born” (again, my emphasis). “Unto you”, meaning this is YOUR savior; this is God Almighty’s gift to you. This makes the mission personal and the way forward clear. The size of the celebration which ensues is among the largest and most impressive in the entire Bible. So this is IT, it is that important, the birth of Jesus Christ, Savior of the World. And who is told first? The hardworking poor shepherds. In case there is any doubt about the universal nature of this miracle, we need only look to verse 14 to learn that the message is “peace on earth” and “good will toward men”. Some translations render this last section “Peace among men of his good pleasure” (Codex 2:14 Folio 6, Quire 77) or “on whom his favor rests” (Jerome, NIV, and others). There has been much discussion on this, but for our purposes all that matters is his favor rests on all the earth. This peace is meant for ALL men, meaning all humankind, and this puts the final icing on our universal cupcake. There is no logical conclusion to derive from Luke’s Nativity except that the Shepherds are the main focus and that they are brought the good news by a host of angels. The mere size of this event underscores its importance. We are forced to conclude that the news of Christ is meant for all people and that the poor are to be a focal point.

The Earliest Outreach

At this point we have established that the Nativity scene within Luke is dominated by the story of the Shepherds, and that in this story a wondrous universal announcement unfolds for all mankind with these shepherds as its primary recipients. There can be no doubt that with this story being the focal point of the Nativity and every word counting, this pluralist and inclusivist evangelical message must be the central theme. But there is still more important biblical instruction packed into this brief world-altering section. Observe carefully what the Shepherds, the first Christians, do when they leave the manger. They “made it known abroad” (Luke 2:17, KJV). This certainly sounds like our first hint at the Great Commission. No translation argues with this reading. The Codex says they “made it known” and “glorified and praised God” (2:17/20). Luther also says they made it “known abroad” (Luther, 1545). We contend that the Shepherds became evangelical missionaries, and that in this very first day of Jesus’ life He has already instructed us in mission. The Nativity, as the birth of Christ, MUST unfold the *missio Dei*. We contend that even the very first Christians in the very beginning of the entire story had to carry the message forth. Evangelical Universal Mission was born with Christ, and the dominant positioning and length of this section proves that mission is the central theme of the Nativity.

So, with a dozen sources confirmed and exegesis complete, what have we learned from Luke? We have an entire initial foundation for mission, with instructions that the good news is meant for all mankind and that we have a personal savior. Furthermore, the very first people to hear this good news spread it immediately, becoming the first agents of outreach, the very first evangelical missionaries. And finally, these people were not the educated or the wealthy; they were the poor lower working class. So, the mission is to spread the good news of our savior to

all people, with a focus on the lower class. The Lukan half of the Nativity has set a Universalist Missional tone (“universal” meaning the message is for everyone, not the modernist universal idea that every road leads to heaven, we’ll save that debate for another paper), and there is evangelism going on the very first day of Jesus’ life. But there is still another half of the Nativity story to access. As we turn to Matthew and leave Luke behind, we do so confident that as Arthur Glasser said, “the entire Bible is a missional book” (2003: 17), and the Nativity is no exception.

Matthew: Missio Dei ad Alieni [The Mission of God to the Foreign]

As we begin our discussion of the Magi, it is very important to make a side note on late 20th century fundamentalism. We love all of our brothers and sisters in Christ and we are all, in the long run, on the same side. But a certain extremely conservative point of view began to develop post World War II that attempted to create a preemptive strike in the realm of spiritual warfare (not a bad idea in and of itself), but in the process developed into a rather narrow, some might say racist (or at least culturalist), dogma. In this point of view all areas of “magic” such as astrology, animism, etc. are universally lumped together in what we might call the “anti-Harry Potter” movement. A perfect example was when an acquaintance of ours was once very offended to the point of having to leave the building when a Native American friend lit some sage. Surely our faith is stronger than that? In this arena we are instructed to guard our kids from all these potentially evil and gate-opening activities, and all fantasy and science fiction is disallowed. This of course, would mean no Tolkien or C.S. Lewis and that is where it goes off-track. Any attempt to deny that God has used some of these “magical” concepts to move people within His plan is simply un-biblical. We all remember when Moses threw down his staff. Many analysts try to ignore the fact that the Pharaoh’s priests had actually turned their staves into snakes beforehand, making this a “magic” battle. A complete denial of these areas must be

eliminated before we continue or it threatens not only the understanding of the Magi, but their use by God and the very missiological core of this chapter of the gospel. Why should it be so hard to believe that God, who created and formed all of the universe, would arrange the stars in such a way as they might provide clues? Why would this “astrology” automatically be evil? In any case, Matthew 2 should end that discussion.

Our point here is not that God is pro-fantasy literature and probably not mad at Star Wars or Harry Potter. Although I think that is obvious from the fact that the genre was basically founded by incredible Christians. Nor are we simply trying to point out that such a narrow view stands in stark opposition to the philosophy of mission. Our sub-theme is much greater than that. The idea here is that He can speak to other cultures. This little single chapter section may be the most important moment in the Bible and no one even notices. God’s son is being born, the savior of the world, and who does He tell; who figures it out? Not a single religious leader. Not a single local intellectual or ruler. Gentile, probably non-monotheistic, foreigners are the ones who get it, and they travel hundreds or even thousands of miles, possibly years, to see the child. This means that a pre-Jesus God was speaking to other culture groups. The implication for this on missiology as well as general eschatology and ecclesiology is overwhelming. It is outright proof of inclusivism. They came and they worshipped Him. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Let us first look to our source and framework line by line from Matthew 2 in the NIV.

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Before this section, in the last part of chapter one, Matthew covers the angel visiting Joseph and the virgin conception; but the majority of the nativity as recorded in Matthew is focused on this section, 12 of the 19 verses, over 60%. As previously established, this majority focus must have been designed by God to tell us something. In simple terms, most of Matthew's story about the early life of Christ involves the visit of the Magi. These were the only people to know of the birth besides the local shepherds and they were from a great distance away. We learn how far in the section after this when Herod orders all children under two killed (Mat 2:16). We do not know exactly how far or how long they traveled, but theologically that is not the point. The point is that they were foreigners. Not Jewish, not local, from far away, and they were the ones that saw the star and followed God's plan. So who were the Magi?

Enigmatic Alien Worshipers

Matthew tells us so little. That they were "from the east" and called "Magi" is about all we get biblically (Matt 2:1). Access to every other source including Greek or Latin from the Vulgate to Luther to the Codex Sinaiticus shines no additional light. Most scholars are in agreement that they were Babylonian astrologers or Persian Zoroastrians since these two groups dealt with the stars and were from the east. Of course, a few simple calculations allows for them to be from almost anywhere, as two years of travel could be as much as five to ten thousand miles. Of course, Herod probably built in a little extra leeway, but even China is not completely out of the question. Tradition tells us there were three because that was the number of gifts, but there could have been hundreds (backed up by Matt 2:3 where all of the city is affected by what must have been an impressive arrival), and even though "kings" is a very loose translation, more traditional than literal, they may well have been king makers and traveled with a full entourage.

Some scholars have said they may have been Parthian, possibly even the lost tribe of Jews (Collins, 1995). Unfortunately, our total biblical description is only a couple words, so this is all speculation. In a way, we do see the word “magi” in other parts of the Bible (or a similar word in Hebrew since the two testaments had different original languages), most importantly in Daniel (magicians and wise men, including Daniel himself). So, we arrive at what we see as the “most likely” origin for the Magi. Persian Priests who knew of the work of Daniel from the past when the Jews were enslaved in Babylon. Intellectually, it would be wonderful to know the full story and origin of the Magi, but truly, we do not, so this also must mean something. For the purposes of this paper we contend that God made the Magi enigmatic for a reason. From a deeply theological stance of biblical inerrancy, especially in form, this specific purposeful lack of information in itself becomes telling. They represent **all** foreigners; **all** non-Christians, and as such they have immediate missiological implications.

Furthermore, the Magi must represent not only all foreigners and non-Christians, but more than that, other pagan religions. It would have been completely acceptable to have the Magi simply make the journey due to some knowledge and arrive in time to see the babe. But that is not what God’s Word says. It says they followed a star (2:2), and it says it more than once, even in such a tiny section it mentions this star four times in different ways (2:2, 2:7, 2:9, 2:10), almost as if God is making an important point. We contend that the star following is representative of astrologically inclined pagan religions and non-monotheistic, perhaps even animist, cultures. Furthermore, we contend that it is such an important part of such an important section that it completes the meaning. God is telling us that He speaks to pagan peoples and that He is present in all nations. This occurs many other times in the bible as well (see Abimelech, Ninevites, etc.) which we do not have time to unravel here, but it is clear that His message is one

of extremely multi-cultural mission theology. The vision and knowledge of the birth of the Savior was in the hearts of foreign magicians who brought gifts fit for a king and fell down and worshipped him (2:11).

Conclusion

So it is that the focal point of the most important time in all the history of the world and the greatest message of all time, the birth of our savior, was announced not to “insiders” or “religious leaders” or “local intellectuals” but to the poor and the foreign. The focus on these groups in the majority of the story lines are a telling sign, and a simple overview makes it obvious that God has made a specific and clear point through the gospel accounts of the nativity. Certainly, the entire Bible has missional assertions, and there are much more direct examples near the end of Matthew and throughout the New Testament of this “Great Commission”, but we contend that we do not have to go that far. That there, in the very beginning, at the birth of Jesus, we receive direct and complete missional orders. The focus of God, and therefore the *missio Dei*, and therefore **our** mission, is to bring the good news to the poor and the foreign; and that they not only have ears to hear, but may inform us as well. I would even go so far as to say these earliest examples of outreach are foreshadowing the work of Padilla and Escobar, as the Poor and Foreign are also the first missionaries (they were the first to move). Perhaps this provides in some way a historical background in the very beginning for the “reverse evangelization” of Jenkins. No matter your surrounding ideology or ecclesiology, this message is clear. No matter your full analysis or format of the gospels, these sections have little to no variation across language, translation, or time. The theme of God’s love and concern for these people groups becomes dramatically clear and following the Shepherds’ example we are instructed to spread the word. Following the Magi’s example we should not be afraid of travel or

distance or unfamiliar nations. I cannot think of a more direct biblical cross-cultural instruction. We are being told to be worldwide missionaries and evangelists. We are being made aware of God's mission focus from the very first day. There is no denying the missiological implications of the nativity, and there is no way to ignore the missional instructions of these, the stories of the earliest outreach.

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Holman Christian Standard Bible

King James Version, 1611

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New American Standard Bible

New King James Version

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The Amplified Bible

The Message

The New International Version