

Christmas

Christmas is the Christ season, the season of the Messiah, that is, the Anointed One specially chosen for a divine task. In Old English, the compound word *cristesmaesse* meant the Christ Mass or ‘the Christ Eucharistic service’, which technically applies to all Masses, but has come to refer more particularly to the liturgy of the feast of the birth of Christ.

I was speaking to a group recently and asked if they could say who was present at the birth of Jesus. This was followed by some hesitation. Not many of us are really familiar with the accounts of the nativity in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. We are side-tracked by popular nativity scenes. Below is a comparison table showing some of the differences and similarities of these two accounts. The gospels imply Joseph and Mary (apart from the baby Jesus) were the only ones present at the birth. All other characters arrived later.

Matthew	Luke
<i>Date:</i> Time of Herod the great – died 4BC	<i>Date:</i> Time of census ordered by Quirinius who comes to power in 6AD (2:1-2)
<i>Location:</i> House in Bethlehem (2:11). No mention of a manger or journey or accommodation shortage or population census.	<i>Location:</i> Stable in Bethlehem (2:7) no room in the inn. No hint of animals present. Journey from Nazareth to submit to population census.
<i>Adoration:</i> Wise men from East: Gentile astrologers/ philosophers. No number cited. They bring rich gifts. Matthew’s point: non-Jews recognise Jesus as a unique figure with a universal role and message.	<i>Adoration:</i> Shepherds: lowest in Jewish world. No number cited. Angels’ message is their gift. Luke’s point: this baby represents God’s reversal of values. He is Messiah to the lowly.
Wise men tell of the Star – heavenly sign	Shepherds tell of Angels – heavenly sign
Murder of innocent male babies (scholars estimate the number of male infants in Bethlehem at this time, to be around 12-20). Escape to Egypt.	No murder of innocents. No escape to Egypt.
Holy Family moves to Nazareth instead of returning to Bethlehem (2:19-23).	Holy Family returns to Nazareth as the town of origin (2:39-40)
<i>Major themes in Matthew</i>	<i>Major themes in Luke</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jesus is Wisdom personified. Hence the wise men. 2. Kingdom of God – Jesus calls us to the reign of God and shows its opposition to world kingdoms and power – Rome, Satan. 3. Jesus is the new Moses fulfilling Scripture and is active in our community today. 4. God speaks through Jesus – Jesus is God with us. 5. Jews and non-Jews are called to discipleship. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jesus brings universal salvation. 2. Reversal of values – Jesus is Messiah to the lowly and disadvantaged. 3. Importance of hospitality and meals as the focus of respect and acceptance of divine presence. 4. Jesus’ followers are the new Israel in continuity with the old.

The **similarities** tell us that both Matthew and Luke (writing most likely between 85-95 AD) are working with a tradition relating to the birth of Jesus. Earlier writers, Paul and Mark, make no mention of this tradition.

The **differences** tell us that each evangelist is projecting his view of the adult and risen Jesus into his birth narrative. Each evangelist has a selection of important points to make for the spiritual guidance of his particular community. Although the baby Jesus is the key figure in these narratives, it is the status, presence and actions of the adoring visitors that shape the meaning of the spiritual messages put forward in each nativity account.

Matthew, writing for a mostly Jewish-Christian community, portrays the Jewish Messiah who is God among us in human form calling all to the kingdom or reign of God. This baby boy will grow to teach us the way to God. He is Wisdom in person. His life and teachings are in perfect harmony with Judaism and fulfil the hopes and truths of Scripture. His death will be a victory over the force of evil in the world.

Luke presents the baby Jesus (to his largely Gentile church) in poor circumstances as he identifies with the disadvantaged of this world. Jesus is the Son of the Most High who fulfils Scripture. Luke will spell out the messianic mission statement of Jesus in the words of Isaiah 61 and the Magnificat of Mary. The death of Jesus will bring universal salvation to the world, i.e., rescue from the power of evil. Luke’s Jesus will mix mostly with the poor and lowly, often engaging with them over meals to invite them to discipleship.