

## Additional Notes from Marc Walker

What do you make of the inconsistencies and apparent contradictions in the gospel accounts?

Do these apparent inconsistencies trouble you in your walk of faith?

Do you think they may be a barrier preventing others from accepting the gospel of Christ?

Have any of you ever considered whether the gospel accounts are deliberately inconsistent and contradictory? Can something which is inspired by God be contradictory and inconsistent?

Thank you all for sharing your thoughts.

I would like to begin by pointing out that I am not going to try and harmonise the gospel accounts when I take lessons.

It is my belief that the gospel accounts should not be harmonised but instead be read within the context of the agenda of the author. Each gospel should be read as a whole narrative independent of each other as they all have different agendas, purposes and unique messages.

I believe we should preserve those distinct voices in their diversity and not try to harmonise them.

Last week I briefly mentioned the background of gospels. A gospel was not a new thing and it was not exclusive to the gospel of Christ. A gospel or you-on gellion literally meaning good news, was used to pronounce every coming king and kingdom during these times.

It is important to acknowledge that the biblical gospel writers were appealing to an ancient audience and each had their own agendas. They played on the pre-existing gospel concept to share the gospel of Christ in their own unique way, with the intention of sharing that there is a new king and new kingdom.

The gospel understanding of those times differed significantly from the evangelistic understanding we have in the 21st century where preaching the gospel is the announcement of salvation through the grace of God which we mean when we refer to the word gospel today.

Whilst Christ's death, resurrection and our salvation through faith alone are key parts of the gospel story, the historical and cultural understanding of what the gospel was, was significantly different from our 21st century evangelical meaning.

- The 12 disciples set out with the mission to preach the good news of the KINGDOM of God.

- John the Baptist preached the kingdom of God is coming

- Jesus taught that it was here.

Whilst a climactic part of the gospel is the resurrection and our salvation, the gospel was the kingdom of God which was manifested through Jesus. The gospel was that there was a new king and a new kingdom.

The disciples were preaching a gospel which contradicted the gospels known to the world of this time.

The old gospels were all gospels of empire  
The new gospel of Christ was a gospel of Shalom.

So, by trying to harmonise the gospels we run the risk of missing important messages. If we try to defend the contradictions between the different gospel accounts, making excuses for the differing genealogies or how one gospel account describes 1 angel whilst another describes 2. We fail to ask the question why? Why did the gospel accounts differ? Are there hidden messages for us to discover?

**It is essential to remember that these texts were written in a culture very different from our own and that what may appear to be contradictions to our 21st century western minds, may actually be purposely made differences in line with the agenda of the gospel authors.**

And this is the approach that I shall lead us through during today's lesson.

**Instead of trying to force harmonisation of the gospels in line with how we think God's inspired word should read I want to look at the alternatives, look at how inspiration may have been understood by the gospel writers in their time and culture.**

But enough of my ramblings,  
last week Llew broached on the intro of Luke's gospel, but we did not really discuss the gospel of Luke, so I want to start off by doing that.

Would anyone like to share what they know about Luke, his gospel, and what his agenda may have been?

The translation orderly in Luke's gospel is not accurate, ordered, or sequenced are more accurate translations.

Theophilus means 'friend of God' so instead of Theophilus being a person, it has been surmised that Theophilus could have been a euphemism for the church.

Regarding Luke being described as a gentile, this would most certainly not have been the case. The evidence supporting Luke being a gentile is lacking. If Luke had been born a gentile, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that he converted to Judaism at some point. When one converts to Judaism, becomes circumcised and takes on the law then they become as Jewish as someone born a Jew. Therefore, to call Luke a gentile is not accurate.

I came across a fascinating theory from Harvard, I don't know whether any of you are aware of Goulder's theory regarding the gospel of Luke?

It is a very interesting perspective and a brief description of it, is that Luke's gospel was written as a companion volume which was meant to be read in conjunction with the weekly parsha (weekly Torah reading) and the haftera readings.

Jesus's ministry would have covered the whole 3 years of the haftera so Luke could have been covering the entirety of those with his gospel. Additionally, those who Luke mentions speaking to would likely have been the hazaneem (nonordained Jewish religious functionaries).

But what about Matthew, would anyone like to share what they know about Matthew and what they think his agenda may have been?

Matthew was a Jewish author writing to a Jewish audience. There is a train of thought that the gospel of Matthew was first written in Hebrew unlike the other gospels, further solidifying his agenda.

In the notes, I asked you to compare the genealogical accounts of Luke and Matthew. Would anyone like to share anything they noticed, and anything that spoke to them from these accounts?

Matthew in his genealogy account points out the 14,14,14 and he purposely skipped a generation in order to achieve this. As we know 7 is the perfect number and there are all sorts of theories regarding why he did this, but I don't want to dwell on this because in the Jewish way of writing when something was pointed out, it was normally leading to something else, something bigger. The treasure was hidden within the texts and oral teachings of the Israelites because the reader/listener was to actively involve themselves in the source, discovering the hidden treasures for themselves.

So given that Matthew was a Jew writing to and for his fellow Jews with the intention of teaching the gospel of Christ, what hidden message do you think he is pointing us toward in his genealogy account?

Matthew has written what has been described as the worst Jewish genealogy possible. The purpose of Jewish genealogies was to describe one's ancestral purity. This was a patriarchal culture where women were only included in genealogies if it were essential.

Yet Matthew purposefully includes many women who he should not have included, worse than this he includes Moabite women, the sexually immoral and the likes, this would hurt the purpose of a Jewish genealogy. Rahab and Ruth were gentiles & Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba were women of questionable character.

Yet Matthew goes out of his way to include these people. Israelite genealogies actively avoided the mess and the impure. Yet Matthew includes the dark stories in Jesus's genealogy. Why would he do this? Does anyone have any ideas?

Matthew was making the point that those dark stories are a part of God's story. The agenda of Matthew was to speak to the outsiders and show that they are welcome in this new kingdom of God.

Matthew the tax collector's agenda came out of his own story, Matthew knew what it was like to be an outsider. Matthew left the Israelite 'narrative' so to speak and in the view of the Israelites 'sold his soul' to the Romans'. Matthew's agenda was to tell a gospel of a new kingdom in which there are no outsiders, where everyone is welcome.

Hence why in nearly every single story told by Matthew in his gospel, those who are not meant to have faith are commended on their faith and those who are meant to have faith are criticised on their lack of faith and blind obedience to law observance. Matthews was a highly inflammatory gospel criticising the religious, and the religious system. His gospel comes with a warning, that those who think they are in, are in the greatest danger of missing out on the whole message.

But I do not want to skip too far ahead so let's go back to the texts allocated for this week.

Think back to the passages in Luke chapter 1 describing the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus.

What was the significance of the holy spirit performing the miracle of Jesus's birth??? Why could jesus not be born of a man? Luke 1:35

In contrast to certain teachings that most will be familiar with, causing speculations that Christ took on a sinful nature.

The ESV study bible explains:

"The holy spirit will perform this great miracle, so that Mary will become pregnant without

having sexual relations with a man. Therefore, indicates that Jesus's holiness derives from his being conceived by the holy spirit. Though Jesus was a genuine human being, he did not inherit a sinful nature and disposition from Adam, as all other human beings do". As can be evidenced in 2 Corinthians 5, Hebrews 4, 1 Peter 2, 1st John 3, contrasting that which applies to us in psalms 143 and Ephesians 2.

Let's move now from the Annunciation of the birth to the birth event and investigate some differences between the accounts of Jesus' birth in the gospels of Luke and Matthew.

Bearing in mind the agendas and intended audiences of Luke and Matthew's gospel. Can anyone think of any significance of why Luke took the effort to include Sheppard's whilst Matthew Did not? Or why Matthew thought it significant to include the wise men from the East and his emphasis on stars whilst Luke Did not?

Both authors were making the similar points through their differing emphasis, their gospels were tailored to their individual audiences.

Can any one think of any significance shepherds, stars or magi from the east may have in the culture back then?

The fastest growing religion within the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was Mithraism. Mithraism was the Greco-Roman equivalent of eastern Zoroastrianism.

The background story of the God Mithra was that he was born from a rock in a cave and was attended to by shepherds.

Now bear in mind Mithraism preceded the birth of Christ.

In the story of Mithra, we see Shepherds attending his birth in a cave. His birthday was the 25<sup>th</sup> December.

In the Christmas story, the common theme is of Christ being born in a stable, and in the gospel of Luke, chapter 2 verse 20 Luke describes shepherds not just attending but glorifying and praising Jesus.

Now it is not my intention to question the historical reliability of Luke's account, I see no benefit in this, could it be possible that Luke included that which he did to best tailor to his audience, tying in similarities to make a statement. A statement such as our God, and our gospel trump your god?

It is not just Luke's gospel where comparisons with Mithra are made, Mark also tailored his gospel to his audience when writing to the Romans, in his gospel, Mithra comparisons can be seen in his account of Jesus' baptism and post death events for instance.

But to go into details would be skipping too far ahead,

so, back to Matthew.

Matthew unlike Luke and Mark, was writing to the Jews and therefore, needed not concern himself with Mithra and the rate of growth of Mithraism, instead he approached the birth of Jesus from a different angle, with specific details which were relevant to his agenda.

It is too much of a diversion and too complicated to do justice during the lesson today to explain, but at the time of Jesus' birth there were significant astronomical and astrological events occurring. As we know the magi from the east (Babylon) were heavily invested in such signs due to their Zoroastrianist beliefs.

Can someone read numbers 24:2-4

Who was Balaam?

Balaam was a Babylonian seer or prophet.

God prevented Balaam from cursing the Israelites and would only allow him to bless them.

Can someone now read numbers 24: 7 & 17-19

"A star will come out of Jacob"

And what did Matthew write that the magi from the east said in his gospel: "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." chapter 2 verse 2.

Could it be possible that the Magi from the east were led by God to correctly interpret the prophecies handed down from Balaam along with the ongoing the astronomical and astrological events to successfully foresee the birth of the messiah?

Matthew describes the Zoroastrian magi's understanding the significance of the birth of Jesus through interpreting their own prophecies and the astronomical and astrological events unfolding around them. If the unclean pagan Babylonians can interpret the signs successfully through their faith in astrology and their prophecies, what does this say about the Jewish peoples, particularly the religious elite. If even the pagan Babylonian seers acknowledged the messiah, how much clearer should it be to the Jews?

What are your thoughts on this?

Additionally, when we consider Matthew's previous genealogy, we can draw even more from his account. Remember the agenda of Matthew was to speak to the outsiders and show that they are welcome in this new kingdom of God. Matthew described God working through pagan Magi, speaking to them through dreams, if God can work through such

people, surely, he can work through you too, if such people are welcome in this new kingdom, surely you are too.

This would have been a fantastic gospel to read if you were an outsider in Israelite society.

But what about important historical figures, can anyone think of a significant historical figure included in Matthew's gospel but absent in Luke's gospel?

King Herod, described as the richest person to have ever existed is the one I was referring to. His wealth has been estimated to have been x100 the regional GDP.

Matthew writing to the Jews compared the kingdom of shalom in Jesus with the kingdom of empire suffered by the Jews under the cruel and paranoid king Herod.

I do not want to bore people with history, but it is important to have an understanding of the cultural context when reading the gospel accounts.

To best understand the comparison to Herod we must acknowledge the power and magnificence of Herod and his kingdom.

Everything Herod done was outrageously bigger and better than what preceded him.

(Steve, can you please put the slides up) Have a look at the size of the stones Herod ordered for the temple. It is still not known today how they were moved. It would not even be possible to use cranes and other large machinery to build the temple in that location today. Yet the largest stones weigh a staggering 260 metric tonnes.

Herod's engineers were disallowed by pain of death to divulge how they achieved the magnificent feats he ordered, because he wanted to emphasize his greatness for all eternity.

He had 3 palaces to escape to due to his paranoia.

One of which being the Masada, an extravagant palace built in the middle of the desert on the top of a mountain.

You can see it pictured in the next slide.

Herod frequently defied nature in his attempt to build a legacy for himself. One scholar has estimated that if all the cisterns in the Masada were half full, there would be enough water to sustain thousands of people for ten years. The contrast between the surrounding desert and the abundance of water inside the fortress would have impressed anyone who visited this place.

Bear in mind the Masada was built to be used only occasionally by Herod.

Another example is the Herodian, Herod wanted to build another palace on a mountain but there was not a mountain where he wanted to situate this palace, so he decided to build a mountain in order to then build a palace on it.

Again, You can see it pictured in the next slide.

Herod was the most extravagant king to have ever existed, whilst this new king Jesus, we are told was born with the animals because there was no room for him in the guest room. (Now guest room would be a more accurate translation than the commonly understood inn), which causes further issues with the theory that the wise men appeared in Jesus's home 2 years after his birth, because as there was no room in the guest room, the wise men arriving at the house as is written implies they are present during the birth narrative not merely arriving at Jesus' parents' house 2 years later. Moreover, in this culture of hospitality it is unprecedented that space would not be made for a pregnant woman in the guest room expanding on the contrast even further.

Yet more than this, can anyone tell me what the town of Bethlehem was shadowed by?????

The Herodian, the palace Herod created on the mountain Herod created simply because he could. Jesus, the son of God was born in the shadow of a palace on top of a mountain which Herod made.

As I mentioned previously everything Herod did was bigger and better yet here is Matthew showing Herod to be a fool. A fool that failed to kill a baby which threatened him. But not only a fool, a fool with an inferior you-on gelion, an inferior kingdom to that of Jesus. Herod's kingdom of extravagant wealth and power was inferior to that of Jesus who was born in poverty with animals in the shadow of just one of Herods magnificent creations. Can you imagine how this would have been read by the Jewish people of that time who were Herod's subjects?

Herod the great distanced himself from his subjects, secluded in his grand palaces because he was greater than them, yet the creator of the world comes, and is born amongst animals, lives amongst the people, heals them, comforts them, and ultimately dies for them. The two kingdoms could not have been further apart.

The same point can be seen in Luke's gospel, but the comparison is not with Herod but with another figure more tailored to Luke's agenda of writing to the romans.



At the time of Jesus there was another historical figure who claimed to be the son of God, a historical figure whose gospel which preceded Jesus is still preserved to this day.

Does anyone know who this figure is????

Divi Filius "divine son" or ("son of a god") Augustus Caesar.

Can someone read Luke 2:1

This is a brief text which I had always previously glanced over, but here Luke is setting the scene to draw a comparison of kingdoms.

Now Augustus was Julius Caesar's legal son following adoption.

I am sure many of you are familiar with Caesar's comet.

Augustus claimed that Caesar's comet was Julius Caesar ascending to his rightful throne as God. Therefore, making Augustus the son of God.

Historical references to Caesar Augustus that we know of today include: "the eternal prince of peace", "the lord of lords", "the king of kings" "the most divine", "divine son".

Additionally, common were sayings such as: "there was no other name from under heaven by which a man could be saved from terror except that of Caesar Augustus".

And

"There is no name, except Augustus, by which men can be saved."

Luke was addressing this mindset in the Roman empire and comparing Caesars Kingdom of empire with Christs Kingdom of Shalom. Luke is saying, I have heard all about your Caesar, but I have a gospel about the true son of God, the true prince of peace. A king who challenges everything you would expect a king to be, a king unlike any other.

By recognising the agenda of the author and understanding their cultural backgrounds, we are more mindful of their artistic licence. This, therefore, undermines the criticisms of incorrect historical details such as how it was not Caesar who made the decreed as Luke described, because the Jews were after all, a poetic story telling people, and the biblical gospels were gospels after all, a you-on gellion was a message of good news NOT a historical record.

Therefore, we ought to be mindful of this before trying to harmonise the gospels and similarly, critics ought to be mindful of this before dismissing the gospel accounts on the basis of historical inaccuracies, because the message was so much more than the details.

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**Matthew was demonstrating how Jesus is the new** Israel - the parallels between Joseph in Matthews gospel and the old testament Joseph we are all familiar with. Such as the amount of dreams, both coming out of Egypt etc.

Another similar difference between the gospel accounts is how the rest of the gospel authors spread the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Matthew, however, refers to the Kingdom of God only one time, the rest of the time he refers to the Kingdom of heaven.

Does this tell us anything, that Matthew referred to the kingdom of Heaven whilst the other gospel writers referred to the kingdom of God?

It once again comes down to the authors agenda and audience. Matthew was a Jew writing to his fellow Jews. The Israelites never mentioned God by name. Often the Israelites would refer to God by using the word heaven or .....

Matthew was respecting his audience,

The other gospel writers were trying to best reach their intended audiences by referring to the much-speculated God character as God.