

Jesus Christ: Who is he? – The Mystery of the Beginning

Chalcedon's particularly anti-Nestorian affirmation: Mary is *theotokos* – God-bearer – “the one who gives birth to the one who is God” (Pelikan) – “Mother of God” – is appropriate (though admittedly mysterious) language

- First affirmed at Council of Ephesus (431); re-affirmed at Chalcedon
- Not “Mary created God”, but “Mary bore the God/Human” Jesus
- From conception and birth, Jesus was both human and divine

The Virgin Birth: an aspect of the mystery of the Incarnation that has been badly handled and badly misunderstood.

- Biblical diversity: Virgin Birth is attested in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark or John, or Paul, or elsewhere in NT (though all affirm in one way or another the mystery of the Incarnation)
- Not a new concept at the time: other “heroes” (including Caesars) in the ancient Greco-Roman world were said to be born of a virgin: emphasizes “specialness”/difference from other humans
- Poses obvious biological problems: concepts of parthenogenesis and cloning were unknown at the time... even if scientific explanations were possible, they wouldn't begin to reflect the witness to Incarnation
- Has given way to claims about Mary and a piety centered in Mary and prayers addressed more to Mary; “papally-defined” doctrines of Immaculate Conception (of Mary), Bodily Assumption of Mary

Considerations worth noting:

- A part of Christian tradition since Second Century AD/CE; but perhaps not at the center of Christian witness to the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ (John 1:14)
- Christians may at times have been tempted to claim to know too much about what God can and can't do, here with respect to becoming human
- The point of the tradition of the Virgin Birth, like Chalcedon's *theotokos*/"God-bearer", is not to point to Mary, but to witness to Jesus Christ as the very presence of God for us – a unique divine intervention in history sufficient to God's purposes, not needing to be repeated
- Given purpose of the ancient tradition, and the paradoxical and mysterious character of human experience, you can embrace the tradition or have reservations about it and still remain within the Christian faith – no need to sit out confessing the creeds

The “formula” from Chalcedon – “one person, two natures” – bears a Christian consensus intended to help avoid pitfalls in speaking of Jesus Christ.

- Not much more is said “definitively” beyond Chalcedon about the relationship of the human and the divine in Jesus
- Some non-Chalcedonian versions of Christian faith endure
- Since the philosophical assumptions and mindsets of our times are significantly different from those of Chalcedon era, how might we witness to who Jesus Christ is for our world? The “formula” at least helps know where *not* to go...

- It could be we need to think more of who God is in light of who Jesus is: Christian witness keeps God and Jesus “together,” even as we engage gracefully with other faiths of the world

The Doctrine of the Incarnation: “What does this mean?”

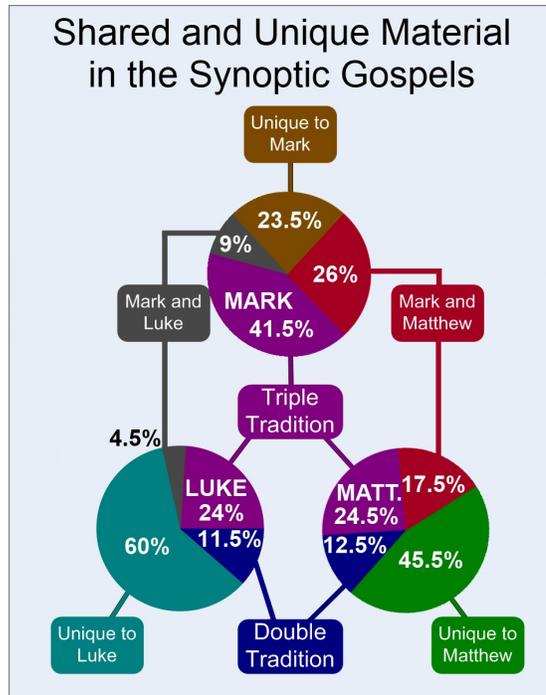
- God is active in our human experience: definitively so in Jesus Christ
 - Not far away, leaving us to ourselves (contra Deism), but closer/more present than anything else can be to you
 - To encounter Jesus Christ is to encounter God; you don’t need anything more
- In Jesus Christ, God comes to us: while we may have been created with a deep need/yearning for God and are driven to search for God, God takes the initiative to find us/break through to us
- In Jesus Christ, God comes to stay – God is tied to us forever, and will not let us go
- In Jesus Christ, God affirms humanity
 - It is good to be human. It is good to be you. (contra Manicheanism, Gnosticism; positive doctrine of Creation)
 - God became human because we need him: we have “lost” our humanity, and Jesus Christ has come to restore it – to re-create us as the humans God intends
- God knows us intimately. In Jesus Christ, we find God can be trusted, and lived with

Our Lord’s question/challenge remains for us: Who do you say that I am?

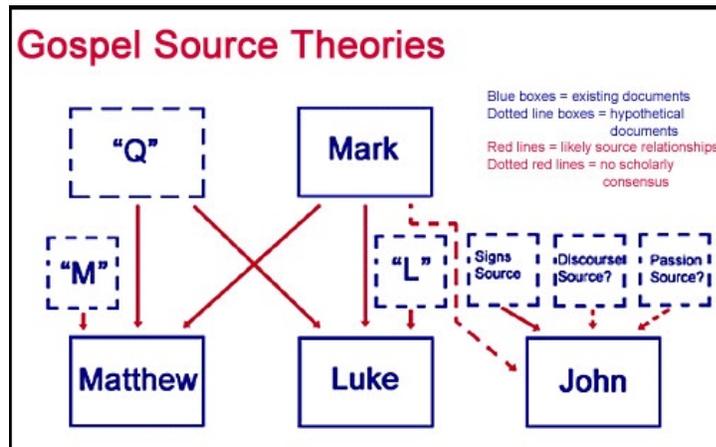
A look at Matthew Chapters 1 and 2 – Matthew’s story of Jesus Conception/birth – Jesus Christ: Who is he? – What Does Matthew Want Us to Know?

Preliminary material:

- Matthew’s background/setting
 - ca. 85 AD/CE... the name, “Matthew” attached to this text in 2nd Century
 - Written for a community of first-century Christians (not “posterity”) – probably somewhere in Syria (Antioch? Galilee?)
 - Community with Jewish roots (majority?), but also with Gentile followers of Jesus
 - Tells the story of Jesus from conception/birth through Resurrection/final promise
 - Not modern sense of biography or history – Matthew writing to/for faith
- Synoptic “theory”
 - Close reading of Gospel texts finds similarities and differences (graphic)



- Weisse (1838) first proposed Synoptic theory – added to, refined by others into 20th century



Matthew 1 & 2 – birth/conception narrative” – is “Special M” material – not in other Gospels

- Synoptic theory helps discern authorial intent of texts

Three “positions” when approaching scriptural texts:

- Behind the text: how did what we see get put together?
- Within the text: how does the “story” get told to bring us meaning?
- Before the text: what meaning do we find with which we move ahead?
- Most of our work here with Matthew 1 & 2 will be “behind” and “within” the text; but the hope is to move us to faithful moving on as we live “before” the text into our own life and life together
 - “Who do you say that I am?”