

Birth Narratives in the Ancient Mediterranean World

In the ancient world it was believed that anyone whose life made a significant impact on history was somehow in a special relationship with a god. Often this special relationship was parental. Zeus/Jupiter/Jove, the principal god of the Greeks and Romans, was notoriously promiscuous and had many human women and Titan women as lovers, according to the stories. His “illegitimate” offspring included Alexander the Great and Helen of Troy as well as some humans who were promoted to demi-gods after their deaths (Heracles/Hercules). The Julian family of Roman emperors considered themselves to be descended from Aeneas, son of the goddess Venus and a human father, Anchises.

Sometimes the birth of an important person was signaled by various supernatural portents, signaling that a person of unusual ability and pre-ordained destiny was entering the world. During their childhoods, such people were believed to have demonstrated signs of their future greatness in what they said or did or what others said about them.

Given this background, it is a little surprising that the writers of the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John did not find it necessary to include accounts of Jesus’ birth and childhood in their stories of Jesus. Mark begins with the appearance of John the Baptist and John begins with a hymn to the Word of God who was the agent of creation and “became flesh and dwelt among us” as Jesus of Nazareth.

For the last three Sundays of December, 2012, we will examine the birth narratives that we have in Matthew and Luke, as well as John’s prologue, to see what each Gospel writer was trying to accomplish in the way he told the story. Although the Christmas cards and nativity sets portraying Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus surrounded by shepherds, sheep, kings, camels, and various other animals are an iconic part of the Christmas season, it is worth taking a look at the stories as the Holy Spirit gave them to us before we mixed them into our own sentimental creation.