

Preambles to the Gospel

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What are the “preambles” to the Gospel?

This presentation will look at all four of the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but will focus *only* on the events prior to the start of Jesus’ public ministry. We will explore why these “preambles” to the Gospel vary so much, while the stories of Jesus’ public life are far more consistent. We will see how each Gospel writer skillfully uses his preamble to introduce his particular view of Jesus and his saving mission.

Historical facts on which all four versions of the Gospel agree

- Jesus was a real human being, not just a divine spirit dressed up to look like a human being.
- As an adult, Jesus was known to have come from Nazareth, a small town in the hill country of Galilee.
- Jesus was baptized as an adult by John the Baptist at the Jordan River.
- Prior to his baptism, Jesus performed no public ministry and had no disciples.
- Shortly after his baptism, Jesus quickly began preaching, working miracles, and gathering disciples.
- After numerous conflicts with the Jewish religious authorities, Jesus finally *allowed* those authorities to arrest him, try him in a Jewish religious court, and then hand him over to Roman authorities for execution.
- Jesus was crucified by order of the Roman Governor, Pontious Pilate. He died on a Friday and was taken down and placed in a tomb before sunset.
- Early Sunday morning, the tomb was found empty.
- After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to various people, demonstrating that he was alive and that he possessed some type of glorified body.

All four Gospel writers tell this same story of Jesus. The differences between their versions occur mostly in the choices of which events to include and the order in which they narrate those events. The main source material for all of them was the oral history of Jesus’ public ministry, from eyewitnesses who shared their stories, and perhaps some collections of Jesus’ sayings, from people who heard him preach and teach.

What was known about Jesus’ early life?

- There is no body of eyewitness testimony or collection of sayings from Jesus’ *private* life prior to his baptism. All the Gospels show that the people of Nazareth did *not* regard Jesus as a prophet, or as a person of any significance, before he began his public ministry.
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, probably was the only person who could have provided the Gospel writers with any information about his early life, and she would have been far more concerned about proclaiming her Son’s passion, death and resurrection — the whole reason for his coming into the world.

- Hence, it is very likely that the Gospel writers, and the rest of the Early Church, knew practically nothing about Jesus' early life. This could explain why the Gospel writers tell a consistent story of Jesus' public life, but they begin with four wildly different preambles to that story.

Where the preambles agree, and where they disagree

- The preambles of Mark and John say absolutely nothing about this early period in Jesus' life. Matthew and Luke provide radically different accounts of Jesus' conception and birth, as well as some conflicting stories about events after his birth. The *only* points on which their infancy narratives agree are these:
 1. Mary conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, without losing her virginity.
 2. Jesus was born in Bethlehem.
 3. Jesus grew up in Nazareth.
- Since Matthew and Luke contradict each other on *all of the other details*, it is very likely that these three points of agreement are the *only* historical facts contained in their infancy narratives.

Four different preambles to the same Gospel story

In this presentation, we will explore how each Gospel writer uses his preamble to introduce the distinct portrait of Jesus which he intends to show throughout his Gospel. We will see how each preamble prepares the reader to view Jesus' public life and ministry through a particular lens.

Four portraits of Jesus

In describing Jesus' public life and ministry, each Gospel writer highlights certain aspects of Jesus, which he sees as especially significant.

- **Mark:** Jesus is fully and authentically human, with the full range of human emotions, but with his divine nature hidden. No one really knows who Jesus is until he completes his messianic mission by dying on the cross.
- **Matthew:** Jesus is the Son of David, who fulfills all of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, and a new Moses, who leads his people to freedom from sin and death. Although he is the Messiah of the Jewish people, his salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.
- **Luke:** Jesus is the embodiment of God's compassion. He demonstrates and teaches God's concern for the poor, as well as God's mercy toward sinners. Jesus is a Savior for all people, from the least to the greatest, but he has a special desire to lift up the meek and the lowly.
- **John:** Jesus is the incarnate Word of God. He existed with the Father from the beginning of time and was made flesh by the will of the Father to save the world from sin and death.

Mark's portrait of Jesus:

Jesus is fully and authentically human, with the full range of human emotions, but with his divine nature hidden. No one really knows who Jesus is until he completes his messianic mission by dying on the cross.

Mark's Gospel begins with this solemn declaration: "Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." So, Mark is clear from the opening verse that *the reader* is supposed to know and believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. However, according to Mark's version of events, none of the characters in the Gospel understand Jesus' true identity *until his death on the cross*. The Roman centurion standing guard over Jesus at his crucifixion sees how Jesus dies and immediately exclaims, "Clearly, this man was the Son of God!" Prior to that, everyone just keeps asking, "Who is this man who can do such amazing things?"

After the opening verse, Mark immediately proceeds to introduce John the Baptist and tell the story of Jesus' baptism. He says nothing about Jesus' conception, birth, or childhood. Jesus arrives on the scene as a complete mystery. Mark simply says, "Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John."

Note that Mark's Gospel was probably circulating among the faithful before the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written, i.e., before anyone had read any stories about the Annunciation or the birth of Jesus.

John the Baptist is expecting someone like Jesus to come, for he says, "One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water; he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." However, Mark gives no indication that John or anyone else recognizes Jesus as "the One" more powerful than John. Everyone treats Jesus as if he is just another penitent coming to be baptized.

Mark is the only evangelist who describes Jesus' baptism as a *private revelation for Jesus*, rather than an epiphany for all those present. According to Mark, when Jesus emerges from the water, *Jesus* sees the sky open and the Holy Spirit descend upon him, and *Jesus* hears the voice of the Father speaking to him in the second person, declaring, "*You* are my beloved Son. On *you* my favor rests." Mark does not indicate that anyone else besides Jesus sees the Spirit or hears the voice. Hence, no one realizes that they have just shared the baptismal waters with the Christ and the Son of God, for the time of his revelation has not yet come.

Summary:

Mark's preamble is distinctive in two ways:

1. It reveals no information at all about Jesus' background, except that he's from Nazareth.
2. Even after Jesus' baptism, his true identity remains a complete mystery to the public.

This way of presenting Jesus fits perfectly with Mark's portrait of Jesus as the Messiah whose identity and mission will remain hidden until his death on the cross.

Matthew's portrait of Jesus:

Jesus is the Son of David, who fulfills all of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, and a new Moses, who leads his people to freedom from sin and death. Although he is the Messiah of the Jewish people, his salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.

Matthew introduces all of these themes through a sequence of events that are highly symbolic and theologically rich, but historically dubious. His preamble includes the following:

- A genealogy of Jesus
- An annunciation to *Joseph* to explain how Mary came to be pregnant
- A brief, almost passing reference to Jesus' birth
- The visit of the Magi
- The flight into Egypt
- The return from Egypt and settling in Nazareth
- The baptism of Jesus

Genealogy of Jesus

Chapter 1 opens with a lengthy genealogy of Jesus, divided neatly into three equal segments of 14 generations each. The genealogy begins with Abraham, linking Jesus to God's first covenant with his Chosen People. King David also is mentioned prominently. Hence, Jesus is clearly identified as a Son of David. Furthermore, the structure of the genealogy suggests that the Kingdom of David, which ended with the Babylonian Exile, was restored forever by Jesus, as was prophesied. The perfect symmetry of the genealogy also suggests that Jesus' birth was the culmination of an elaborate and carefully orchestrated divine plan spanning many centuries.

The annunciation to Joseph

Next, Matthew tells the story of how the birth of Jesus came about. Once again, the themes of "Son of David" and fulfillment of prophecy are central. *Joseph*, not Mary, is the key figure in the story. Mary is found to be with child, risking either a divorce or a huge scandal. Then, the angel of the Lord appears to *Joseph* in a dream and assures him that Mary has conceived her child through the power of the Holy Spirit, not through sinful intercourse with another man. Note that the angel addresses Joseph as "son of David," emphasizing that his decision to accept Mary as his wife will grant Jesus the lineage that he needs in order to fulfill the messianic prophecies associated with King David and his offspring. The angel also tells Joseph that this birth will fulfill the prophecy about a child being born who is "Emmanuel," or "God with us." So, there is a hint of the Incarnation here, although it's not nearly as explicit as in the prologue of John's Gospel.

The birth of Jesus

Matthew simply mentions that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, and he says nothing more about this event which changed the world. He gives the impression that Jesus was born quietly, with no one taking any notice of him, until a year or two later, when the Magi showed up at their house.

Since he says nothing about Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem, we can assume that Matthew thought they lived there, not in Nazareth, prior to Jesus' birth. Hence, Jesus was most likely born at home. That would explain why Matthew doesn't make a big deal about how or where Jesus was born.

The visit of the Magi

Next, Matthew tells the story of the Magi coming to look for the newborn King of the Jews. These mysterious figures from an unidentified kingdom somewhere in the East represent all the pagan nations who will also benefit from Christ's saving mission. Their symbolic gifts of gold and frankincense recall a prophecy of Isaiah, which speaks about foreigners coming to Jerusalem to join themselves to the Jewish people and honor their High Priest/King, who is a Son of David. Their gift of myrrh also foreshadows that Jesus' death will be the event which brings salvation to the whole world.

The flight into Egypt

After the Magi return to their own land, without telling King Herod the exact location where they had found the newborn King, Matthew then tells a story that ties Jesus to Moses and the Exodus, another key theme in his Gospel. Just as Moses narrowly escaped death after a royal decree called for the murder of all the newborn Hebrew boys in Egypt, so Jesus narrowly escapes a decree from King Herod calling for the murder of all the boys under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding villages. And, to make the connection even stronger, the Holy Family flees to *Egypt*, hundreds of miles away, rather than simply moving to another part of Israel. Matthew cites a prophecy which said, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." Originally, the "son" referred to the whole Israelite community during the Exodus. Matthew is identifying Jesus with that community and their descendants, showing that he is like a new Moses, but even greater. Jesus will lead his people on a new Exodus, from their slavery to sin and death, into the Promised Land of God's Kingdom.

As improbable as the Flight into Egypt might seem, the story allows Matthew to accomplish two important narrative tasks. Jesus comes out of Egypt, connecting him with Moses and the Exodus, and he ends up in Nazareth, harmonizing Jesus' backstory with one of the few historical details about his earlier life which were known to the public. Everybody knew him as "Jesus of Nazareth."

Baptism of Jesus

When Matthew narrates the story of Jesus' baptism, he again emphasizes that salvation is not limited to the Jewish people, but is open to Gentiles, as well. He does this through a nasty exchange between John the Baptist and the Pharisees and Sadducees. John chastises them for not repenting and tells them that being descended from Abraham (i.e., being Jewish) does not automatically make them righteous in the sight of God. Conversely, when Jesus presents himself to be baptized, John immediately recognizes him as sinless and hesitates to baptize him, for that reason. Jesus asks him to do it anyway, for the sake of fulfilling God's plan.

When Jesus comes out of the water, it seems that John, and perhaps others, see the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus. The voice of the Father also appears to speak to everyone present, declaring publicly and in the third person, “*This* is my beloved Son. My favor rests on *him*.” (Note the contrast with Mark, where the voice speaks to Jesus in the second person.)

Luke's portrait of Jesus:

Jesus is the embodiment of God's compassion. He identifies with the poor and shows great mercy toward sinners. Jesus is a Savior for all people, from the least to the greatest, but he has a special desire to lift up the meek and the lowly.

Luke has by far the longest and most elaborate of all the preambles. It includes the following elements:

- A short preface
- The miraculous conception of John the Baptist, followed by the miraculous conception of Jesus
- The Visitation, in which the two mothers meet, and so do their unborn children
- The birth of John, followed by the birth of Jesus
- The announcement to the shepherds, who visit the baby Jesus
- The presentation in the Temple and return to Nazareth
- The 12-year-old Jesus is lost, but then found in the Temple
- The baptism of Jesus
- A genealogy of Jesus

The preface

In the opening verses, addressed to someone named Theophilus, Luke claims to be following in a tradition of previous authors who have written about Jesus. He says, "Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled in our midst, precisely as those events were transmitted to us *by the original eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.*" These "events that have been fulfilled in our midst" almost surely refer to events in Jesus' *public* life and ministry. Eyewitnesses shared these stories, and ministers of the word preached about them in the Christian churches. Luke proclaims that he has "carefully traced the whole sequence of events *from the beginning.*" But, again, he probably means from the beginning of Jesus' *ministry*, not the beginning of his earthly life. So, we should not presume that Luke's preamble is more historically accurate than Matthew's when they contradict each other.

The relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus

Luke begins his narrative with a very complicated story in which the early lives of Jesus and John the Baptist are intertwined and remarkably parallel. According to this infancy narrative, their mothers are cousins, and their families are so close that Mary would travel a great distance to help Elizabeth through the last three months of her pregnancy. Yet, later in this same Gospel, Luke gives the distinct impression that Jesus and John don't know each other at all. For example, John baptizes Jesus without recognizing him as the Messiah or as the cousin that he has known all his life. Later, when John's disciples visit him in prison and tell him about the amazing things that Jesus has been doing, John sends two of them to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah or if they should wait for another. So, if Luke's account of Jesus' public life is as accurate as he claims, then the relationship between John and Jesus described in his infancy narrative has to be fictional.

God has visited his people again

Luke's infancy narrative borrows heavily from Old Testament stories in which God visited his people, blessing the poor and the afflicted who cried out to him, and raising up from them great prophets and heroes. This is Luke's way of showing that God again visited his people in New Testament times by reaching out to Mary and Joseph, as well as Elizabeth and Zechariah, in order to raise up from them the Messiah and the Prophet who would prepare the way for his coming. In other words, Luke is showing continuity between the Old and New Testaments and emphasizing that in the births of Jesus and John the Baptist, God has again demonstrated his great care for the poor and the humble who put their hope in him.

Conception of John the Baptist

Many great figures in the Old Testament were said to be born of women who were sterile until the Lord intervened to make them fruitful.

Examples:

- Sarah, wife of Abraham, and mother of Isaac.
- Rebekah, wife of Isaac, and mother of Jacob and Esau.
- Rachel, wife of Jacob, and mother of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers.
- The unnamed wife of Manoah, and mother of Samson, in the time of the Judges.
- Hannah, wife of Elkanah, and mother of Samuel, the first prophet.

This is a very common motif, which emphasizes that the child to be born has been consecrated to God from the womb and has been called to fulfill an important role in God's divine plan. John's conception fits this pattern, with the angel Gabriel announcing not just his conception, but also the mission that will be given to him. He will be the Elijah figure who was destined to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Conception of Jesus

Although miraculous conceptions were commonplace for Old Testament heroes, they all came about by *natural* means. God enabled the couples to conceive when they were unable to do so on their own. Jesus' conception is not only miraculous, but *supernatural*. There is no biblical precedent for a virgin birth, which is why Mary justifiably asks how it can be possible. Hence, although the two conception stories are told in parallel and follow a similar pattern, the contrast between them indicates the vast difference in dignity between the Messiah and his herald. John himself will highlight that difference when he is asked if he is the Messiah.

The Visitation

The two pregnant mothers now meet, and so do their unborn children. John supposedly leaps in his mother's womb, as if he is already recognizing and proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. Elizabeth proclaims Mary the most blessed of all women, for being the mother of the Savior. And she also commends Mary for trusting the angel's announcement, in contrast to her own husband, who doubted the angel's announcement about their son.

Mary's canticle, known as the "Magnificat," is nearly identical to the canticle of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who lived 1000 years earlier. It repeats the key theme that God lifts up the poor and the humble, but casts down the rich and the powerful. Luke is emphasizing that this is how God has operated throughout history. Mary is another example on a long list of the humble who have been exalted by God. Soon, Jesus himself will be added to that list.

Birth of John the Baptist

When John is born, everyone rejoices that God has blessed the infertile couple with a child. But nobody yet realizes how special the child is, because Zechariah, John's father, was struck mute when he doubted the angel's announcement. John's parents give him the name that God had already chosen for him, emphasizing again that this child already belongs to God. Then Zechariah is finally permitted to speak, and he launches into his famous canticle, known as the "Benedictus," in which he blesses God for his promise of salvation and proclaims his son John's special vocation in service of that salvation.

Birth of Jesus

- The circumstances of Jesus' birth could not be any more poor and wretched. The manger scene fits perfectly with the portrait of Jesus that Luke wishes to present. Jesus not only cares about the poor and afflicted; he is one of them.
- In contrast to Matthew's story of the Magi, Luke shows the birth of Jesus being announced to the lowliest of all, the shepherds out in the field. This clearly is a Savior for all people, from the least to the greatest. No one will be excluded from his kingdom because of their low social status.
- The story about traveling to Bethlehem for the census seems a bit contrived, but it offers a plausible explanation for how Jesus could have been born in Bethlehem, as the Prophet Micah seemed to predict of the Messiah, even though his family lived in Nazareth.

Presentation in the Temple

Before returning home to Nazareth, Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem and offer a sacrifice of two turtledoves. The Mosaic law generally required a larger animal to be sacrificed for a firstborn son, but allowed for a pair of turtledoves in cases of extreme poverty. Hence, Luke is again emphasizing that the Holy Family is destitute. Jesus has entered the world on the lowest rung of society, in order to identify with those at the bottom.

Both Simeon and Anna prophesy about Jesus, announcing him as the Messiah and Savior whom the Jewish people have awaited for centuries. The Prophet Malachi, who predicted that a "messenger" would precede the coming of the Messiah, also said, "Suddenly there will come to *the temple* the Lord whom you seek." Hence, Jesus coming to the temple is a highly symbolic gesture, which speaks to the fulfillment of prophecy.

Luke is most likely foreshadowing what is to come, rather than describing an actual event. If Simeon and Anna had made such a public spectacle of Jesus, as the story describes, how could the Holy Family have gone back home and lived a quiet, obscure life for the next 30 years? Also, if they were so poor that they could not afford lodging or even afford to buy a lamb to

sacrifice, how could they afford to hang around in Judea for 40 days, until the time of Mary's post-partem impurity was completed? The story seems as implausible as it is symbolic.

The finding in the Temple

Luke includes another story, unique to his gospel, about Jesus getting lost one Passover at the age of 12 and ending up essentially taking his place among the rabbis at the Temple. It's another example of "the Lord whom you seek" coming to the temple, as in the story of the Presentation. Once again, Luke is probably foreshadowing Jesus' future role as "Teacher," rather than describing an actual event from his adolescence. No one would have been surprised by Jesus' ability to teach with authority at age 30 if he had already shown himself to be the equal of the esteemed rabbis in Jerusalem at age 12.

Baptism of Jesus

Luke's introduction of the adult John the Baptist calls to mind the lowly shepherds out in the field being the first to hear about the birth of Jesus. As Jesus is about to reveal himself publicly, Luke lists all of the political figures who were in power at the time, only to say that the word of God was spoken not to them, but to John in the desert, instead. While John had been portrayed like an Old Testament hero in the infancy narrative, now he is just "a herald's voice in the desert, crying, 'Make ready the way of the Lord.'" He admits that he is not worthy to loosen the sandal strap of the Messiah, whose coming he anticipates. Note, also, that he does not seem to recognize Jesus when they meet. He just baptizes Jesus along with a large crowd of people. *After* the baptism, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and the Father speaks to him, as in Mark's Gospel. However, Luke is vague about who sees the Spirit and who hears the voice. It could be just Jesus or everybody else, too.

Genealogy of Jesus

While Matthew begins his preamble with a genealogy linking Jesus to Abraham and King David, Luke ends his preamble with a different genealogy, going all the way back to Adam, whom he calls a "son of God." Once again, Luke is emphasizing that Jesus is the Savior of the whole human race, for all are children of God.

Conclusions about the infancy narratives

The infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew appear to be masterful works of fiction, loaded with important theological themes. Even though they teach us little about the actual circumstances of Jesus' early life (or John's, for that matter), they prepare the reader very well to see Jesus as Luke and Matthew wished to portray him throughout their versions of the Gospel. Hence, these preambles, like those of Mark and John, play an important role as an introduction to Jesus' public life.

John's portrait of Jesus:

Jesus is the incarnate Word of God. He existed with the Father from the beginning of time and was made flesh by the will of the Father to save the world from sin and death.

By the time John wrote his Gospel, the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke were probably in wide circulation among the faithful. Hence, the story of Jesus of Nazareth was well-known, and his life and mission on earth were well-documented. John's Gospel seeks to address a different issue, namely, doubts about Jesus' *divinity*. And so, John does not begin with Jesus' baptism, or with his conception and birth. Instead, John begins with the Divine Word of God (*Logos*) that was with God from the beginning and eventually became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

After this prologue, John immediately proceeds to introduce John the Baptist. However, he does not narrate the actual event of Jesus' baptism. Instead, he merely has John testify to Jesus afterwards by proclaiming that he saw the Spirit descend on Jesus. This was the sign that God told him to expect. So, John the Baptist now points out Jesus to others, saying, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" And he directs his own disciples to follow Jesus instead of him.

Another unique feature about the preamble of John's Gospel is that Jesus does not go into the desert after his baptism to be tempted by the devil. Since John so strongly emphasizes Jesus' divinity over his humanity, temptation by the devil would seem rather pointless from his perspective. Instead, Jesus immediately starts attracting disciples, with the first ones being sent by John the Baptist himself.

Conclusion

Whenever we read the Gospels, we should keep in mind that these compositions are *literary* and *theological* works, not historical biographies. The authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit, were testifying to the crucified and risen Jesus, not trying to present a complete and historically accurate account of his earthly life. A correct understanding of this literary genre is especially important when reading any of the material prior to the start of Jesus' public ministry (the "preambles").

We have seen how the Gospel writers used their creativity and literary skill to introduce the main themes that would feature prominently in their presentations of Jesus Christ. Each preamble prepares the reader to see the particular portrait of Jesus that each author wanted to present. Hence, it would be a mistake to take these stories out of context and treat them as historical events, accurately described. Rather, we should read them in the context of *the Gospel in which they appear*, to understand how each carefully crafted narrative, based on only a few historical facts, highlights certain aspects of Jesus and his messianic mission.

At the same time, we recognize that all four Gospel writers were telling essentially the same Gospel story. Their different perspectives on Jesus are complementary, not contradictory. Taken together, they give a fuller picture of Jesus than any one of them in isolation. The preambles to their Gospels help to form that picture, as long as we read them as the theological works that they were intended to be. If we try to read them as historical narratives instead, we obscure their theological meaning and their literary purpose. We must always remember that the Gospels (including the preambles) were written to inspire belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and to deepen our devotion to him.