

Life Group Greek

Lesson 15 – The Nativity in Matthew

It is hard to beat Christmas. For many years I have taught a Christmas lesson exploring both Scripture and church history. The Bible gives the nativity narrative, but does not source much else for many modern Christmas traditions. We do not have the date of Jesus's birth; Saint Nicholas is centuries from arriving on the scene, and decorated trees are nowhere. How we got to December 25 and celebrated with gifts, trees, echoes of Saint Nick, the modern Santa Claus, and more, are fun traditions to place in history. While placing these matters has occupied my Christmas lesson the last several years, this time is different.¹

As we draw our Life Group Greek class to an end, we seek to take some of the Greek lessons we've learned over the last four months and apply them to the nativity story as Matthew gives it. This gives a glimpse into aspects of the story previously not discussed as well as a practical application of some of the tools we have used.

THE GREEK

In our Greek lessons, we studied, among other things, the relationship between Greek vocabulary's semantic range of meaning with English, the Greek penchant for puns, the role of Greek verbs in establishing "perspective," and the usage of the Greek "y'all." We can find most all of these concepts present in Matthew's accounting of the nativity in Matthew 1:18-2:23. We consider them in this lesson.

MATTHEW'S NATIVITY

Puns

One of Matthew's key word plays is found in a fairly common Greek word: *ginomai* (γίνομαι). This root forms a number of similar sounding words that relate in their meaning, creating a background/drumbeat setting out a certain rhythm for Matthew's nativity.

¹ The lessons setting out the historical Christmas matters are easily downloaded at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

Sometimes the root forms “*genesis*” (γένεσις), a noun from the verbal root. As anyone familiar with the English word “genesis” might surmise, the word conveys “birth,” “genealogy,” “offspring,” or “family.”

Another word formed from the root is *ginnao* (γιννάω), which means, “to be the father of,” “to bear,” or “to beget.” This word is used forty times in the first seventeen verses of Matthew where the genealogy of Jesus is set forth (i.e., “Abraham was the father of Isaac,” etc.).

A third word formed from the root is *genea* (γενεά). This word can reference a race or kind, it can refer to an age or era, or it can convey the idea of a “generation.” Matthew uses it four times in Matthew 1:17 counting the generations from Adam to Jesus.

Emphasis

We spoke of several kinds of emphasis in the Greek. The ancient Greeks had certain words that were used to alert the reader/listener that what followed was to command attention. While translators use different words to translate these emphatic signals, one of the ways we used in class was borrowing Emeril Legasse’s “Bam!” that he uses to emphasize a dish he is spicing up. In the section of Matthew set out below, we will translate Matthew’s word *idou* (ἰδοῦ) with “Bam!”

Other times the Greeks emphasized a word or idea by placing it in the start of a sentence or clause. Those we will show in the Matthew passage by bolding the word.

Verbal Aspect

We learned how Greek verbs can relate action from different perspectives. One illustration we used was that of a hurricane report. There is the satellite view of the storm that analogizes with the Greek “aorist” verb forms, where the overview is shown. This is also the Greek default verb tense, used for background and when there is no real need to shift into a more compelling verb form.

If instead of with a satellite picture, the hurricane is reported on by a reporter standing on a seawall as the hurricane comes ashore, it is akin to the perspective of the Greek verb forms known as “present” and “imperfect.” These verbs shift the reader from a satellite view of the hurricane to that of one experiencing the moment-by-moment nature of the action verbs.

We also learned of the Greek verb form known as the “perfect” that serves to describe a state of affairs. It could analogize to the reporting of the hurricane in aftermath, as the soaked reporter, standing on flooded streets speaks of the residual effects of the storm.

We will reproduce these verb forms in the narrative below by leaving the aorist verbs in normal font. We will increase the font on the more rare present and imperfect by 2 sizes, and we will further increase the perfect verb forms by 2 more sizes. Often I will also indicate the moment-by-moment nature of the present and imperfect as well as the state of affairs of the perfect through some additional bracketed words.²

The Greek Y'all

We learned that the Greek language had a second person plural usage that most modern translations simply translate as “you,” failing to show the distinction in the original that set apart the “you” singular from the “you” plural. I have clarified these “you’s” in the below excerpt by leaving the singular forms as “you,” but making the plural forms “y’all.”

MATTHEW’S NATIVITY (MATTHEW 1:1-2:23)

The book of the *genealogy* of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the *father* of Isaac, and Isaac the *father* of Jacob, and Jacob the *father* of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the *father* of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the *father* of Hezron, and Hezron the *father* of Ram, and Ram the *father* of Amminadab, and Amminadab the *father* of Nahshon, and Nahshon the *father* of Salmon, and Salmon the *father* of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the *father* of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the *father* of Jesse, and Jesse the *father* of David the king.

And David was the *father* of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the *father* of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the *father* of

² Koine Greek made great use of participles. These verbs carrying “aspect” even though they function as nouns and adjectives. Accordingly, sometimes in the Matthew text given at the end of the lesson, the increased font for verbal aspect identification does not always correspond to an English verb.

Abijah, and Abijah the *father* of Asaph, and Asaph the *father* of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the *father* of Joram, and Joram the *father* of Uzziah, and Uzziah the *father* of Jotham, and Jotham the *father* of Ahaz, and Ahaz the *father* of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the *father* of Manasseh, and Manasseh the *father* of Amos, and Amos the *father* of Josiah, and Josiah the *father* of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the *father* of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the *father* of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the *father* of Abiud, and Abiud the *father* of Eliakim, and Eliakim the *father* of Azor, and Azor the *father* of Zadok, and Zadok the *father* of Achim, and Achim the *father* of Eliud, and Eliud the *father* of Eleazar, and Eleazar the *father* of Matthan, and Matthan the *father* of Jacob, and Jacob the *father* of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called [moment-by-moment] Christ.

So all the *generations* from Abraham to David were fourteen *generations*, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen *generations*, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen *generations*.

Now the *birth of Jesus Christ* took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been **betrothed** to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and **unwilling** to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, BAM! An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is *conceived* in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this *took place* [set up a state of affairs] to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

“BAM! The virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means [moment-by-moment], God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not [minute-by-minute or at any point in time] until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Now after Jesus was *born* in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, BAM! Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king **heard** this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he **inquired** of them where the Christ was *to be born*. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so **it is written** [the state of writing/affairs] by the prophet:

““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.””

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “**Go** and **y’all search** diligently for the child, and when y’all have found him, y’all bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And BAM! The star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

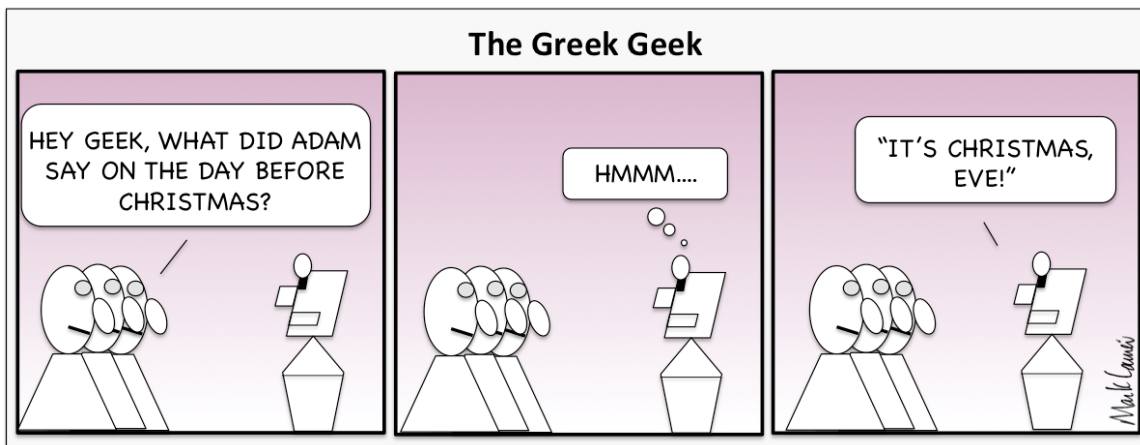
Now when they had departed, BAM! An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under,

according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was **fulfilled** what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they care no more.”

But when Herod **died**, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are **dead** [the state of affairs].” And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he **heard** that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.



GREEK FOR HOME

1. “The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means [moment-by-moment], God with us)” (Mt. 1:23).

There is a dual effect in Matthew changing his verb aspect when he quotes this marvelous passage from Isaiah 7:14. The Isaiah passage says the name of Jesus is going to be called “Immanuel.” This word can fairly be

translated “God with us,” as noted by Matthew. But notice how Matthew shifts his verb form to the present when saying Immanuel “means” God with us.

One effect is the obvious one in the English. Namely, “Immanuel” was fairly translated in the moment by Matthew as “God” (“-El”) “with us” (“*immanu*”). Yet inherent in the verb form is another idea/perspective. It is fair to say that Immanu-El means God with us in a sense that God is with us “now.” That is a “now” that exists at every moment. God was not with us only when Jesus walked planet Earth. God is with us even now. Because of the incarnate Jesus, we have God with us in the here and now, whenever and wherever the here and now is for us.

This is a marvelous blessing I need to remember and remind to others. The incarnate Jesus *was* not God with us. He *is* God with us. It means that to me today just as much as it did to people in Matthew’s day.

2. “The book of the *genealogy* of Jesus Christ... Now the *birth of Jesus Christ* took place in this way” (Mt. 1:1, 18).

Matthew begins as the “book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.” “Book” (*Biblos* – βιβλος) should not be read as if it is setting out the context of all of we today call “The Book of Matthew.” *Biblos* – βιβλος can be used of a segment within a book. We see that often in the Septuagint.

In fact, the phrase Matthew uses “*biblos geneseōs*” is the exact same phrase used multiple times in Genesis. For example, Genesis 5:1 reads, “This *is* the book of the generations [*biblos geneseōs*] of Adam” (KJV). “Genesis” (*geneseōs*) was also the title of the book of Genesis pre-dating the composition of Matthew.³

This ties Matthew’s account of Jesus into the very beginnings, not only through genealogy, but through language. We should also note that the final words of Matthew have Jesus promising to be with his followers “to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). Here we have Jesus Christ – the beginning and the end – in a story that stretches throughout time. You and I are a finite point in that time stream. In this gospel, while Jesus’ incarnation was a finite point in the time stream, we should never lose track of who he was, is, and is to come. Matthew sets out for his readers a clear understanding that generations come and go, but we can find Jesus each day in everyone.

³ Philo (25 BC -50 AD), *De posteritate Caini*, 127; *De Migratione Abrahami*, 1.

3. “Now the **birth** of **Jesus Christ** took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been **betrothed** to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 1:18).

Over and over in the Nativity, Matthew uses words related to *ginomai* – γίνομαι. This repetitive usage forms a constant thumping of the theme/play on words. Jesus Christ came in the flesh! This is the central moment in history as it culminates in the cross and resurrection. We celebrate the incarnation of God as man!!! Merry Christmas!