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Lesson 1

Before the Event of Bethlehem

The thirty-three-year span of Christ's earthly biography is small as compared to the subject of His total life. There were antecedents leading up to His birth, and sequels since His death and resurrection are still shaping world history. Before we begin study of the events of Jesus' earthly life, it would be enlightening to consider some subjects that are related to His life in an anticipatory way.

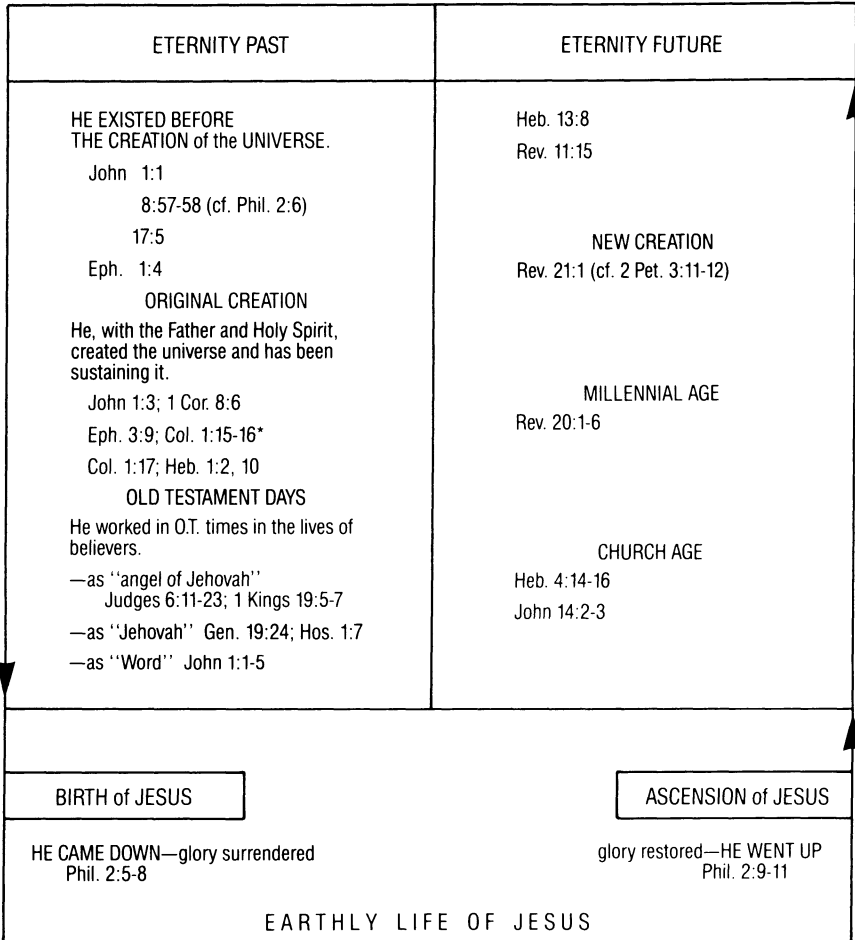
I. THE PREINCARNATE CHRIST

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was the first event of His earthly career as the incarnate ("in the flesh") Son of God. But He existed before that time. For Christ, like the Father and the Spirit, did not have a beginning—He has always existed. When John says (referring to Jesus) that the Word was "in the beginning" (John 1:1), he is simply declaring that when creation's time began its course (Gen. 1:1), the Word, or Jesus, was already existing.

The Bible does not furnish many specific details about the preincarnate Christ, or, for that matter, about the ascended Lord. That which it does tell us is vital to know. Study Chart A, then read each Bible reference shown. Record in a few words the essence of each verse. (You may recall other verses that apply to this survey.) What are the important truths that the Bible teaches about the preincarnate Christ?

**CHRIST FROM ETERNITY TO ETERNITY
THE PREINCARNATE CHRIST**

**Chart A
THE ASCENDED LORD**



* Some translators translate “primeval Creator” instead of “firstborn.”

How is this doctrine related to that of His deity?

Make a special study of Christ's humiliation (from throne to cross) in Philippians 2:5-8; and of Christ's exaltation (from cross to throne) in Philippians 2:9-11. What is the practical exhortation in this passage?

II. THE ANCESTORS OF JESUS

Divine design in the ancestral line of a person is supremely manifested in the ancestry of Jesus. Every prophetic word uttered concerning Him in the centuries before He was born was spoken according to a perfect divine plan and fulfilled with the same accuracy. Of the things prophesied of Him, four were prominent:

1. He was to be of the human race (Isa. 9:6a).
2. He was to be of the messianic covenant line (Gen. 22:18; 49:10).
3. He was to be of the royal line of David (2 Sam. 7:14, 16; Isa. 11:1).
4. He was to be "The mighty God" (Isa. 9:6).

The two New Testament genealogies of Jesus (Matt. 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38) bring out the above four fulfillments. To acquaint yourself with these genealogies, read the two lists and note the likenesses and differences. You may want to record the two lists in parallel columns to help you compare the two. (Record both in the advancing order of Matthew's.)

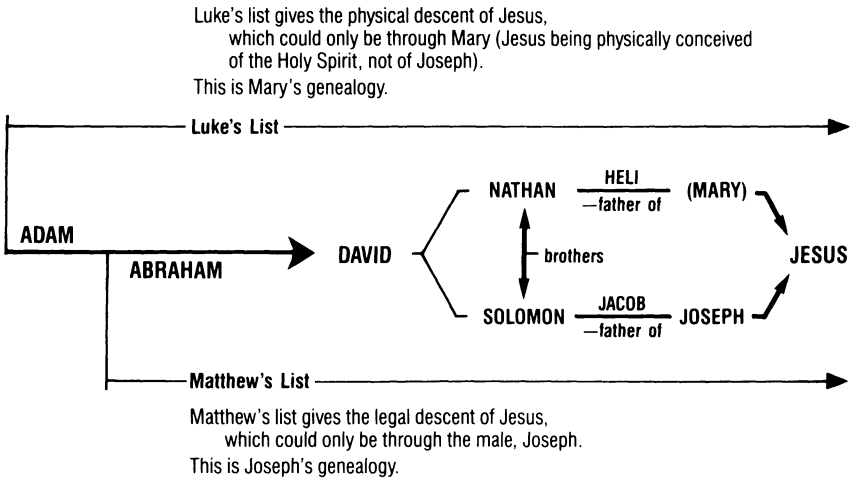
Chart B shows the prominent features of the two lists. Both genealogies are of Jesus, Luke giving the ancestors of Jesus' mother, Mary, and Matthew giving those of Jesus' legal father, Joseph.

Some observations:

1. How far back in the human race does each genealogy go?
-

GENEALOGIES OF CHRIST

Chart B



Account for the difference, keeping in mind that Matthew wrote especially with the Jew in mind.

2. Compare the lists from Abraham to David.

3. Note that the brothers Nathan and Solomon were the forefathers, respectively, of Heli (father of Mary) and Jacob (father of Joseph). Which brother succeeded David on the throne? (cf. 1 Kings 1:13).

4. Matthew divides his list into three groups (rounded off to fourteen generations each for convenience): Abraham to David (theocracy); David to Babylon (monarchy); Babylon to Christ (hierarchy). Was Israel's history generally bright or dark during these periods?

5. Matthew uses the word "begat," which in Jewish genealogies usually referred to a son but sometimes referred to even more dis-

tant offspring, such as a grandson. For example, Matthew 1:8 says, “Joram begat Ozias,” but 1 Chronicles 3:11-12 indicates that there were three descendants of Joram before Ozias was born. Such genealogical “gaps” are not errors in the Bible but rather allowable liberties that the recorders took for the purpose of the record.

Now let us see how the genealogy of Jesus fulfilled the four prophecies listed earlier in this section.

1. *Son of Man*. Jesus was identified literally with the human race, born in human flesh (cf. Gal. 4:4). Luke emphasizes His identity with the entire human race by going back to the first man, Adam. Matthew brings out the “human” aspect of this race (though Jesus was not bound by any limitations of humanity) by citing names with moral blots (e.g., Rahab) and by making a big point of the captivity of Judah in Babylon.

2. *Messiah*. Four times in the first eighteen verses of Matthew Jesus is identified as the Christ (the word is from the Greek *chrīo*, “anoint”), a title equivalent to Messiah. Matthew also emphasizes this messianic aspect in the opening statement, identifying Jesus as the “son of Abraham” (1:1). Also, Matthew’s list of names begins with Abraham. It was with Abraham that God first made His covenant with Israel, promising them everlasting blessing (cf. Gen. 12:2-3; 17:3-8). Jesus came to be not only the hope of the world but also the deliverer of Israel.

3. *King*. Matthew calls Jesus “the son of David” (1:1). He repeats the phrase “David the king” twice in 1:6. The royal line of David, continued through Solomon his heir, is recorded by Matthew. It is noteworthy that the bloodline of Jesus (Mary’s descent), recorded by Luke, also reaches back to David.

4. *Son of God*. Both genealogies are careful to guard the truth of Jesus’ deity, His birth being of supernatural conception by the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 1:20). Joseph was Jesus’ legal father only. Matthew says that Joseph was “the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus” (Matt. 1:16). The phrase “of whom” is in the feminine form in Greek, referring only to Mary. Note how, a few verses later (v. 23), Matthew explicitly identifies Jesus as God.

The reading of Luke 3:23 also guards the truth that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit, not of Joseph. The verse literally reads, “And Jesus . . . being (as was supposed, son of Joseph),¹ of

1. The closing parenthesis placed here can be justified by the original Greek and also makes more sense. See A.T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper, 1922), p. 261. Compare the Berkeley version of this verse.

PROPHECIES FULFILLED IN JESUS

Chart C

PROPHECY	DESCRIPTION	FULFILLMENT
	PRE-EXISTENCE AND BIRTH	
Isa. 11:1		Rev. 22:16
Isa. 7:14		Matt. 1:18-23
Mic. 5:2		Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:1-7
Dan. 9:25		Luke 3:1, 21-22
	PUBLIC MINISTRY	
Mal. 3:1; 4:5-6 Isa. 40:3-4		Luke 1:13-17; Matt. 3:1-3, 16; 17:10-13
Isa. 11:2		Matt. 3:16
Isa. 61:1-3		Luke 4:16-21
Isa. 53:3		Mark 3:6
Zech. 9:9		Matt. 21:1-11
	DEATH AND RESURRECTION	
Isa. 53:4-8; Dan. 9:26		John 19:18; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 3:18
Ps. 34:20; Ex. 12:46		John 19:33, 36
Zech. 13:7		Matt. 26:31, 56
Isa. 53:9, 12		Luke 23:32-33; Matt. 27:57-60; John 19:39
Ps. 22:7-8		Matt. 27:39-43
Ps. 22:18		Matt. 27:35; John 19:23-24
Ps. 22:1		Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34
Ps. 16:10; Isa. 53:10		Matt. 28:1-6; Acts 2:22-32
	PRESENT AND FUTURE MINISTRIES	
Ps. 110:1, 4		Acts 5:31; Heb. 8:1
Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 7:13-14		Luke 1:32-35; Matt. 25:31

Heli.” Heli was Mary’s father and thus was Jesus’ grandfather. So Luke’s list begins with the recognition of the supernatural virgin birth of the Son of God. (Observe that Luke ends the list with a reference to the divine creation of the father of the human race, Adam, “of God” [Luke 3:38].)

It is interesting to observe that two gospels, Mark and John, identify Jesus as God in the very first verses. Mark 1:1 records the grand genealogical fact: “Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” John 1:1 says clearly, “The Word was God.”

III. PROPHECIES FULFILLED IN JESUS

Over and over the Old Testament Scriptures pointed to Christ as the coming One. Hundreds of such prophecies are in the indirect form of types, such as offerings, feasts, events, institutions, men, the Tabernacle and its articles. More than three hundred prophecies are stated directly in words, relating to some aspect of Christ’s Person or work. A familiar expression in the gospels, appearing about thirty-five times, is “that it might be fulfilled,” referring back to an Old Testament prophecy. Everything about Jesus was in accord with a divine plan, drawn before the foundation of the world.

The accompanying list in Chart C gives the locations of some of the major messianic prophecies and their fulfillments. Look up each verse, and record in the middle column a brief description of the prophecy.

IV. THE WORLD INTO WHICH JESUS CAME

“When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son . . .” (Gal. 4:4). The time was right as to preparation, for the law had served its disciplinary and instructive purposes. The time was right also as to political, religious, and social climate, conducive to the ministry of the gospel; and it was right as to need—a spiritual vacuum was waiting to be filled.

The world of Jesus’ day was ruled by Gentile Rome. The particular people to whom He primarily ministered were the Jews of Palestine. (Read Matt. 15:24.) Chart D is a summary tabulation intended to describe these two “worlds” of Jesus’ day, Gentile and Jewish.

This is James Stalker’s description of the Jewish world to which Jesus came:

A nation enslaved; the upper classes devoting themselves to selfishness, courtiership, and skepticism; the teachers and chief professors of religion lost in mere shows of ceremonialism, and

ROMAN EMPIRE	JEWISH PEOPLE
POLITICAL SETTING	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Unification of the Mediterranean world —Safe and easy communication —Universal language —Universal peace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Under the yoke of Rome —Expectation of a Deliverer, of their own race —Sanhedrin (the Jewish organ of local government) had only limited power
MORAL SETTING	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Degradation —“To corrupt and be corrupt is the spirit of the times” (Tacitus) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Generally strict standards —Sadducees sponsored moral compromise
INTELLECTUAL SETTING	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Greek and Roman culture highly developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Education a prominent part of the Jews' life
RELIGIOUS SETTING	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Heathen idolatry —Mystic religions —Philosophic religions —Spiritual vacuum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Generally intensely religious as to externals —Religious life molded by three sects: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pharisees: rigid legalists; self-righteous; middle class 2. Sadducees: free thinkers; worldly; upper class 3. Essenes: mystic pietists; ascetics —Synagogues and rabbis: a thriving institution of worship, which arose after the exile —A believing remnant: there were some who looked and prayed for the advent of the Messiah (read Luke 2:21-39)

boasting themselves the favorites of God, while their souls were honeycombed with self-deception and vice; the body of the people misled by false ideals; and seething at the bottom of society, a neglected mass of unblushing and unrestrained sin.²

Concerning the Graeco-Roman world of Jesus' day, G.T. Manley writes:

We must not, of course, exaggerate the preparedness of the Graeco Roman world for the acceptance of Christianity. It needed three centuries of intensive evangelization and heroic witness-bearing to overcome the pride and self-satisfaction begot-

2. James Stalker, *The Life of Jesus Christ* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1880), pp. 35-36.

ten of so mighty and dazzling a civilization. But its external order, its deep spiritual aspirations, and its groping after truth, all assured the presence in it of good soil when the Sower came with His seed which is the word of God.³

V. CONCLUDING EXERCISES

Compare the world today with the world of Jesus' day, with respect to the need for the gospel and the opportunities of its proclamation. How is the gospel relevant to the life of man today? Is the gospel for *all* people?

Jesus is coming again. Will the event be as real as His first coming? Read John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18. Then read Luke 2:21-32 again, and observe that Simeon was waiting for the coming of the Messiah *while* he was *servicing* in the Temple. Try to recall passages in the New Testament that exhort the believer to *wait* and *work* until the coming of the Lord.

3. G.T. Manley, ed., *The New Bible Handbook* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1947), p. 293.