Two Men & A Baby: Jesus’ Birth in Matthew and Luke

1. Should you care?
Most of what we know about Jesus’ birth comes from the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. (Mark and John begin their Gospels with Jesus full grown.) But the Christmas story dear to many people may owe more to carols and Christmas cards than to the New Testament. How much do you know? Test your Christmas Trivia. Answer True or False. (This isn’t graded. Answers on p.2.)
   ___ 1. Mary rode to Bethlehem on a donkey.
   ___ 2. Mary was almost ready to deliver the baby when she arrived in Bethlehem.
   ___ 3. They laid the baby in a manger because there was no room in the inn.
   ___ 4. The manger was in a cave.
   ___ 5. Animals surrounded the baby.
   ___ 6. Three kings came to Bethlehem to pay homage to Jesus.
   ___ 7. The wise men followed a star.

2. Thoughtful readers wonder . . .
   . . . whether the Gospels give us accurate historical details about Jesus’ birth
   . . . whether the virgin birth is myth, theological claim, historical & biological fact, or some combo
   . . . what the star was and how the Magi knew a Jewish king had been born
   . . . what Old Testament images Matthew and Luke deploy to tell their stories
   . . . whether the infancy narratives are linked to the rest of the story or simply tacked on
   . . . why Mark and John don’t have birth narratives
   . . . how our view of Jesus would change if we had no birth narratives
   . . . what the Christmas story adds to our understanding of Jesus & what it means for us

3. Your Quest: To puzzle out parallels and differences between two accounts.
Look up the passages on the right and fill in the blanks.

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Reflection. Submit this (filled-out) worksheet attached to one typed page of thoughts on the following questions.

3.1. Which similarities are most significant or most striking to you?
3.2. Which differences are most puzzling?
3.3. How might you explain this combination of overlap and difference? Do the two accounts contradict each other? Why or why not?
3.4. How might you characterize each Gospel’s portrait of Jesus? That is, what features stand out in each Gospel?
3.5 How, if at all, would your faith be affected if we had no birth narratives?

BONUS (2 pts): After completing this task, read the lead article on Jesus in *Time* (Dec. 13, 2004) ("Behind the First Noel," by David Van Biema; on reserve in library) and discuss the author’s appeal to Jewish (esp. for Matthew) and Greco-Roman (esp. for Luke) backgrounds to explain various bits of the story. Is this worrisome to you? Why or why not? Express your thoughts in a paragraph.

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**Answers to Christmas Trivia**

1. Unknown. See Exodus 4:20 for a possible source of this idea.
2. Unknown. In Luke 2:5, the *King James Version* calls Mary “great with child,” but in 1611 (when this translation was made) the expression simply meant “pregnant.” We don’t know how far along she was.
3. False. The word in Luke 2:7 often rendered “inn” (καταλύμα) likely refers to a public shelter or maybe the front reception room of a private home.
4. True, according to early Christian traditions. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was built over a network of caves. Its location was determined by Constantine’s mother Helena on a pilgrimage around 324 C.E. Many scholars today readily imagine that Helena successfully located the cave/house where Jesus was born.
5. False, but they were probably close by. Scripture says nothing about animals but we do know that ancient dwellings would typically have a raised platform or 2nd story for humans, and a lower, dirt area for animals. Evidently, they found space in the animal quarters for the delivery or soon thereafter. The ox and ass on Christmas cards come, as best as we can tell, from the 8th or 9th century, from a document we call Pseudo-Matthew, influenced, in turn, by Isaiah 1:3.
6. Unknown. The number three is probably due to the three gifts mentioned. They probably came to be called “kings” under the influence of Ps 72:10-11.
7. Probably false. Matthew says only that they saw a star in the east, and that they saw it again as they approached Bethlehem. Nothing suggests they followed it all the way. Since they went to Jerusalem for help, they probably were assuming the child was in Herod’s royal nursery. Could a star lead them west to Jerusalem and then south to Bethlehem?