Experiencing the Christmas Story
with Darrell L. Bock and Mikel Del Rosario
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Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. My name is Mikel Del Rosario, cultural engagement assistant at the Hendricks Center at Dallas Theological Seminary. And our topic for today is "Experiencing the Christmas Story."

My guest in the studio is Dr. Darrell Bock, executive director of cultural engagement and senior research professor of New Testament here at Dallas Theological Seminary. Welcome, Darrell.

Dr. Darrell Bock Uh-huh, my pleasure as always.

Well, before the broadcast, we were talking about kinda different approaches that we see to Christmas – to the Christmas story. And I've certainly seen this in the apologetics blogosphere and Christian blogs on the Internet, where you get a couple of different approaches to Christmas.

On the one hand, you have people who write about Christmas in terms of how Jesus came to Earth. And we look at Jesus' birth in light of what we find out at the end about who Jesus is. Like the Gospel of John, for example, starts out telling us.

And then the other approach is where we do this defense of the faith, or we're looking at the possibility of miracles; we're looking at the historicity of the Gospel accounts. What do we miss out on by only focusing on these two approaches to the Christmas story?

Well, amazingly, we may miss out on the actual story of the birth. It's surprising, because we end up being distracted either by proving the historicity of the account, or trying to do that, or dealing with the philosophical approach to miracles in relationship to the virgin birth.

Those of us who have a faith in God being a Creator and being present in the creation don't have any problem with him working in that creation. The idea of a virgin birth is not something that catches us too terribly by surprise.

But in a modern world, you find yourself defending those things. And in the midst of doing that, you oftentimes miss out on actually the point – some of the key points of the Christmas story itself.
Mikel Del Rosario

Mikel Del Rosario Mm-hmm. And so, what we want to do with our conversation today, in this approach, is to just walk through the Christmas story. We'll look at it in Luke, and we'll look at it in Matthew and see what these different approaches give us and try to put ourselves in the shoes of someone who doesn't know the end of the story. You know?

Dr. Darrell Bock

Dr. Darrell Bock That's right. In fact, one of the interesting things – fascinating things – is to think through how the infancy material actually works. It actually lays the groundwork for the two Gospels in which the infancy stories appear.

In Luke, it's setting up, much like an overture would in a piece of music, what's gonna be happening in Luke-Acts. And in Matthew, it sets up the story about how promise is being completed in Matthew. And it does so in a way that tells us God's doing unusual things. A virgin birth is not a normal activity. It doesn't happen every day.

But on the other hand, it signals something special's going on. But watching it dawn on people what is going on is actually part of the wonder of the Christmas story.

Mikel Del Rosario

Mikel Del Rosario Yeah. Well, it really is a fascinating story. So, let's take a look at the version in Luke to begin with Luke is writing with – primarily through Mary's eyes. And you think about the Christmas story as the birth of Jesus. And yet, when you start, the story has John – you know, the story about the annunciation of John's birth. So, why is John a part of this story?

Dr. Darrell Bock

Dr. Darrell Bock Well, John's a part of the story because he's the pointer, the forerunner to the Messiah in the synoptic Gospels. And as a forerunner, it actually is evoking an image that comes out of the Old Testament that says that God's coming will be announced. It will be pointed to.
And so, John becomes the figure – whether you're thinking about Isaiah 40 or Malachi 3, John becomes the figure who points to the arrival of the Promised One, the arrival of the eschaton, if you will. And so, we go through a full comparison in Luke 1 between the birth of John the Baptist and what John represents – prophet of the Most High God – to what Jesus represents, and that is the Son of David on the one hand, and the one who is the Son of God on the other.

**Mikel Del Rosario**  Mm-hmm. And so, we see John then is pointing toward Jesus. There's kind of a parallel with these birth announcements, 'cause we move now into the annunciation to Mary. Luke tells us that Elizabeth was old. Then we have this contrast Mary's very young. Right?

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  Mm-hmm.

**Mikel Del Rosario**  How old was Mary do you think?

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  Mary would have been – if this is a typical first century situation of someone being betrothed – would have been between the ages of 12 and 14. So, I tell people, this is a seventh-grader. You know?

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  Yeah. And your reaction is what the crowd – I get raised eyebrows and, "Really?"

"Yeah." You know, that kinda thing. So, we're talking about a very, very young girl. I think it's important to understand that in the ancient world, if you lived to be the age of 5, the average span of life was 40, and it was really exceptional to live to your 60s or 70s.

So, I like to tell my classes, I say, "I hate to announce this to you, but you're all senior citizens, and I'm geriatric."

And so – so, there's really a sense of a compressed time of life, and people moved into marriage as quickly as they could. Now boys, generally speaking, would have been older, between 18 to 25-30, in that range. But generally speaking, the girls would have been younger.
So, this is a seventh-grader. And there's another interesting comparison that was at work here. In the Old Testament, when you get women who are of age, who bear children, you know someone special is coming down the line; Samuel perhaps being the key example in relationship to Hannah and her giving birth in old age. This is a common pattern.

But here we've got that a little bit reversed. Here we have a virgin birth in a very, very young child. And there are a lot of parallelisms that are working in this passage, where you get pairings. You get the announcement to Zachariah, a male. You get the announcement to Mary, a female. So, there are pairings that are also going through the infancy material that drive the story and that bring balance to the fact that Jesus is coming is for all people.

**Mikel Del Rosario**  
Hmm, mmm. Well, this is a very unusual story for sure. Let's take a look at this one verse in Luke. Luke 1:30-32. 'Cause the way that this child is conceived is very unusual. The angel says:

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Listen. You will become pregnant and will give birth to a son. And you will name him Jesus. And he will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.

The angel goes on to say he'll reign forever; he'll be holy. He'll even be called the Son of God. What was going through Mary's head when she heard these things of what her baby was gonna be called?

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  
Well, I think that sometimes when we hear "Son of God," we automatically leap to Jesus being the second Person of the ontological Trinity. We get a full Trinitarian view. And certainly for people who know the entirety of the story of Jesus, that's a natural place to go.

But I think at this time, she's really hearing, "This is the Promised One. This is the Messiah. This is the One who's gonna bring deliverance to God's people. And "Son of God" is an ambiguous phrase in the Old Testament. It can refer – in fact, it most often refers to the king. "I will be to him as a father; he will be to me as a son." That's the language of the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7.
And so, I once heard a devotional from – in a context of a church service, around Christmastime, from a woman who said, "I wonder what it was like for Mary to raise a child who never made a mistake and who realized she was having a perfect child."

And I'm sitting in the audience going, "I don't think Mary even had that thought. She wasn't quite there yet." And we see this in the context of Jesus' ministry, because when he announces the nature of his authority, etcetera, his family comes to him and wants to talk to him about some of the things that he's saying about himself.

So, I think what we've got here is an announcement in which the understanding is this is the Messiah, but the people who are receiving this announcement don't yet understand everything that the Messiah is going to be. And what they sense is this is God's answer for his promise. God is keeping his word, but there's still a lot to learn about who this figure's gonna be.

**Mikel Del Rosario**  Mm-hmm. So, Mary wasn't thinking, "This is little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." Right?

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  Exactly right, yeah, yeah. I have no idea whether Jesus whimpered or not.

**Mikel Del Rosario**  Well, when we think about Mary being a virgin, how does that tie into Elizabeth's getting pregnant? 'Cause there's a kind of a parallel going on here –

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  Yeah, well, again, everything in the parallel is designed to show that anything that John can do, Jesus can do better. And so, Jesus is the superior so that one contrast is the prophet of the Most High vs. Son of God. Another contrast is the means of birth. Mary as a virgin birth in contrast to Elizabeth, who has a natural birth even though she's up in years, so that there are two miracles, but the one miracle is greater than the other.

And everything about the way this first chapter is laid out is designed to show John's preparation for the arrival of Jesus. He comes in the spirit of Elijah Luke says. This is the pointer role that we're talking about. And the chapter's even told in such a way that Jesus is the one who emerges from the first chapter as the center of the story. So, we get this comparison.
We get to the end of Chapter 1, and we get the hymn to John at the naming – at his naming. And then immediately John goes offstage, and Jesus is the only subject in Chapter 2 of the infancy narrative.

So, everything is designed to show the superiority of Jesus in relationship to John, and John doing his role as a pointer, even to the extent of doing flips in the womb. You know? Of pointing out when the two come together, Mary and Elizabeth, for the first time. Even from the womb – the text says that the child will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, and from the womb he testifies to Jesus when the two mothers come into one another's presence.

Mikel Del Rosario  Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Going back to her being what we would think of as a seventh-grader, for Mary what would that have meant to her culturally to be found in this state?

Dr. Darrell Bock  Well, just think about what's in store for her when she accepts this announcement from the angel, and she says in effect, "May it be to me as your word." And she actually is presented very much as an example of a person of faith who is responsive to God and undertakes the role God has them undertake.

So, just imagine the series of conversations that she is headed for. She's headed for a conversation with Joseph about her being pregnant. She's headed for a conversation with her parents about being pregnant. You know? I wish there was such a thing as recording during that time, and that those conversations would have been recorded. Those would have been very interesting conversations to be a part of.

'Cause you can just imagine, "I'm pregnant."

"Well, okay. And how does this happen?" You know?

I tell students, when we talked through this, I said, "The people in this drama all understand Biology 101.

And so, "How does this happen?"
And then she says, "Well, it's by the Holy Spirit." And just imagine the burden this puts on the entire conversation when that happens. She's undertaking that role. And, of course, what we see when the announcement is made is she immediately moves off into a hymn of praise literally littered with the language of the Old Testament, showing her piety. Mary is very much an example of faith, an example disciple in this chapter as she takes on the role of bearing this child under these circumstances.

Mikel Del Rosario

Mm-hmm. So, we take a look at Mary. We take a look at Elizabeth. We see their faith in this, and Mary says, "Let it be to me just like you said; I'm the Lord's handmaid."

And so, now we get to Zachariah. He wasn't the bastion of trust earlier.

Dr. Darrell Bock

No, he went through a quiet time. That's what I call it. When he – when this was originally announced to him, he asked, "How can this be?"

And basically the angel says, "Well, you're going to be quiet until you see God pull off his word."

And it's designed to be a lesson to say, "If God promised this, if God says this is gonna happen, this is gonna happen. You're gonna watch it happen, and you're gonna watch it happen. You're not gonna be able to speak; you're not gonna be able to hear. You can have a little time to reflect on the fact that when God says it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen."

The interesting thing about this chapter and this feature of the chapter is whereas Zachariah is put in this large quiet time, during the entirety of the pregnancy of Elizabeth with John the Baptist, Mary asks essentially the same question when the virgin birth is announced. And there's no punishment; there's no limitation on what happens to her. I get people asking me, "Well, why is that?"

And I said, "That's a question for the heavenly press conference; I don't know the answer to that question." But it is interesting this juxtaposition. But literarily what's happening, of course, is that everybody is supposed to realize if God says it, and if God promises it, it will happen.
In fact, this is one of the major themes of these early chapters. Now, why would Luke be interested in saying that? Because there are other things that God has committed himself to, through this child who's now going to come to Earth and be the Savior and has now been resurrected. There are other things that God has committed himself to that haven't happened yet. Haven't even happened yet for us.

So, the idea that God keeps his word – and he will be faithful, and he keeps his promises – is designed to reassure us that the things that God has committed himself to will happen. And part of the goal of the Gospel of Luke is to reassure Theophilus of the things that he's been taught in Luke 1:4. So, all these things are driving us to say we can trust God to keep his word.

Mikel Del Rosario  Mm-hmm, no matter how unusual, no matter how seemingly impossible.

Dr. Darrell Bock  That's right. In fact, everything about it's odd. When they go to name the child – and, of course, they pick a name that isn't a family name, isn't a part of tradition. But it's out of the ordinary. And they're being obedient to the way the angel instructed them to name this child. And when Elizabeth does it, they go, "Oh, she's taking advantage of the fact that he can't speak."

So, then they check it out with him, and, "Nope, that's gonna be the name." And as soon as that happens, this quiet time that Zachariah's been under goes away, and he's able to speak, and we get the hymn that comes off of it. Everything about that is designed to say Zachariah learned his lesson. He learned to trust God; he learned to do things the way God does. He learned the fact that the arrival of the Savior is gonna call on people sometimes to do things they're not used to doing, to live differently, if you will; all of that is being reflected in what's going on here.

Mikel Del Rosario  Yeah. And so, now Zachariah is being obedient.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Exactly right.

Mikel Del Rosario  And he has this hymn; he prophesies. And I want to read this short section from Luke 1:68-70. Zachariah prophesies. He says:
Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel, because he has come to help and has redeemed his people. For he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from long ago.

What's the background of this hymn, and what does Luke want us to get at this point in the story?

Dr. Darrell Bock Well, again, it's the arrival of the Messiah; it's the arrival of the completion of the promise made initially to the nation: the promise that there would be a seed of David who would be a deliverer. That's being appealed to. There's an interesting little juxtaposition, too, that happens in this passage. It's actually pretty fascinating. It says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited us and made redemption for his people."

The verb "visit" is an interesting verb, because later on in the hymn, it talks about the mercy of God when the rising sun of the morning rises up and visits us. Okay? So, the Messiah is pictured as a light who shines in the midst of darkness, bringing day out of night. That's the visit of the one who makes redemption and the one who's raised up as a horn of salvation out of the house of David.

So, the end of the hymn matches the beginning of the hymn and the Davidic promise and the promise of God completing his work through this Deliverer is declared very clearly by Zachariah as he announces the arrival of this child. And he says things like – that he's gonna rescue us from our enemies; he's gonna show mercy. He's gonna rescue us from the hands of our enemies so that we can serve him in righteousness and holiness all the days of our lives.

I like to say, "That's a great life verse." You know? That's the point of the exercise. We're delivered, and we're freed, but we're not freed to do our own thing. We're freed to live in a way that is honoring to God.

Mikel Del Rosario Wow. And so, the picture that's emerging of John here is somehow he's pointing the way to the Messiah. Somehow he's pointing the way to Jesus. And there's elements of salvation and forgiveness here that are at work as well. You mentioned Isaiah 40 earlier; can you expand on that a little bit?
Dr. Darrell Bock

Yeah, it's the idea of – it's the clearing of the desert for the arrival of the Lord. It's the passage at the beginning of the last section of Isaiah, from 40 to 66, in which the ultimate deliverance of not just the people of God and Israel, but of the world is being described, and John the Baptist is being described as issuing a call in which people are to clear the way for the entrance of God.

I call it kind of a creation red carpet. You know? Everything gets leveled, doesn't matter whether it's hills or mountains or whatever. And on into this entryway comes the activity of God. That's the picture that we're dealing with here.

Mikel Del Rosario

Hmm. Well, let's turn to the core of the Christmas story. When we think about the Christmas story, we normally think of the nativity scene. And we go to Luke Chapter 2 now. And Luke says there was a census that was ordered by Caesar Augustus, and that's why Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem.

Now, Joseph was of the house of David. What entirely does that mean for him? What's that mean for Jesus?

Dr. Darrell Bock

Well, the main thing – what it means for him and what it means for Jesus is this descent of being a child of the Davidic promise is in place. He ends up being in Bethlehem because Bethlehem is in the seat where Judah is, and is the tribe out of which this line comes.

And apparently this census was ordered in a way that was honoring to the structure of the Jewish nation of Israel, where the 12 tribes' territories were in play. And so, that seems to be the reason why Joseph has gone from Nazareth, which is his home, down to – down to Bethlehem and down in the southern region. Bethlehem's located really next door to Jerusalem.

Mikel Del Rosario

So, if he went back, and this was his ancestral home, the place was probably packed with relatives like when you have relative gatherings, Christmas parties. Where do you think Jesus was actually born, and what would that have looked like?

Dr. Darrell Bock

Well, he was born – it looks like he was born in a family stall, basically, in an area where family – now, you would think, "Well, that's not a great way to treat family." But I think what we've got here are people gathered. It's a huge crowd. They've all come in for the census, it looks like, and so he ends up in a manger. He ends up in animal trough basically.
And I tell people – now, think about this for a second. Think about the message this sends. If you were in a public relations meeting, and you had the assignment, "We're going to plan the arrival of the Promised One of all time," a program that God has been talking about for the ages, for centuries, and so you, as the public relations firm, what's the best way to announce this arrival and to perform it, to execute it?

And you would think about all the pomp and circumstance. You'd put it in a capital city. You'd make a huge fanfare. You'd do everything – I think that would be the way we would instinctively think it would happen.

Instead, what we get is a baby born in an animal trough in a little suburb of Jerusalem, not even the capital city. And everything about it breathes with the most humble status of life into which Jesus is entering.

And it's the character of his entire life to show this kind of quality, where he lives really in the midst of everyday life: not privilege, but very much in a family context, if you will, that kind of thing.

A very humble beginning: wrapped in swaddling clothes; put in a manger, an animal trough; and there enters into the world. It's not what the PR firm would design; it's something far more profound, because I think this very humble way in which he enters the world is designed to say, "I have come for everyone. I have come to save the world. I've come to save and bring salvation into the most common of scenes, and in that way, develop – really develop the Christmas story. The Christmas story is about anyone and everyone.

**Mikel Del Rosario**  Well, yeah. So, we have Elizabeth, we have Mary, and now even Jesus in this very humble state. And it seems like the Christmas story is touching people, like you said, in very humble states; not like you would think, would have all this pomp and circumstance for the Messianic story.
And certainly the very opposite of the way Roman rulers would handle their power and the way in which they would surround themselves with all these accoutrements of power. What you're getting, rather, is someone who's literally stepping into life at its most basic level and starting their life from that very place.

Mikel Del Rosario: Mm-hmm. And so, what can we tell, then, if we were stepping into the story, not knowing the end? How would the original audience put this together with this juxtaposition of royalty, on the one hand, and humble circumstances on the other?

Dr. Darrell Bock: Well, I think the main thing that you see here is that they have a sense that this child who's coming because of the virgin birth, etcetera, because of the way in which this ends up being signed off on – we're just short of the story of the shepherds, where the angels announce this to the shepherds, and they show up – everything about this says God is at work. And God is at work in this child who is the hope and the promise. But what they don't yet realize is how great a bearer of this authority of hope he is.

Mikel Del Rosario: Could you expand a little bit on this hope?

Dr. Darrell Bock: Well, I just want you to see how often the idea of David is mentioned in these chapters. I mean if you go – in these two chapters – well, actually the latter part of Chapter 1, just the beginning of Chapter 2 – but you go back to the announcement of – to Mary. It says – it talks about a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. That's one mention.

Then it talks about he's gonna be given the throne of his father David, and it's in 1:32. Then you come along and you're listening to what's going on, and you come to the hymn of Zachariah and it says he's raised up for us a horn of salvation in the house of his servant David.

And then we come to Chapter 2, and we've got Joseph went up from Galilee, to the city of Nazareth, to Judea to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.
And so, you're hearing David, David, David, David. I mean if this were a football game, we'd be spelling it out. You know, D-A-V-I-D. And so, this Davidic promise, this Messiah. Now, in Judaism, there were a variety of expectations for what this Messiah would be. Some portraits expected a military deliverer – the Psalms of Solomon and that. A Jewish text written between the two Testaments looks forward to this political deliverer who's gonna be a powerful military figure. That was one portrait.

The other portrait was a figure called the Son of Man, kind of this celestial person who had received authority from God out of Daniel 7, who comes and crashes the party of Earth from beyond and is this powerful transcended figure who has judgment authority. That was another way in which the expectation was put forward.

And so, there were a variety of images, but they all shared one fundamental thing: they thought the Messiah would come and defeat the political enemies of the nation. They're looking for a political deliverance, a physical deliverance, a kingdom deliverance, if you will.

And, of course, Jesus is gonna do something in some ways far more profound than that. He's going to – his battle, as we see in the early chapters of Luke, is not with Rome; his battle is with Satan. So, he opens up with temptations. We have the three temptations from Satan. He's performing exorcisms and that kind of thing.

So, we're showing that this kingdom isn't just about the material political world; it is a spiritual kingdom that's designed to work from the hearts; it's designed to deal with forces that we can't see but that are very real and that often get in the way between our relationship and God.

And so, this Davidic Deliverer is gonna be a little bit different kind of Davidic Deliverer than what people were anticipating, which is why, in the midst of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus is sort of slow to say, "I am the Messiah," because they created – had the potential to create expectations that were not in line with the way his ministry would work. They certainly didn't anticipate the idea that the Messiah could suffer. They had a portrait of the Messiah that was more like Arnold Schwarzenegger. You know? "I'm gonna crush the enemy."
And so, the idea that this Messiah would suffer is something that they're not prepared for. And the idea that this Messiah was going to be primarily about a spiritual provision that extends beyond any material physical kingdom transformation, although that's coming later in the return that Jesus is gonna perform. The fact that this was happening in stages, none of that was on the table yet.

And so, this is part of what comes along with the rest of the story, that the rest of the story has to tell in order for you to understand that that's a part of the rest of the story.

**Mikel Del Rosario** Yeah. But this early on in the story, we see all these people in humble circumstances that are longing for this hope, and yet we have royalty and humility together.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** That's right.

**Mikel Del Rosario** And the thing about the shepherds, too. I mean what kind of status do they have in society?

**Dr. Darrell Bock** Not much. I mean they would have been your average worker, where they would have the status of a migrant worker. And that might be exaggerated, but they were — shepherds were just, again, another — it's another theme of the common people. And they're there, and the angels make the announcement, and they go to see Jesus, and they share the fact that an angel appeared to them and told them, "Hey, you might want to put in a visit to this child, 'cause this is the Savior, born in the city of —" you guessed it, "— David."

**Mikel Del Rosario** That's right.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** And so, in the midst of that, you get this sense of — everything about Luke's infancy material has celebration around it. You get three hymns. You get the joy of the shepherds going to see the child. You get the amazement that Mary feels that these things are happening around her. There are a couple of phrases in these chapters where it says, "And Mary treasured all these things in her heart."
So, we're very much getting the story through the lens of Mary. And everything about it has the note of celebration, that God's promise is finally arriving; that he's keeping his word. That's the chorus that is ringing out as we tell this story from Luke.

*Mikel Del Rosario* Mm-hmm. And we have elements of suffering here as well, don't we? But there's hope –

*Dr. Darrell Bock* Eventually we do, because eventually, of course, we've got the presentation of the child, and we get – we get Simeon taking this child in his hands, and he talks about, "This one's gonna be for the rise and fall of many in Israel." And then it goes on to say he says to Mary, "And this is gonna be like a sword piercing you." That's the only hint of suffering in the entire infancy material is this remark that Simeon makes in his – in the third hymn of this material. We get one from Mary, one from Zachariah, and one from Simeon. This is the only hint of suffering anywhere; it's the only dark note; it's the only cloud in the first two chapters. Everything else is, "God's keeping his promise."

*Mikel Del Rosario* Okay. Yeah, joy and celebration.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* Exactly.

*Mikel Del Rosario* And even though Mary is what – she's willing to endure, she knows there's going to be marginalization potentially, embarrassment potentially, she's looking at this joy.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* That's right. And it is the context of the joy that they have and the promise – the reality of the promise coming to fruition defines everything that they see and the way they see it.

*Mikel Del Rosario* Mm-hmm. So, when the shepherds hear that the Messiah is gonna be in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, that's probably pretty unusual as well, yeah.
Yeah. I think that would probably – not probably the way I would have designed it. I mean it very much is a surprise, but it shows – again, it shows God's willingness not just to condescend to come to Earth – m-kay? – but the way in which he does it is important. He doesn't come to Earth, you know, banging a drum and drawing attention to himself; he comes to Earth – coming to Earth like almost anyone would come to Earth.

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah. This is such an amazing story.

It is.

It's so unusual just to step back in there, 'cause we feel like we know it so well.

Exactly.

But to think back to where people were, and then to think about, "How are they putting these things together?" There's royalty and there's humility.

Well, let's turn to Matthew now. Matthew gives us the story through Joseph's eyes. And I kinda feel like this is like a movie. You know? There's one character that's focused in on, and then you restart the whole movie again, and you're looking at it through another character's eyes.

Now we get Joseph hearing about this whole pregnancy thing in Matthew. We look at Matthew 1. I want to just read a short section here. This is where he's thinking about divorcing Mary. He finds out about the whole pregnancy. Then an angel tells him:

Joseph, son of David. Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

And then the angel even says he will save his people from their sins. Now, for us, we certainly have a lot of background as to what that's about, 'cause we've read the rest of the story. What would Joseph be thinking? What's going through Joseph's head, and how would Jewish readers hear this?
Dr. Darrell Bock

Well, imagine the mercy of God that we're seeing here. 'Cause earlier, you remember – and remember, we kinda jumped out of sequence, 'cause we kinda told the story ahead, and now we've come back to catch it here.

But Joseph is in a situation in which he understands that Mary is with child, and he's thinking about what to do with it. How he found that out would have been another interesting recording to know about.

And then – and so, he's trying to, in as gentle a way as possible to put her to the side. And now, in the mercy of God, an angel appears in a dream and says, "You don't need to do this. This is actually – your wife is pious. This is not something – this doesn't represent an act of immorality or anything like that. This is a special act of God that has taken place here.

And so, she never actually has to have the discussion with Joseph that we talked about earlier about how did this happen, because the angel has preempted here.

But there's another thing that's going on here that I think is important that we need to mention, and that is why do we get two accounts of this? Why do we get two accounts of the infancy story, and why not – why didn't we just get one running account, which is, of course, what we tend to want to do with it at Christmas?

I think about the fireplace scenes that we often have, where we've got the baby lying in a manger. There's Joseph and Mary. We get the magi on one side, and the shepherds on the other. And I go, "No, no, no, no, no. That's not how it happened. The timing of the shepherds visit and the timing of the magi visit is not at the same time."

The perspective that Luke is giving us of Mary is not the same perspective of experience that Joseph had that we get in Matthew. And each portrait gives us a slightly different angle and a slightly different appreciation of what's going on.
So, Luke is very bright and almost airy in the way it tells the story. It's got hymns and celebration. Matthew's a very dark version of the infancy material. Think about what's in the Matthew section. We get this explanation that Joseph needs, 'cause things seem out of whack. We get the slaying of the infants in Bethlehem because Herod's trying to get to Jesus.

As bright as the Luke portrait is, Matthew's portrait is dark. And the reason it's dark, at least to a certain degree, is because it shows the injection of the Child of God into the history of man forces choices. And some people embrace what God is doing, and some people don't want anything to do with what God is doing. And we see those choices laid out at the start.

We see some surprising things. We see Jewish people who should know better not embracing what God is doing, even though this is in line with their promise, and we see Gentile folk, who in one sense probably should have no idea what's going on who are quite aware of what's going on and are very open to what it is God is doing.

And this is in Matthew, the Jewish Gospel. So, there's a very – there's some very interesting moves, and these additional perspectives, I think, show the wisdom of what he canon is. The canon is this multiperspectival approach to Jesus, in which each angle gives us a glimpse of Jesus that the other story doesn't give us. And so, rather than dumping it all into one pot and making what I call Gospel stew – m-kay? – letting each story kind of tell what it's about is a great way to read the Scripture.

Mikel Del Rosario Mm-hmm. This is sometimes – you've taught me a lot about sports and football since we've been working together. This is like how you have all these camera angles in a football came.

Dr. Darrell Bock That's right.

Mikel Del Rosario And it takes a long time to make some of these calls, 'cause they have so many angles and so many choices and –
Dr. Darrell Bock And certain camera angles will tell you what you're looking for, and other camera angles won't. And so, rather than trying to make a camera angle do something it's not designed to do, let's allow each camera to present the picture that it presents.

Mikel Del Rosario Mm-hmm. And in this case, we see that two stories are better than one.

Dr. Darrell Bock That's exactly right.

Mikel Del Rosario Yeah. Now, we often think about Mary's potential embarrassment and potential marginalization. What about on Joseph's side? Would he have had kind of a cultural stigma as well?

Dr. Darrell Bock He's in the same situation. You know, the tradition that floated around about Jesus was that he was born out of wedlock. And we know this – that insult is cast at Jesus in John Chapter 7.

And so, this is something that Joseph and Mary bore together as they raise this child. I mean let's face it; a virgin birth is a little bit of an unusual event out of all the births that we've ever had in the history of humanity. This is a one off. There's no other one like it. So, he would have to bear that as a part of having raised this child.

Mikel Del Rosario And think about his faith, too, and his obedience.

Dr. Darrell Bock Exactly right.

Mikel Del Rosario He did take Mary as his wife.

Dr. Darrell Bock Well, again, he's shown to be very pious, very sensitive. All the characters – this is actually – we haven't mentioned this; it's important – all the characters surrounding the birth of Jesus are revealed to be very pious, sensitive figures to God.

That's important because you've got someone who is kind of portrayed as a rebel to the Jewish movement by the theology that has emerged, etcetera. And so, well, maybe he comes from a suspect background. Maybe there's something wrong with the way he was raised, something like that.
No, these infancy accounts, both of them – both make the point – these – Jesus comes out of very pious, faithful, Jewish roots, parents who honor the law, parents who are respectful to one another, etcetera.

Mikel Del Rosario Mm-hmm. Well, in Matthew 1:22 – I want to read this verse. It says:

All this happened so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled, "Look, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel," which means "God with us."

How is Matthew linking this prophecy to Mary's situation?

Dr. Darrell Bock Well, the prophecy, of course, goes back to Isaiah 7:14. This is the one place where that text is associated with this birth in the infancy material, no matter which Gospel we're talking about. It's part of a series of texts that Matthew cites in the infancy material. This is one of five texts where there's an appeal to the Scripture, where the narrator comes in and says, "Okay, let me tell you about this event and how the Old Testament sees it."

And so, we've got one in relationship to the birth in Bethlehem, coming in the beginning part of Chapter 2. We've got one, "Rachel weeping for her children," later. We've got, "Out of Egypt I've called my Son." That's coming also in Chapter 2. We've got, "He shall be called a Nazarene," which is probably an idea citation as opposed to a specific verse.

And so, those five all are making the statement, "This is in line with things that God has talked about. This is in fulfillment of what – so, it's Matthew saying, "God keeps His word," but in a different way than Luke said it. Luke said it through the language of the characters within the narrative. They would sing hymns of praise that would evoke the promises of God, talk about the covenant promises being kept.

Matthew does it by citing specific Scriptures. And the interesting thing is here's another case where our apologetics sometimes causes us to miss something. 'Cause I love Matthew 1:23. It says:
Behold, a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and you will call his name Immanuel.

Well, of course, we get all – we don't get past the first part of that line. We end up talking about the virgin birth and how that goes back to Isaiah 7, etcetera. But the end of the line is pretty important. "God with us."

Mikel Del Rosario  Yes.

Dr. Darrell Bock  I mean so that's actually the point of the story. God is present and in our midst in this birth. He is doing stuff that he has committed himself to. Not only does he keep his word, but he's present with us in this child. And it isn't just "God with us," as the rest of the story makes clear, it's "GOD with us."

Mikel Del Rosario  That's right.

Dr. Darrell Bock  You know? And so, that emerges from the way in which this story is told. And what's interesting is is that no one actually calls Jesus Immanuel. You know? He's called Jesus. But he is God with us.

Mikel Del Rosario  Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And so, this is a pattern that God has. God has a pattern of fulfilling what he promises to do.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Exactly right.

Mikel Del Rosario  And so, Jesus is a sign child that, "Here we go. God is fulfilling his promises no matter how impossible they seem to be."

Dr. Darrell Bock  Exactly correct. And again, he's fulfilling things that he's talked about in the Old Testament. It's the same message said in two Gospels in different ways.

Mikel Del Rosario  Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Well, let's move to the magi now. You mentioned those little nativity scenes that we have. We have the magi; we have the shepherds. And in the traditional nativity scene, they're all there at the same time.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Mm-hmm.
But that's not the way the story goes when Matthew gives it to us. In fact, we see that the magi don't come until later. How much later was that?

Don't know. We just know it's later.

Okay. But it's not newborn Jesus.

No – well, it's not – it's not at the same point that the shepherds are there. Here's what we know. We know that when Herod went to deal with this, after the magi visited him, and they determined he was born in Bethlehem, and Herod said to them, "Tell me where the child is born, 'cause I want to come and honor him as well," what we find out is the magi go, but then on the way back, again by a dream, God's direct intervention – a lot of dreams in the infancy material in Matthew – they are told not to tell Herod and to go back home.

And when Herod figures that out, he goes and he slays all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two. Now, probably he's created that window to protect himself in terms of length of birth. But what that tells us is is that there's this time window into which this event seems to fit.

It might be the case that it's still within the 40-day period that would come, in which you have the birth and then you go and you offer sacrifices for a firstborn at the temple in Luke to do. That's something that they could have gone from Bethlehem to do, go to the temple, and then move on in the story.

But Bethlehem is also so close to Jerusalem, that they could go to the temple, offer this child – offer the sacrifices for this child – and come back to Bethlehem and then make their subsequent moves later. So, we just don't know what the timing is.

What we do know is that in all likelihood, those fireside scenes that you have, where the shepherds and the magi are there, side by side, it's a nice way to put the whole story together, but it's probably not how the story happened.

And these magi, they're clearly not Jews.
Dr. Darrell Bock  That's correct.

Mikel Del Rosario  Where are they from?

Dr. Darrell Bock  They're Gentile astrologers, basically, who've read the signs the signs in the heavens, and they've followed the star, and they recognize the star must represent something. And so, in a way that's – this is interesting – in a way that speaks into a Gentile world. God has drawn people out of the Gentile world to see a birth that also relates to them.

And so, we see this – again, this consideration that God gives of how to build a bridge to the people that he wants to reach. We see it in the way the magi are drawn to Jesus.

Mikel Del Rosario  That's interesting. And here we see another contrast between the people who aren't Jewish, who are responding to Jesus in a positive way, and then we have Herod, who is acting as the king and not responding to Jesus in a positive way.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Not to mention the Jewish leaders that he checks this out with – okay? – and says, "All right, these magi say they have a sign in the heaven that a Messiah is being born, that a figure's being born. Where should that – what should we do with this?" And they know the location, they know where it's supposed to be happening, but do they care to go there? No.

Mikel Del Rosario  Yeah, yeah. So, once again we see that Jesus' coming wasn't just – I just said Jesus' coming – but if we think about it from – in the middle of the story –

Dr. Darrell Bock  Right.

Mikel Del Rosario  – because it's so natural for us to do – right?

Dr. Darrell Bock  Right.

Mikel Del Rosario  Well, we see Jesus being born. This birth is so unusual that it doesn't impact just Israel. It impacts the nations as well.
Dr. Darrell Bock: That's exactly right. And this division – this tendency of many of Israel not to appreciate what's going on in the openness of the Gentile world is hinted at even in the infancy material of Matthew, the Jewish Gospel.

Mikel Del Rosario: Well, we've covered a whole lot of material, but as we move into the Christmas season, what can we take away from Luke and from Matthew as we move into the Christmas season and think about this from kinda inside the story?

Dr. Darrell Bock: Well, I think the main thing to take away from it is to show, one, that God keeps his word, that he keeps his promises. The promises made long ago are being realized. And the promises that remain, that still remain to be kept are going to be kept, that we can trust God to complete what he started. I think that's one very important feature.

Obviously, the centrality of Jesus as the Messiah, as the one who is the promised one, as the one who brings the promise and commitments of God is a very, very important element in the equation and is central to the story, even though in none of the passages that we have discussed Jesus does any speaking. All of the talking is about him.

And then we have the whole humility with which this is done, that it walks into everyday life; it's everyday people; it's not done with fanfare; it's not done in a capital city. It's done in the dirt of everyday life, if I can say it that way. And in the midst of that, God is making a statement that he's reaching out to touch everyday people in an everyday way so that every day for them can count.

Mikel Del Rosario: Amen, amen. Well, we thank you so much for joining us here on The Table podcast today to talk about Christmas, looking at it not from the end to the beginning, but from the beginning and wrestling with humility and royalty and how Jesus didn't just show up and be born for Israel, but for the nations, too. And this really is hope for all the nations.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Indeed. And we hope everyone has a great Christmas.

Mikel Del Rosario: Amen. Merry Christmas, and we'll see next time on The Table podcast, where we discuss issues of God and culture.