

The Birth and Infancy Narratives of Jesus
STUDIES IN THE FIRST AND THIRD GOSPELS

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Preface

The birth of Jesus of Nazareth is described in two of the four gospels, Luke and Matthew. Mark, which is usually considered to be the earliest of the gospels, begins the testimony of the life of Jesus with Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan. John, the Fourth Gospel, provides a theological prologue to the testimony about Jesus, but while he describes the incarnation as the Logos which became flesh, he does not provide any details about the actual event. In other NT documents, the details are also scarce. Paul, for instance, mentions that Jesus was "born of a woman" (Ga. 4:4) and that he "appeared in a body" (1 Ti. 3:16), while the Apocalypse briefly mentions the birth of a male child who would rule the nations (Re. 12:5). But it is to the Third and the First Gospels that the reader must go in order to discover how this event actually took place.

Many interpretive differences arise in the stories of Jesus' birth and infancy. Some of them, such as the nature of the Bethlehem star and the actual date of the birth, are of secondary importance. Other differences are crucial to the theology of the church, such as the message of the virgin birth which is contained in the oldest creeds and remains a central article of Christian orthodoxy. Non-evangelical scholars frequently deny the story of the virgin birth, some because they assume that it was impossible, and others because they conclude that it is unnecessary. At least one recent scholar has argued that Matthew and Luke did not intend to describe a virgin birth in the first place¹, and still other scholars view the birth and infancy narratives as being written in a non-historical literary genre².

In this study, the historicity of the narratives will be assumed throughout. This is not to say that there may not be special literary forms, structural devices, and theological overtones arising from the way in which the authors collected and put together their traditions. At the same time, these stories will be treated as a fair representation of the way in which the events themselves actually happened. The

¹ J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

² R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Theological and Literary Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

exegesis will begin with Luke's account followed by Matthew's. In so doing, the theology of both the Third and the First Gospels can be addressed without interruption. It should be understood, however, that a strictly chronological approach would necessitate moving back and forth between Luke and Matthew, an approach that synthesizes the events at the cost of fragmenting the respective theologies of the individual gospels themselves. For those who are interested, the following is the probable order in which the events actually occurred.

1. The annunciation regarding John (Lk. 1:5-25)
2. The annunciation regarding Jesus (Lk. 1:26-38)
3. Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Lk. 1:39-56)
4. Joseph discovers Mary's pregnancy (Mt. 1:18-25)
5. The birth of John (Lk. 1:57-80)
6. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (Lk. 2:1-7)
7. The visit of the shepherds (Lk. 2:8-20)
8. The temple ritual (Lk. 2:21-40)
9. The visit of the magi (Mt. 2:1-12)
10. The flight to Egypt (Mt. 2:13-18)
11. The return to Nazareth (Mt. 2:19-23)
12. Jesus visits the temple at age 12 (Lk. 2:41-52)

Part One

The LUKAN Birth and Infancy Narratives

The LUKAN BIRTH and INFANCY NARRATIVES

The Third Gospel is a document written by a Gentile for Gentiles. The author is the most prolific writer in the NT³, a man with the Greek name *Loukas*, who from very early times has been identified as the traveling companion of Paul.⁴ Both volumes of his work, the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, are dedicated in the same way, “...to Theophilus” (Lk. 1:3; Ac. 1:1). The identity of Theophilus is unknown, and because his name literally means “God-lover”, some have suggested that it is an eponym for the Christian community, though this is uncertain. Virtually all scholars believe that there is a literary dependency between the Third Gospel and the Second Gospel with most scholars upholding the hypothesis that Mark was written first and that Luke used it as a major source.⁵ A minority view is that Mark’s Gospel is an abridgement of both Matthew and Luke, a view that is as old as Griesbach (1783) but which is finding new adherents.⁶ In either case, however, the

³ It is often thought that Paul wrote more of the NT than any other writer, and it is quite true that the 13 letters which bear his name are far in excess of the number of documents by any other NT writer. However, in terms of volume alone in the Greek text, Luke’s two works amount to a greater length than all of Paul’s combined.

⁴ In the Muratorian Canon (170-190 A.D.), a statement is made which identifies the Third Gospel with Luke the physician and companion of Paul (cf. Col. 4:14). Irenaeus (185 A.D.) agrees, cf. V. Taylor, “Luke, Gospel of,” IDB (1962) 3.180. This tradition seems to be internally confirmed in Acts by the “we” sections, that is, those parts of Acts where the author narrates his stories in the first person plural.

⁵ The classic work in this area is still B. H. Streeter’s *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1956), though there has been a multitude of works since that time which affirm the same thing

⁶ The most recent defense of the Griesbach hypothesis is C. Mann, *Mark [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986) 47-71

birth narratives as recorded in Luke are unique. While in some ways they parallel the narratives in Matthew, they largely deal with events and stories not recorded by Matthew, and in fact, none of the stories in Matthew and Luke describe precisely the same things, though they complement each other and fill out the nativity story.

By Luke's own testimony, he was not the first to attempt a history of Jesus (1:1). However, he asserts that he was especially careful in the selection of his source material, whether written or oral (1:2).⁷ He apparently does not classify himself with the eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, but his narrative depends upon those who were. His gospel was written to instill certitude and faith in the story of Jesus (1:3-4), and Luke guarantees its accuracy by explaining his careful investigation of all the traditions which had come to him. It is not beyond the range of possibility that Luke might have personally interviewed Mary, Jesus' mother. If so, then Luke's information about the birth narratives would have come from the most impeccable source.

The birth and infancy stories abound in Hebraisms, unlike the classical Greek of the prologue (1:1-4). There are frequent allusions to OT passages which combine to emphasize that both John and Jesus were born as the fulfillment of Israel's prophetic hope. Jesus, especially, is the interpretive key which unlocks the messianic mysteries and reveals the meaning of the OT.

The Annunciation Regarding John (1:5-25)

Annunciations were important in the historical faith of Israel. Besides the annunciations in the birth narratives of Luke, there were annunciations for the births of Ishmael (Ge. 16:7-12), Isaac (Ge. 17:1-3, 15-21; 18:1-2, 9-15) and Samson (Jg. 13:2-21). In general, annunciations follow a stereotypical pattern:⁸

- 1) The appearance of an angel
- 2) Fear and/or prostration by the one who is confronted
- 3) A divine message in which:
 - a) The person is saluted by name
 - b) The person is urged not to be afraid
 - c) A pregnancy is predicted resulting in the birth of a male child
 - d) The child is named in advance
 - e) The significance of the name is explained
 - f) An indication is given of the future accomplishments of the child

⁷ The verb *paradidomi* (= handed down) is often a technical term for the handing down of oral or written tradition, and it is probably used as such here, though whether oral, written or both one cannot say, of. *BAG* (1979) 615.

⁸ R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1977) 156.

- 4) The person to whom the annunciation is made offers objections and/or a request for a sign
- 5) A sign is given to confirm the validity of the annunciation

Both the OT annunciations and Luke's two annunciations follow this same pattern. Together, the annunciation stories regarding John and Jesus form a matching pair which are at the same time similar yet contrasting.⁹ The birth of John is placed over against the birth of Jesus to demonstrate the divine origin of both individuals and yet the infinite superiority of Jesus over John.

1:5-7: In agreement with Matthew (2:1), Luke places the time of the annunciations in the reign of Herod the Great (40-4 B.C.E.).¹⁰ Similar to the sterility of Sarah (Ge. 16:1), Manoah's wife (Jg. 13:2) and Hannah (1 Sa. 1:2, 6-8), Elizabeth and Zechariah were also sterile. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were devout Levites, Zechariah serving in the 8th of the 24 orders of priestly rosters designated to serve at the temple twice a year for a week at a time (cf. 1 Chr. 24:1-19).

1:8-10: There were so many priests, even in each of the 24 orders, that the duties for each morning and evening sacrifice were assigned by lot. The thrill of awaiting one's turn to serve in the temple must have been intense, and the most coveted part of the ritual was the burning of the incense, a symbol of the congregation's prayers rising to God just as the smoke arose toward the ceiling. No priest was allowed to perform this function more than once, and some priests had never done it.¹¹ Thus, when Zechariah faced the altar of incense in front of the inner curtain which screened from view the Most Holy Place, he was participating in the single most important event of his religious life. Outside, the congregation remained waiting and praying until his return to pronounce God's blessing upon them, probably taken from the ancient benediction delivered to Aaron (Nu. 6:22-26).¹²

1:11-17: While performing his service, an angel appeared to Zechariah between the altar of incense and the candlestick.¹³ Zechariah was told that his prayer had been heard, though the exact nature of his prayer is unknown. It may have been a personal request for a child, but given the couple's age, this seems doubtful unless it refers to a prayer perhaps offered at some earlier time. It may also simply mean a customary prayer for the salvation of Israel associated with the offering of the

⁹ As a literary device, such a pair of matching stories is called a diptych.

¹⁰ However, see the further discussion under 2:1.

¹¹ C. Caird, *Saint Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 50; see also, *Tamid* 5:2.

¹² A. Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 170.

¹³ This position assumes that the phrase "right side" is given facing the east as are most directions having to do with the temple, cf. L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 68.

evening sacrifice.¹⁴ The angel explained that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son, and they were to name him John (a common Jewish name meaning “the Lord has been gracious”). The birth would be a cause of joy for both the parents as well as for others. Though John was not required to take a full Nazarite vow (cf. Nu. 6:1-8), he was required to abstain from wine or any alcoholic beverage. This restriction may be a way of pointedly expressing that John’s stimulant would be from the Holy Spirit, not from an artificial source (cf. Ep. 5:18). In any case, John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth.

Luke here introduces one of the most important and recurring expressions in his writings, the description of being “filled with the Spirit.” The same expression or parallels to it appear in the Third Gospel in connection with Elizabeth (1:41), Zechariah (1:67), Mary (1:35), Simeon (2:26-27), and Jesus (4:1, 18). In Acts, Luke employs the same language with regard to the disciples at Pentecost (2:4), Peter (4:8), the Jerusalem church (4:31), deacons (6:3, 5), Stephen (7:55), Saul/Paul (9:17; 13:9), Barnabas (11:24), and the church at Pisidian Antioch (13:52). In general, the expression refers to the empowerment of the Spirit to speak or act as God’s spokesperson. John would be such a spokesperson *par excellence*, because he would be Spirit-filled from birth.

The significance of this vocabulary of the Spirit in Luke’s writings must be understood against the background of the synagogue teaching of the time. The Jewish community had concluded that the prophetic sequence of inspired speech had broken off with the last of the writing prophets. However, in the days of messiah, it was believed that the Spirit of Yahweh would again become active, for the quenched Spirit would return.¹⁵ By stressing the activity of the Spirit, Luke calls attention to the fact that the dawn of the messianic era had begun.

John’s mission, like that of Elijah in the Northern Monarchy of the 9th century B.C.E., would be to turn Israel back to God and to prepare her for God’s visitation. John would minister “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” The connection with Elijah is especially significant against the background of Jewish expectation that the ancient prophet, who did not die but was mysteriously transported to heaven (2 Ki. 2:1-12), would come as the herald for Yahweh in the end of the age (Mal. 3:1; 4:5; Sirach 48:4, 10). This notion was kept alive in rabbinic literature.¹⁶ Later, representatives from the Jews would ask John directly if he was Elijah in person, to which he responded negatively (Jn. 1:21). Nevertheless, the connection between John and Elijah was more than incidental. John, like Elijah, wore the garb of a prophet (cf. Mk.

¹⁴ Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 56.

¹⁵ D. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 80-82; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971) 80-82; E. Schweizer *TDNT* (1968) VI.332-455.

¹⁶ S. Szikszai, *IDB* (1962) II. 90.

1:6; 2 Ki. 1:8; Zec. 13:4), and Jesus identified John as the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy of Malachi (Mk. 9:11-13; Mt. 11:13-14). Given Elijah's reckless boldness in confronting Ahab (1 Ki. 17:1), it is not surprising that after Herod had John executed for a similar denunciation (Mk. 6:17-29), some folks speculated that Jesus was John resurrected or else Elijah-redivivus (Mk. 6:14-15).

1:18-22: As was common in stories of annunciation, Zechariah asked for a sign of authentication. Gabriel (the name means "man of God", cf. Da. 8:16; 9:21) promised that Zechariah would be struck mute until the birth occurred. The people waiting outside would have been anxious at the priest's delay, for normally the priest was only in the temple a short time. According to the Mishna, "He did not prolong his prayer lest he put Israel in terror."¹⁷ When Zechariah was able to leave the sanctuary and confront the people praying outside, he was no doubt acutely embarrassed while the congregation was surprised and baffled that he could not pronounce the customary benediction (cf. Sirach 50:19-23). His frantic gestures indicated to them that something extraordinary had happened, and they concluded that he had seen a vision.

1:23-25: When his week of service had ended, Zechariah returned home. Soon Elizabeth was pregnant, though for the first five months she remained secluded. This seclusion does not seem to have been due to embarrassment; otherwise, it would have been in the latter months of the pregnancy when her condition was more obvious. Rather, the seclusion was more likely a way of avoiding any discussion of the pregnancy with neighbors who probably would not have believed it anyway, given Elizabeth's age, at least until it could not possibly be denied. In any case, Elizabeth's seclusion made it possible for the pregnancy to become a sign to Mary, her relative, some six months later (1:26, 36).

The Annunciation Regarding Jesus Lk. 1:26-38)

If John was born as one to go before Yahweh to prepare Israel for Yahweh's coming, the question must surely have arisen in the readers' minds as to how God was to come. The annunciation to Mary is Luke's answer. God was to come in the birth of his Son. According to Luke, the whole life and ministry of Jesus was the promised visitation of God (1:68, 78; 7:16; 19:44; cf. Is. 40:9-11; 52:7).¹⁸ The annunciation to Mary follows the typical pattern of previous annunciations.

1:26-27: In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel once again appeared, this time to Mary in the northern, rural Jewish community of Galilee. Mary was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. Some knowledge of Jewish

¹⁷ *Yoma* 5:1 (as quoted in Marshall, 61).

¹⁸ Caird, 52

marriage customs is necessary to fully appreciate Mary's circumstance.

Jewish marriage at this time consisted of two distinct parts, the betrothal and the hometaking (Dt. 20:7).¹⁹ The word betrothal translates the Hebrew verb *'aras*, which in cognate languages carries the root meaning of a fine, a price or the payment of tribute. Betrothal, or the pledge to be married, was usually sealed for the girl at an early age with the paying of the bride price to the father (*mohar*) in the presence of witnesses. Until a girl was twelve and a half years old, her father could arrange for her to marry whomever he wished, and she could not refuse. When she had come of age (twelve and a half years or older), she could not be betrothed against her will, and thus, the usual age of betrothal was between twelve and twelve and a half years old. Betrothal signified the acquisition of the woman by the man and began the transfer of the girl from her father's power to her husband's power.

Once the betrothal was valid, the betrothed woman was called the "wife" of the man, and while they were not yet living together, she could be widowed, divorced, and executed for adultery. In fact, the betrothal could be broken only by divorce, a divorce which could be initiated only by the man. While in Judea the engaged couple could have sexual relations under some circumstances prior to the hometaking, in Galilee no such leniency was tolerated, and the wife had to be taken to the husband's home as a virgin.

The second stage, the hometaking, was the marriage proper, in which the girl would be transferred to the home of her husband who would then assume her full support since she was now under his full power. The hometaking usually occurred about a year after the betrothal, and it was celebrated with a processional to the husband's home followed by a wedding feast.

Given these circumstances, Mary may only have been a girl at the time of the annunciation which took place between her betrothal and her hometaking. Little is known of Joseph, Mary's fiancée. Later tradition pictured him as a widower with children at the time he became betrothed to Mary, but the reliability of such tradition is uncertain.²⁰

1:28-33: The angel's first word to Mary was "hail" or "greeting", from which the Latin salutation *Ave Maria* derives.²¹ Mary was greatly disturbed, as might be

¹⁹ O. Baab, *IDB* (1962) 111.284—285; J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 364-368; A. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 148ff; Brown, *Birth*, 124.

²⁰ E. Blair, *IDB* (1962) II.980.

²¹ The greeting *Ave Maria* is combined with a prayer to Mary as the mother of God by Roman Catholics. In Roman Catholic theology, the Greek wording *chaire kecharitomene* (= greetings, you who are favored) has been translated "Hail, Mary, full of grace" and consequently taken to mean that Mary herself is a source of grace, cf. R. Lawler, D. Wuerl and T. Lawler, *The Teaching of Christ: A Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 2nd. ed. (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1983) 569-570. Thus, the prayer runs:

expected. After calming her fears, Gabriel announced the coming birth, named the child, and predicted his kingly role. Each of these elements in the annunciation are theologically significant.

The name Jesus (the equivalent of the OT name Joshua) means “Yahweh is salvation” or “Yahweh is savior”. It is part of Luke’s affirmation that the birth of Jesus was truly a divine act, and it connects Jesus with two significant figures in Israelite history, Joshua, the leader who crossed the Jordan in the conquest of Canaan, and Joshua, the high priest of the post-exilic period who was attacked by Satan and became a symbol of God’s cleansing for the nation (Zec. 3:1-10). Furthermore, the title “Son of the Most High” and its accompanying phrases point toward Jesus as the Davidic messiah.

Note the deliberate parallelism of this annunciation with the ancient promises about David:

<u>Promises About David</u> (2 Sa. 7:9, 13, 14, 16)	<u>Promises About Jesus</u> (Lk. 1:32-33)
a great name	he will be great
the throne of his kingdom	the throne of his father David
he will be my son	he will be called the Son of the Most High
your house and your kingdom will endure forever	he will reign over the house of Jacob forever
your throne will be established forever	his kingdom will never end

The Israelites, especially those of the southern nation of the divided monarchy, held tenaciously to the idea that the promises would be fulfilled by the Davidic dynasty in the politics of ancient Israel. However, the prophets predicted otherwise (Ho. 3:4-5; Je. 22:24-30; 36:30-31; 37:6-10, 17). Thus, it remained for the promises

*Hail, Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you
Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

This understanding, however, depends more on the Latin Vulgate than the Greek text. In the Greek text, Mary is almost certainly the object of grace, not the source of grace, cf. W. Hendriksen, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 85; N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 75, and even modern Roman Catholic scholars tend to agree, i.e., C. Stuhlmueller, “The Gospel According to Luke,” *JBC* (1968) II.122.

to be fulfilled in another time, and this, also the prophets had predicted (Aim. 9:11; Is. 11:1-2; 55:3; Je. 33:14-26; Eze. 34:22-24; 37:24-25). According to Luke, the promises would not only be fulfilled in another time, but in another way than was popularly conceived. The kingdom of God was not to be the kingdom of Israel, even if a political Israel could be revived (Lk. 4:42-43; 6:20; 8:1; 9:1-2; 10:9, 11; 11:2, 14-22; 12:32; 16:16; 17:20; 18:16-17). Mary, of course, could not have known all of this at the annunciation. She only knew that the time of fulfillment was at hand.

1:34-35: Mary's immediate dilemma was related to her own life situation. How could she possibly become pregnant since she was between the betrothal and the hometaking? In Galilee, at least, sexual intercourse between a betrothed couple was not tolerated,²² and Mary was still a virgin.²³ Gabriel explained that the pregnancy would result from the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke employs two verbs here, *eperchomai* (= to come upon) and *episkiazo* (= to overshadow). The first is a word often used to describe unpleasant occurrences, even hostile events.²⁴ The second is a word which quite literally means to cast a shadow, though metaphorically, as used here, it comes to mean protection, especially divine protection.²⁵ Thus, the combination of these two verbs sets up a dynamic tension. The "coming upon" of the Spirit points to the mystery and stigma of Mary's pregnancy. The "overshadowing" of the Spirit points to God's presence and protection during this difficult time. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit not only plunged Mary into her dilemma and not only protected her during it, the Spirit also guaranteed that her child would be holy, the Son of God.

While the title "Son of God" is a title for the Davidic king in the OT, and while Luke certainly makes use of this concept (of. 1:32), the use of the title in the annunciation seems to move beyond the Davidic framework. Jesus would be called the Son of God, not merely because he was descended from David, but also because he was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. He would be the Son of God in a special, unique sense. While Mary herself may not have fully understood the implications of the saying at this time, surely Luke, in retrospect of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, understood that the saying implied divinity.

It may only be added that the Christian confession of the virgin birth has been

²² Furthermore, Matthew's record insists that there was no sexual intercourse until after the birth of Jesus (1:25).

²³ The Greek simply reads, "...since I know not a man," but the phrase "knowing a man" is a common Hebrew euphemism for sexual intercourse, thus indicating, as does the NIV rendering, that Mary was a virgin. This is reinforced by the term *parthenos* (= virgin) in 1:27.

²⁴ *LS*, 618. In the LXX the general connotation of the word describes obscure and oppressive evils, J. Schneider, *TDNT* (1964) II.680-681. In Koine Greek, the word is used to describe legal prosecution, assault, brutality, invasion, robbery and the like.

²⁵ This is the verb used in the LXX to describe the cloud which overshadowed the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 40:35). Luke uses the same verb in the transfiguration to describe the Divine Presence (9:34).

held virtually from the beginning as a way of asserting the truth of the incarnation and the paradox of Jesus' humanity and divinity. While a few heretical sects denied it,²⁶ the post-apostolic Fathers accepted it as a matter of course, and it was incorporated into the earliest creeds of the Christian faith.

Today Christians may affirm the ancient confession:

Apostles' Creed

I believe....in Jesus Christ....our Lord; I who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary....

Nicene Creed

I believe....in one Lord Jesus Christ....Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, And was made man....

1:36-38: Mary was given a sign that the words of Gabriel were true. Gabriel explained to her the unusual pregnancy of Elizabeth, Mary's relative.²⁷ This other pregnancy would function as an assurance to Mary that nothing which God had spoken was impossible.²⁸

Mary's response was one of humility, faith and obedience, all in the face of almost certain public disgrace and undoubtedly with many mixed inner feelings.

Mary's Visit to Elizabeth (Lk. 1:39-45, 56):

1:39-40, 56: Mary lost no time in visiting her relative Elizabeth. The annunciation to Mary was in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (1:26), and Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, presumably until after the birth of John (1:56). Thus, she must have traveled south almost immediately after the

²⁶ G. MacGregor, *The Nicene Creed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 57. It may be noted that there are those who argue for incarnation on grounds other than a virgin birth or who argue that the gospel narratives do not intend to describe a virgin birth, but the arguments are complex and cannot be addressed here, cf. J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

²⁷ The Greek term *syngenis* (= relative) is translated as "cousin" in the KJV, but the term is more general than such a translation suggests. If Luke had meant cousin specifically, he would have been more likely to have employed the Greek term *anersios*, as is also used in Col. 4:10 of. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) 352. While Jesus and John are thus related, it is too rigid to demand that they are second cousins.

²⁸ The Greek text literally reads: "It will not be impossible with God every word," a clear allusion to the statement of Yahweh to Sarah (Ge. 18:14). While the syntax of this Greek sentence is awkward for English, its use of the vocabulary *rhema* (= spoken word) rather than *logos* (= word or thing) emphasizes that it is the word or speech of the message that will not fail, and it is to this that Mary responds, "May it be to me according to your word (*rhema*).

annunciation. If one knew the time of year, he might speculate as to how Mary, presumably not much more than a girl, traveled to her relatives' home. Certain seasons, especially during any of the great religious festivals, would have been conducive to pilgrim traffic, and Mary could have been taken by either her immediate family or friends of the family. The normal route would have taken her from Galilee across the Jordan and south through the transjordan area of Perea to the fords near Jericho. Here she would once more cross the Jordan, and from there the Jerusalem road passed through Jericho and Bethany on its way to the ancient capital.²⁹ The location of Zechariah and Elizabeth's home is only generally given as in the mountains of Judea.

1:41-45: The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth carried a tremendous impact for both women. For Mary, the obvious pregnancy of Elizabeth, who was now at the end of her second trimester, was a confirmation of the sign explained to her by Gabriel (1:36). For Elizabeth, the sudden and joyful spasm of the fetus in her womb at Mary's greeting was accompanied by an inspiration of the prophetic Holy Spirit which filled her.³⁰ Even in the womb, John's prenatal spasm shows his function as the forerunner of the Messiah, a role that was impressed upon him by the Holy Spirit (1:15).

Elizabeth's blessing has been set by Luke into poetic meter after the Hebrew manner of parallelism:³¹

*Blessed [are] you among women,
and Blessed [is] the fruit of your womb!*³²

Elizabeth immediately recognized that Mary carried within her the *Kyrios* (= Lord), a title that is Luke's favorite for Jesus³³. Her double blessing upon Mary rests

²⁹ It is unlikely that Mary would have traveled the straighter route through Samaria inasmuch as Jewish travelers avoided Samaria due to religious and ethnic hostilities, cf. A. Edersheim, *Sketches*, 43-44. On those occasions when the Samaria road was used, there were always incidents and sometimes even bloody encounters, cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 353-354.

³⁰ For the significance of being "filled with the Spirit", see comments under 1:11-17.

³¹ This blessing is quite similar to the ones pronounced in Jewish history by Deborah over Jael (Jg. 5:24) and by Uzziah over Judith (Judith 13:18):

<i>Most blessed of women be Jael,</i>	<i>Blessed are you, daughter, by the Most High God,</i>
<i>the wife of Heber the Kenite</i>	<i>above all the women on earth.</i>
<i>Most blessed of tent-dwelling women.</i>	

³² For the incorporation of this blessing into the Roman Catholic *Ave Maria*, see footnote 4 on 1:28-33.

³³ Luke's favorite title, which appears with more frequency in Luke-Acts than any other, is *Kyrios* (= Lord) which appears some 219 times. While Luke uses it a few times in the more limited sense of "owner" or "sir", by far his most frequent usage is to refer to either God (where *Kyrios* is the normal Greek translation for the Hebrew name Yahweh in the LXX) or Jesus as the Messiah and the Savior (cf. Lk. 2:11; Ac. 2:36; 5:31). Though Jesus' credentials as Lord were verified and amplified by the resurrection, Luke is quite clear that Jesus did not become

upon two grounds, the role which Mary was to play as the mother of the Lord,³⁴ and the faith which Mary displayed toward God's promise. This beatitude toward Mary is repeated later in the Third Gospel when a woman in the crowd also pronounced a blessing upon Mary with respect to her role as the mother of the Lord (Lk. 11:27). Here, however, Luke places the two beatitudes in a priority. The role of faith is more important than the role of giving birth to the Lord (Lk. 11:28). Mary, for her part, was doubly blessed, but the more significant reason to honor her is that she was a believer.

The Magnificent (1:46-55)

Once more Luke sets forth his narrative in Hebrew poetic parallelism. This poem or hymn derives its traditional title from the first word in the Latin Vulgate, translated by Jerome in the 4th century (*magnificat* = magnify or praise). Like many of the speeches in the birth narratives, it is programmatic, that is, it anticipates the great redemptive action of God which will follow.³⁵ The hymn is far more Jewish in character than it is Hellenistic, and it draws from both the language and imagery of the ancient Song of Hannah (1 Sa. 2:1-10) as well as from the Hebrew Psalter and the prophets. It may be easily divided into two parts, the first (1:46b-49) which is personal to Mary herself, and the second (1:50-55) which is corporate and looks outward toward all God's people.

1:46-47: It is not without significance, especially with regard to the role of Mary as discussed above, that Mary considers herself to be an object of God's salvation. In this provision by God Mary rejoices.

The title "Savior" is highly significant in Luke's writings, especially since he was writing as a Greek to another Greek (1:3). In the Greco-Roman world, the verb "save" and its cognate noun "savior" was used to describe political leaders as benefactors to their subjects, particularly benefactors who establish peace (cf. 22:25,

something after the resurrection which he was not before the resurrection, cf. F. Danker, *Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 18. Even in his prenatal state, Jesus was the Lord, the complete master of all.

³⁴ Some of the early Christian Fathers applied the title *theotokos* (= bearer of God) to Mary, and this title was accepted by the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) as well as by the Reformers Luther and Zwingli, and in more modern times, by Karl Barth. While many evangelicals are reluctant to accept this title because they fear Mariolatry, it should be pointed out that Mary as the "bearer of God" does not imply the same thing as Mary the "Mother of God" (Latin, *Dei Genetrix*, as used in Roman Catholic theology). The title for Mary as the "bearer of God" is not objectionable as long as one understands it to describe Mary's role in the nativity and the full deity of Jesus from conception and not as giving to her a role of *coredeptrix* (Latin = co-redeemer) or as opening the door for the worship of Mary. Mary was an object of special grace, and in this regard she stands unique in the human race. It is appropriate that all generations should call her "blessed" (1:48), cf. V. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 242; W. Proctor, "Mother of God," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1984) 739; D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) I.140, 196

³⁵ P. Minear, "Luke's Use of the Birth Stories," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L. Keck and J. Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 116.

NIV). Among the Ptolemies and Seleucids, who ruled Judea prior to the Maccabean Revolt, the term *soter* (= savior) was an official title. The same title was adopted by Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus, and later, Caesar Nero. Luke knew well the language of the decrees which so described these political rulers, and he deliberately uses this title to describe Jesus, the great Benefactor of humankind, and to describe God, the Savior who gives Jesus to the world as his climactic benefaction.³⁶

1:48-49: Mary's "humble state" expresses her unworthiness to be the bearer of the Son of God. God's action in the virginal conception was an act of grace, not a reward for merit. Yet due to this grace, Mary receives the highest station of honor among women. Her exclamation regarding the holiness of God's name should be understood in the ancient sense in which someone's name stood for his/her whole person. It is not simply that God's name is holy, though this is true, but that God himself is holy (cf. Ps. 111:9).

1:50: The phraseology of this verse is drawn from Ps. 103:17. It emphasizes that God's redemptive acts are for those who revere him. This idea is significant inasmuch as it depends on the remnant motif so prevalent in the OT prophets. From the remnant who returned from exile, Luke extrapolates the idea of a remnant who believe. Later, Luke will describe John the Baptist as thundering out the message that a direct lineage from Abraham carries no weight with God, but rather repentance and faith. God could fulfill his promises to Abraham even to those who were never a part of the Jewish community (3:7-9).

1:51-53: God's redemptive work will mean a reversal in socio-political categories.³⁷ The proud, the rulers and the rich stand in sharp contrast to the humble and the hungry. These words anticipate the great proclamation of Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue concerning his mission to the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed (4:18; Cf. Ac. 10:38) as well as the beatitudes and reversals he pronounced upon the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the persecuted (6: 20-26). Such a reversal of categories reflects God's fundamental favoritism toward the powerless and needy as preached by the 8th century OT prophets in their message of social justice. While signs of this reversal are surely to be seen in Jesus' miraculous cures and exorcisms, the anticipation is ultimately eschatological (cf. 12:4-10, 35-37; 13:22-30).

1:54-55: In Jesus the covenantal promises to Israel are to be fulfilled. The title "his servant Israel" comes from the promise in Is. 41:8-9 that God had not rejected Israel in spite of her exile to Babylon. God's promises to Israel, most clearly

³⁶ Danker, 6-17. It may be noted that Luke is the only one of the synoptic gospels which uses the title "Savior" and the cognate word "salvation", though the other synoptic writers use the verb *sozo* (= to save).

³⁷ The six aorist tenses in 1:51-54 should be taken as either ingressive aorists (that is, God has already begun to do these things) or prolepses (describing God's future acts in a finished way so as to emphasize their certainty)

expressed in the land promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, are to be realized by the people of faith. This becomes a recurring emphasis for Luke (24:21; Ac. 1:6-8; 3:13, 19-26).

The Birth of John (Lk. 1:56-66, 80)

Three months after the arrival of Mary in Judea, Elizabeth and Zechariah's child was born, as the angel had promised. Since it was a boy, on the eighth day after birth the parents made preparations for his circumcision, the initiatory rite into the covenant of Abraham's family (Ge. 17:10-14; Lv. 12:3). At this time the child would customarily be named.³⁸ The friends and relative supposed that the boy would be named after his father,³⁹ and they were surprised that Elizabeth wanted to name him John, a name that was not to be found in the family ancestry. However, when Zechariah had been consulted, he indicated in writing the very name which Elizabeth had already given, and instantly his mute condition of nine months was suspended. As is typical of Lukan vocabulary, Zechariah's prophetic praise is described as being "filled with the Spirit" (1:67).⁴⁰ Awe fell upon all who knew of these events, for the very nature of these things indicated that the child would be special. As the boy grew, he spent his youth in the desert, the traditional home of prophetic inspiration for Moses and Elijah, Israel's two greatest prophets.

Some speculation has arisen since the 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls near the Essene community of Qumran that perhaps John spent time with this group of desert reactionaries who had withdrawn from urban Jewish society. There are at least some superficial similarities, such as, their desert lifestyle, the Qumran practice of baptism for purification, the Qumran teaching of a cleansing by the Holy Spirit through purifying water and refining fire, and the use of Is. 40:3 as a prophetic mandate for messianic preparation (cf. Lk. 3:4).⁴¹ Such a suggestion cannot be

³⁸ Other than the NT references (Lk. 1:59; 2:21), there are no direct mentions in Jewish literature of the Jewish custom of naming the child on the eighth day until the eighth century AD, Morris, 78. However, there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the reference.

³⁹ In fact, the Greek imperfect tense of the verb *kaleo* (= to call, to name), if taken as an iterative, suggests not so much that the relatives tried to name the child outright as much as that they had gotten into the habit, during the eight day interval, of calling him "little Zechariah".

⁴⁰ See comments on 1:11-17.

⁴¹ Two quotations from the Qumran writings serve to illustrate this similarity:

Then God will purge by his truth all the deeds of man, refining for himself some of mankind in order to remove every evil spirit from the midst of their flesh, to cleanse them with a holy Spirit from all wicked practices and sprinkle them with a spirit of truth like purifying water (1QS 4:20-21 as quoted in Fitzmyer, 389, 474).

And when those will form themselves as a community in Israel according to these rules, they shall be separated from the midst of the session of the men of evil to go to the wilderness to prepare there His way as it is written: In the wilderness prepare the way [of the Lord], make straight in the desert a highway for our God, of. Y. Yadin, *The Message of the Scrolls* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957) 188.

proven, but it is not impossible.

The Benedictus (Lk. 1:67-79)

As with the Magnificat, this song of praise gains its traditional title from the initial word in the Latin translation. The poem may be divided into two parts, the first (1:68-75) being a celebration of the fulfillment of the messianic promise, and the second (1:76-79), which shifts from the third person to the second person, being an address to the future prophetic role of the newborn son. As with the Magnificat, the Benedictus is filled with the vocabulary of the OT.

1:67-68: It is probable that Zechariah's song of prophetic praise is to be taken as the content of what was uttered in 1:64. The first phrase beginning with *eulogetos* (= blessed, praised) recalls similar affirmations in the Hebrew Psalter (cf. Ps. 41:13; 72:18; 106:48). Zechariah understands the birth of John to belong to the long awaited visitation of God. As in the Magnificat (see comment on 1:51-54), the redemptive actions of God are described in a completed way in order to emphasize their certainty. The time of fulfillment has come. As when Israel was in Egypt before the exodus, God had "visited"⁴² his people in order to redeem them. The word *lytrosis* (= redemption) recalls the great OT redemptive event, the exodus, and compares it to the NT redemptive event, the manifestation of Christ.

Later, Luke will record the disciples' question, "Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Cleopas and his companion, in the aftermath of Jesus' passion, mused about their hopes that Jesus "was the one who was going to redeem Israel," a hope that to them seemed to have been crushed (cf. 24:19-21). Zechariah's song, however, points to the fact that in the Christ event, the OT promises have already come to fulfillment. For Luke, the promises to Israel are truly fulfilled, not in the nationalistic Israel of the old order but in the new Israel of faith. It is in this sense that Jesus "opened their understanding" about the OT Scriptures (24:25-27, 32). Luke uses Zechariah's song to assist in opening these same scriptures to his readers.

1:69-70: The imagery of a "horn of salvation" is thoroughly Semitic. Specifically, it alludes to Ps. 18:3, but the symbol is derived from an animal's horns, especially those of wild buffalo or oxen, which represent strength and power (cf. Dt. 33:17). The figure draws from those passages which view the son of David as an agent of God's salvation (cf. 1 Sa. 2:10; Ps. 132:17; Eze. 29:21).

1:71-75: In these verses Luke has stitched together various phrases from the

⁴² The NIV rendering "he has come" (*episkeptomai* = to visit, to go see) obscures the fact that Luke has chosen the identical verb of Ex. 4:31 (LXX) where God "visited the children of Israel" and saw their affliction. This is a favorite term which Luke uses to describe a visit for the purpose of bringing salvation (cf. Lk. 1:78; 7:16).

LXX:

“...salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (cf. PS. 106:10)

“...to show mercy” (lit., “to do mercy”, recalling the common phraseology describing covenantal love, the performing of *hesed*, that is, loyal love or covenant faithfulness)

“...to remember his holy covenant” (Ps. 105:8; 106:45; Le. 26:42)

“...the oath he swore to Abraham” (Ps. 105:9; Ge. 22:16; 26:3; Mic. 7:20; Je. 22:5)

“...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies” (Ge. 22:17b)

It is clear from the way in which Luke weaves together the prophetic strands of the OT covenantal promises that all the land grant promises and their attendant blessings are spiritually fulfilled in the redemptive work of Jesus. What Israel once understood exclusively in terms of her national politics, Luke, representing the Christian interpretation, asserts she must understand in terms of the kingdom of God.

Furthermore, it is not without significance that many of the phrases in this section of the Benedictus closely follow the ancient Jewish daily prayer, the Eighteen Benedictions. What was prayed in expectancy had been realized.⁴³

1:76-79: Now shifting into a direct address to the newly named child, Zechariah’s song describes John’s future role in these great redemptive events. John would not be the primary figure of God’s redemption, but he would be the forerunner, a prophet of the Most High who would fulfill the predictions about a ministry of preparation (Is. 40:3; Mal. 3:1). His ministry would focus on the knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of sins, phrases which anticipate John’s baptismal message about forgiveness, salvation and the gospel (3:3, 6, 18).

John’s anticipatory⁷ ministry was nothing less than an act of divine grace.⁴⁴ In God’s redemptive action, which would first be preached by John, the dawning of the messianic age would begin (of. Mal. 4:2).⁴⁵ The hopes of deliverance which began in the darkness of Jewish exile would be realized (cf. Is. 9:2; 42:7; 58:8; 60:1-2).

⁴³ A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (USA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.) 76.

⁴⁴ Lit., “bowels of the mercy of our God”; *splanchna* (= bowels, entrails) was considered in antiquity to be the seat of emotion, much as we think of the heart in modern times.

⁴⁵ The LXX renders the Hebrew *tsemah* (= sprout, branch) by the Greek *anatole* (= rising, dawn) in several passages (Jer. 23:5; Zec. 3:8; 6:12). Since this is the same Greek word used in Lk. 1:78 to refer to the dawn, it is possible that Luke has these passages in mind as well.

The Nativity (Lk. 2:1-7)

The story of Jesus' birth is an interweaving of three elements, prophecy, history and symbolism.⁴⁶ While Luke does not use the characteristic Matthias phrase "this occurred to fulfill what the prophet said," his description of the nativity in Bethlehem surely has in mind Micah 5:2, and his mention of the Galilean origins of Joseph and Mary may intentionally recall Isaiah 9:1. Luke is careful to root the narrative in secular Roman history by naming the emperor and Syrian governor and by citing the census which necessitated Joseph and Mary's trip south to Judea. Finally, the familiar story of "no room in the inn" has become a solemn symbol challenging all men and women toward an acceptance of Christ, and it has often been celebrated in carol and proclaimed in sermon. Surely the symbolic value of the story was not missed by Luke, either.

2:1-3: The year of the birth of Christ has given rise to much scholarly debate, and the debate is fueled both by what is known as well as by what is not known. That there was a census taken during the emperorship of Augustus (27 B.C. to 14 A.D.) is not in question. However, according to independent historical records of the period, the governorship of Quirinius in Syria and the associated census are to be placed in 6 A.D., a date that would flatly contradict Matthew's record, which places the birth of Jesus prior to the death of Herod the Great (known to be in 4 B.C.).⁴⁷ A common suggestion is that perhaps Quirinius was governor two times with an earlier tenure and a later one, but while possible, this apologetic has no historical verification, and what is known of Quirinius' career leaves such a suggestion uncertain.⁴⁸ Another attempt at harmonizing the material is based on an unusual translation of Lk. 2:2, "This was before that [census] when Quirinius was governor of Syria," or, "This census took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria."⁴⁹ Unfortunately, this rendering strains the grammar of the passage.⁵⁰

Thus, it seems best to suspend judgment on the issue and to hope that further information will be forthcoming which will clarify it. Since there is no reason to doubt Matthew's dating of Jesus' birth to the end of Herod's reign, and since this date agrees with the other relevant data in the NT, most scholars fix the date of Jesus' birth at about 4 or 5 BC.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Caird, 60-61.

⁴⁷ A. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963) 162-171.

⁴⁸ F. Bruce, "Quirinius," *NBD*, 2nd ed. (1982) 1004.

⁴⁹ H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 20-22. The word *protos* (= first, earliest) can on rare occasions mean "before".

⁵⁰ Fitzmyer, I.401

⁵¹ Laypersons often assume that the birth of Jesus occurred at the dividing point between BC (= before Christ) and

If the year of Jesus' birth is unknown, the day of his birth is equally uncertain. The traditional date, December 25th, can be traced back at least as far as Hippolytus (c. AD 165-235) and was reaffirmed by Chrysostom (AD 386),⁵² and while this date cannot be verified, it is certainly possible.⁵³ That Christians celebrated the Lord's birth on the same day as the Roman Feast of Saturnalia, a day when slaves were temporarily freed, should not be thought unusual. Many early Christian holidays coincided with pagan holidays inasmuch as with a seven day work week (weekends were not holidays in Rome) Christians, particularly slaves, were obliged to celebrate their holy days on the same days as their pagan neighbors.⁵⁴

2:4-7: The journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was not to pay taxes *per se*, as might be inferred from the KJV rendering. Rather, they went to register their names on the roll which would probably be used for levying taxes. Why they felt obliged to return to their ancestral town of Bethlehem is unclear, for in a Roman census people were usually enrolled wherever they happened to be.⁵⁵ However, if Joseph (or even Mary) owned property in Bethlehem they might have had to travel south for that reason, and we know that in Syria women of even twelve years and upwards were liable to a poll tax.⁵⁶ In any case, Joseph, along with the pregnant Mary, made the three-day journey to Bethlehem, David's ancient birthplace.⁵⁷ While there, Mary began her labor and Jesus was born in the manger, a feeding trough for domestic animals.

Many non-biblical traditions have arisen regarding the scene of the nativity.

AD (= *anno Domini*, Latin for "in the year of the Lord"). To be sure, this was the purpose of Pope John I (AD 525) in calling for a revision of the ancient Roman calendar so as to reckon the beginning of the Christian era from the incarnation. However, later research has discovered that these early calculations were flawed, cf. Hoehner, 11-12.

⁵² Hoehner, 25

⁵³ The objection that sheep would not be kept outside in the elements at this time of year in Palestine is overthrown by the Mishnah (*Shekalim* VII.4) which states that Passover lambs were indeed kept outside all year in the vicinity of Bethlehem.

⁵⁴ Ironically, even some reactionaries who insist on claiming that the origin of the Christmas celebration is pagan in turn compromise their claims of purity by celebrating the coming of the New Year with a Christian watch-night service. (The New Year's celebration also originated in paganism). Actually, the practice of taking over something pagan and "Christianizing" it by transforming it into something new is not completely foreign to the Bible. Based upon the precedent of the LXX, for instance, titles for Jesus, such as Lord and Savior, which were common appellations for political leaders in the pagan world were given new Christian meaning with reference to Jesus. Similarly, the household codes for social behavior which were common in the moral philosophies of the Greco-Roman world were adopted by NT writers (Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Peter) but adjusted so as to come into alignment with Christian principles, cf. E. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 251-270

⁵⁵ Fitzmyer, 405.

⁵⁶ Marshall, 101-102

⁵⁷ It may be noted that there are two Judean cities with the title "town of David", Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Bethlehem is the "town of David" because it was the place of his birth and youth (1 Sa. 17:12, 58). Jerusalem is the "town of David" because it was the Jebusite stronghold which David captured and turned into his private capital (2 Sa. 5:6-9). While the two towns are only some five miles apart, they should be distinguished.

The usual assumption of animals being present is not mentioned in the biblical text, and the popular imagery of an English stable is highly unlikely. Some interpreters suggest that Jesus was born in the uncovered courtyard of a Near Eastern caravanserai (a sort of hostelry for travelers),⁵⁸ though a second century tradition locates the birth of Jesus in a cave.⁵⁹ That Jesus was wrapped in strips of cloth was no more than was customary for newborns among Palestinian women (of. Eze. 16:4; Wis. of Sol. 7:4); however, the fact that Mary performed the action herself implies that she was without the help of a midwife.

The Bethlehem Shepherds (2:8-20):

Jesus' first worshipers, the Bethlehem shepherds, were typical of the common peasants who were later to throng Jesus in his public ministry. As a social class, shepherds had a bad reputation. They frequently ignored ceremonial law, they were sometime thieves, and they were not trusted to give testimony in a court of law.⁶⁰ If Jesus was born in a cave, as early tradition asserts (see above under 2:4-7), it may be that the shepherds owned or used the cave inasmuch as such caves near Palestinian villages often served as animal shelters, and the announcement by the angels that the infant would be found in a manger seems to have enabled the shepherds to find him without difficulty.⁶¹ It is not impossible that the shepherds were keeping sacrificial animals for the temple. Such flocks, according to ancient Jewish literature, were kept in the surrounding desert, and any stray animal found between Jerusalem and a place near Bethlehem would be presumed to belong to such a flock.⁶²

2:8-12: The annunciation of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds was by an unnamed angel of the Lord. In the annunciation pattern already seen to be typical (see above under 1:5-25), the angel calmed their fears, announced the birth, proclaimed the newborn's titles, and gave to the shepherds a sign of verification.

In retelling this story, Luke has provided for the Greco-Roman reader what can only be termed as "loaded" vocabulary, that is, vocabulary which would immediately have created certain significant associations. The verb *euangelizo* in 2:10 (= to announce good news) is the verbal form of the noun *euangelion* (= good news, gospel), and the latter was a familiar word used in official proclamations to announce the birthday of Caesar, his coming of age, his enthronement and his various speeches, decrees, and acts which were alleged to bring joy (cf. 2:10) and peace (cf. 2:13) into

⁵⁸ J. Shephard, *The Christ of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939) 31.

⁵⁹ A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., "The Protevangelium of James, (18, 19)" *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) VIII.365, and "Dialogue with Trypho, (LXXVII)", 1.237.

⁶⁰ Morris, 84; Caird, 61.

⁶¹ J. Jeremias, *TDNT* (1968) VI.491.

⁶² Morris, 84.

the ancient world.⁶³ The title “Savior” also carries overtones related to the official role of political benefactors (see above on 1:46-47). The designation *Kyrios* (= Lord) was widely used in the pagan world, both as a title of respect for the Roman emperor, who was thought to be divine, and as a title for other pagan deities.⁶⁴ It seems, then, that Luke has deliberately used words and concepts familiar to the pagan world in order to proclaim that Jesus is truly the divine ruler *excellence*.⁶⁵

Furthermore, his words also carry overtones from the ancient faith of Israel. The title “Lord” is the familiar LXX designation for Yahweh (see above under 1:41-45), while the title “Savior” is also a familiar Isaianic address for God in the LXX and corresponds to the Hebrew *yeshu’ah* and its cognates (Is. 12:2; 25:9; 45:15, 21; 62:11). Even the verb *euangelizo* (= to announce good news) draws upon the LXX announcements of salvation to the captives in exile (Is. 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1).

In addition, Luke has also used another important title from a Hebrew background, namely, “Christ”. *Christos* (= Messiah or Christ; corresponds to the Hb. *mashiah*) was the ancient title for the kings of David’s dynasty who ruled in Jerusalem (Ps. 2:2; 18:50; 20:6). Not until the intertestamental period did this title come to be understood as a designation for the endtime mediator of salvation.⁶⁶ However, by the time of the birth of Jesus, the term “messiah” had come to represent the Jewish hope for the future, and in spite of the fact that there was at that time no single fixed concept of what or who messiah would be, there was a general hope in an anointed figure with Jewish and nationalistic characteristics.⁶⁷ The coupling of the titles Lord and Christ (*Kyrios Christos*) seems to be favored by Luke (cf. 2:26; Ac. 2:36; 11:17; 15:11, 26; 16:31; 20:21; 28:31).

2:13-14: Immediately following the annunciation to the shepherds, there appeared a great company of angels proclaiming (or singing, as is traditional) the glory of God. The words in the Latin Vulgate, *gloria in excelsis Deo* (= glory in the highest degree to God), have passed down to us traditionally. The company of angels is called a “host of heaven”, once again a Hebrew concept coming from the OT. The terms *tsaba* (Hb.) and *stratia* (Gk.) quite literally mean army. In the OT the term “host” could refer to the earthly army of Israel, to the array or “army” of the stars, and/or to the angelic company which could be dispatched by God to do his bidding. Some 279 times in the OT God is himself called Yahweh Tsebaot (= LORD of Armies; frequently rendered God Almighty and LORD Almighty in the

⁶³ U. Becker, *NIDNTT* (1976) II.108.

⁶⁴ Brown, 415-416.

⁶⁵ D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981) 291-292

⁶⁶ L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. J. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 1.169; O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. S. Guthrie and C. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 111-112.

⁶⁷ G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 136-140.

English Versions).⁶⁸ Here, of course, it is the angelic company that is described. Just as the “morning stars sang together, and the angels shouted for joy” when God “laid the cornerstone” of the earth (Jb. 38:7), now the same angelic chorus assembles to celebrate the beginning of a new act in salvation-history.

The angels’ message of peace, unlike the external and transient *pax Romana* (= Roman peace), would come from God, not from a political source. The celebrated *pax Romana* was a peace inaugurated by war -- a peace maintained by Caesar’s legions. Public and private morality had severely declined in the presence of the new wealth and power, and it was at best an uneasy peace -- and certainly not peace of mind.⁶⁹ The peace of which the angels sang began in quite different circumstances with a humble peasant couple in a borrowed shelter.

2:15-20: At the word of the angel,⁷⁰ the shepherds quickly went to find the newborn, just as they had been told. They rehearsed to Mary and Joseph as well as to their friends in Bethlehem what had happened, and the result was amazement. This motif of amazement is very strong in Luke’s portrayal of the Jesus event. Luke employs a collection of verbs, nouns and their cognates to describe the awe and wonderment which the Jesus event created in various people, such as, *thaumazo* = to wonder, be astonished, marvel (cf. 1:21, 63; 2:18, 33; 4:22; 8:25; 11:14, 38; 20:26; 24:12, 41), *ekplesso* = to be overwhelmed (2:48; 4:32; 9:43), *existemi/ekstasis* = to confuse, amaze, astound/astonishment, bewilderment (2:47; 5:26; 24:22/8:56), *thambos* = astonishment (4:36; 5:9) *phobeo/phobos* = to fear, reverence, stand in awe/fear, awe (2:9; 8:25, 35; 9:34/1:65; 2:9; 5:26; 7:16; 8:37) and *aporeo* = to be perplexed (24:4). In several cases he couples more than one of these words together, sometimes in the same phrase, to create a stronger effect (cf. 2:47-48; 5:26; 8:25). This vocabulary seems to be Luke’s way of posing the question made famous in the Christmas carol, “What child is this?” It is a way of calling upon the reader to pause and ask himself/herself, “Who was Jesus?” By the end of the Third Gospel, with its climax of passion and resurrection, the answer to the question should be obvious. Jesus was truly the Lord, the Christ, the Son of David, the Son of God, the divine Savior and Benefactor of the world!

While the shepherds and their friends were amazed at what had happened, Mary deeply considered the convergence of all these wonderful reports and events within her own mind. As such, she becomes a paradigm for the reader who also is called upon to deeply consider the testimony which has been given. Just as Mary

⁶⁸ E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) 54.

⁶⁹ H. Kee, et al., *Understanding the New Testament*, 3rd.ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 22.

⁷⁰ Again, it may be noted that Luke uses the word *rhema* (NIV = “thing”) to describe what had happened (see discussion under 1:36-38), thus bringing together the event and the prophetic word about the event (cf. 1:65; 2:17, 19, 29, 50-51).

herself became a believer, part of the company of faith (Ac. 1:14), so the reader is implicitly challenged to believe “the certainty of the things he has been taught” (Lk. 1:4) and the “convincing proofs” which call for faith (Ac. 1:3).

The Temple Ritual (2:21-40)

Luke takes pains to point out how carefully Mary and Joseph as well as Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna all observed the law. Theologically, this devotion to the law seems intended to demonstrate that the one who is truly committed to the spirit of the law will be ready to receive Jesus. It was Mary’s and Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s openness to God’s redemptive action in the context of OT thought that enabled them to respond so favorably to what God was doing through them. The Magnificat and the Benedictus surely suggest as much. The devotion of Simeon and Anna indicate the same thing, as these two elderly Israelites looked for the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem, only to find that God would fulfill both in the child who was being presented to the Lord.

2:21-24: Like John, Jesus was circumcised according to the law and named when eight days old (see discussion under 1:56-66). Levitical laws regulated ceremonial holiness, and Mary was strictly segregated for the first week after the birth and forbidden to participate in temple worship for thirty-three days after Jesus’ circumcision. During this time she waited for her postnatal discharge to cease (Lv. 12:1-5). It is not unlikely that she and Joseph spent this time with Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary’s relatives. At the end of this period, she was to appear at the sanctuary with both an an_2 ‘*olah* (= holocaust)⁷¹ and a *hatta’t* (= sin offering)⁷² for her ceremonial purification. Luke indicates that Joseph and Mary’s offering was the one prescribed for those who were poor (Le. 12:6-8; of. 5:7-10), though it may be noted that there was available to them an offering for those even less capable (Le. 5:11-13). This seems to suggest that while Joseph and Mary were poor, they were not at a desperation level.

The presentation of the infant Jesus to Yahweh was a ceremony separate from Mary’s purification, even though Mary and Joseph accomplished both rituals in the same visit. Only firstborn male children were presented to Yahweh, because they symbolized the firstborn males who were saved during the final plague of death which occurred at the exodus (cf. Ex. 13:1-2, 12, 15; Nu. 18: 15). Later, when the

⁷¹ The holocaust or burnt offering was to be wholly consumed by fire as a gift to Yahweh in order to insure his favor (Le. 1:10-17).

⁷² The sin offering was intended to secure divine pardon for the donor, though it should be pointed out that such offerings were for accidental transgressions (Lv. 4:1-2, 32-35). The act of giving birth, by its very nature, brought the mother into contact with human uncleanness, and while it could not be avoided, it was still to be treated as sin (cf. Lv. 5:3, 5-7).

Levites were set apart for ritual service as a priestly clan, the Levites themselves came to represent the firstborn of all the Israelites of the other tribes (Nu: 15-19; cf. 3:44-48). Theoretically, all firstborn males, whether human or animal, were devoted to Yahweh for slaughter inasmuch as on the night of the first passover, all such firstborns were marked for death. However, the law would hardly permit human sacrifice, and in lieu of child-slaughter, the firstborn son was to be symbolically presented to Yahweh and bought back (redeemed) for the price of five shekels of silver (Nu. 18:15-16; cf. Lv. 27:6)⁷³

2:25-28: The narrative regarding the presentation of Jesus in the temple (2:22-24, 39-40) is interrupted with the incident involving Simeon and Anna (2:25-38).⁷⁴ Nothing is known of Simeon other than what Luke has chosen to tell us. He was careful about his religious duties,⁷⁵ but given the way that he comes to the temple under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, there is no reason to suppose that he was a priest or that he came to perform priestly duties. According to an ancient Jewish custom, parents brought their child to the temple for an aged rabbi to bless it and pray for it, and it may be that Simeon was fulfilling such a role, though whether or not Simeon was a rabbi is also unknown.⁷⁶

Of more importance is the fact that Simeon is described as having the Holy Spirit upon him and as being moved by the Spirit to visit the temple courts on this particular day. These references to the Holy Spirit are part of the cluster of such references with which Luke emphasizes that the quenched Spirit had returned (see discussion under 1:11-17). Simeon is not specifically said to have been “filled with the Spirit”, as was Elizabeth (1:41), Zechariah (1:67) and John (1:15), a phrase that for Luke indicates divine inspiration for prophetic speech. Nevertheless, he utters a prophetic speech, and it may be assumed that Luke intends his readers to regard Simeon as being filled with the same prophetic Spirit as the others.

Simeon performs a symbolic role as well. Inasmuch as he was waiting for the “consolation of Israel”, he represents all those Israelites who were awaiting God’s eschatological redemptive action. This description parallels very closely that given by Luke to Anna (2:38), and later, to Joseph of Arimathea (23:50-51). The phrase “consolation of Israel” is drawn from the Isaianic passages which predict the return

⁷³ Five shekels of silver (a biblical unit of weight) is about two ounces (55 grams).

⁷⁴ The literary technique used here is called “framing” or “sandwiching”. This method, in which there is an episode within an episode, appears several times in the gospels. Into the purification and presentation narrative has been inserted another narrative which tends to emphasize the relationship between the two. Luke previously used this technique when he inserted the Magnificat (1:46-55) into the narrative describing Mary’s visit to Elizabeth (1:39-45, 56). He also used it when he inserted the Benedictus (1:67-79) into the narrative of John’s birth and childhood (1:57-66, 80).

⁷⁵ The descriptive word *eulabes* (= devout) generally indicates religious devotion, of. Brown, 438.

⁷⁶ E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 83.

of the Jews from exile (Is. 40:1-2; 52:9; 66:12-13).

*Comfort, comfort my people,
Says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
And proclaim to her that her hard service
has been completed....*

Once more, as he has done in the Magnificat and the Benedictus, Luke calls upon the reader to perceive that the true fulfillment of these promises are to come in the kingdom of God to be preached by the Christ. While waiting for Israel's consolation, Simeon had been assured by God that his life would not end before he had seen the inauguration of the fulfillment through Yahweh's messiah.⁷⁷

2:29-32: The first oracle of Simeon is traditionally entitled the *Nunc Dimittis* (Latin for "now dismiss", the opening words of 2:29 in the Latin Vulgate). Like the Magnificat and the Benedictus, it is written in the style of Hebrew poetry. Addressing Yahweh in the prayer mode of a slave addressing his master,⁷⁸ Simeon affirms by his emphatic "now"⁷⁹ that God's long awaited time of salvation has dawned. The term "salvation", like the term consolation, is especially an Isaianic term which refers to the restoration of the exiles from Babylon (Is. 45:15-17; 46:13; 49:6, 8-9; 52:7, 9-10). However, even though the exiles did indeed return from Babylon, they never saw the glorious future envisioned in the later chapters of Isaiah. Instead, they faced the bitter disappointment of hard times and continual domination by pagans. "Now," Simeon declares, "Yahweh's salvation has been revealed."⁸⁰

There is a certain universalism in Isaiah's vision of eschatological salvation. Drawing upon the Isaianic phraseology, the *Nunc Dimittis* speaks of God's salvation which would be a "light to the Gentiles" (42:6; 49:6) and which would be accomplished "in the sight of all people" (52:10). Of course, this salvation was for the glory of Israel also (46:13, LXX), and when Luke quotes the Isaianic phrase "all

⁷⁷ For a fuller discussion of the coupled titles "Lord" and "Christ", see comments under 2:8-12.

⁷⁸ Simeon's vocabulary, *doulos* (= slave) and *despotes* (= master or owner), suggests as much.

⁷⁹ Word order in the Greek text is not without significance. The general tendency is that any emphasis on an element in the sentence causes that element to be moved forward, and the fact that Luke places the Greek nun (= now) as the first word in the sentence makes it emphatic, cf. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) 248.

⁸⁰ It may be noted that Luke has drawn from the LXX version of Is. 40:5 which differs somewhat from the Hebrew text: "And the glory of the Lord shall appear, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God, for the Lord has spoken" (my translation of the LXX). The Hebrew Bible reads, "And the glory of Yahweh will be exposed, and all flesh together will see (it), for the mouth of Yahweh spoke" (my translation of the MT).

the nations” (52:10), he adjusts it slightly to make his interpretation more lucid by rendering it “all the people”.⁸¹ “All the people” includes both Israel and the Gentiles, for the Gentiles also are God’s people, and this is a recurring theme for Luke (Lk. 24:47; Ac. 1:8; 2:39; 11:18; 15:14).⁸²

2:33-35: Luke also records a second oracle of Simeon, this one in prose. If the first oracle speaks of a glorious, universal salvation, the second one speaks of rejection and catastrophe. While Joseph and Mary were still experiencing amazement over the first oracle,⁸³ Simeon directly addressed Mary with the second. Her child had a destiny especially for the nation Israel in that he would cause many to fall and to rise.⁸⁴ This theme of polarization arises later in Luke’s account (12:51-53), and the falling/rising imagery possibly alludes to the quarried stone (Is. 28:16) which was rejected by Israel but which became the cornerstone of the new temple, the church (Is. 8:14-15; Ps. 118:22; Lk. 20:17-18). The rejection of the stone became a standard way for NT writers to explain why many in Israel rejected their messiah, while many among the Gentiles accepted him (cf. Ro. 9:30-33; 1 Pe. 2:6-8).

Furthermore, the child was to be a sign against which many would speak; his life would be a storm center of controversy.⁸⁵ Jesus’ life would be a catalyst, causing people to decide either for or against God. Their inner thoughts, whether faith or belief, would be exposed by their response to Jesus.⁸⁶ Even Mary would be affected by this disconcerting character of her child. The imagery of a sword piercing Mary’s soul is a metaphor for the disruption in Mary’s life which her son would bring, and it may well refer to her grief when Jesus was executed on a Roman gibbet as a criminal against the state.

2:36-38: Just as Simeon finished his second oracle, yet another figure entered

⁸¹ Even though Luke quotes from Is. 52:10, he does not follow the vocabulary in either the MT (*ha-goyim* = the nations) or the LXX (*ethnoi* = nations). Instead, in an interpretive quotation he uses the word *laos* (= the people), a word that is less apt to be understood in terms of ethnic identity. In the poetic structure of Lk. 2:31, the term *laos* is defined in the succeeding lines as being both the Gentiles and the people Israel.

⁸² Brown, 458-460.

⁸³ For the Lukan theme of amazement, see discussion under 2: 15-20.

⁸⁴ It is possible to interpret the “rising and falling” as referring to the same group, i.e., some would first fall and then rise, cf. Caird, 64. Any interpretation depends primarily on how the term “fall” is understood. If it is used figuratively for humility or misunderstanding, then the above interpretation is possible so that the phrase points to humiliation before glory or doubt before faith. However, if the term “fall” is understood in terms of the stone imagery of the OT, as we have done here, then the “falling” group is different than the “rising” group. Those who fall are those who reject Christ, and those who rise are those who accept him.

⁸⁵ It is unclear why Luke has chosen the word “sign”. If he is alluding to the OT, he may be making a connection with the negative sign given to Ahaz of Judah about the birth of a child which would serve as a rebuke for Ahaz’ lack of faith (Is. 7:10-17). On the other hand, the word “sign” may merely mean that Jesus would be a symbol of controversy.

⁸⁶ The term “thoughts” (*dialogismoi*) often carries a negative tone, and Luke seems to use it in a hostile or pejorative sense, cf. Fitzmyer, 430.

the picture, Anna, an elderly prophetess. In a patriarchal society such as ancient Israel, such women leaders were rare.⁸⁷ That she was considered a prophetess at all is unusual inasmuch as the common Jewish opinion was that the prophetic Spirit had ceased some 400 years prior (see comments under 1:11-17). However, the incident involving Anna is in keeping with Luke's theme of the revived prophetic Spirit, and particularly, in keeping with the fact that even women would be blessed with the prophetic gift in the dawn of the time of salvation (cf. Ac. 2:17). Anna was from one of the northern tribes, Asher, which had been crushed by the Assyrians in 721/722 BC. Shortly before this exile, many northern refugees had fled south to Judah,⁸⁸ and perhaps Anna was descended from one of them. In any case, Anna symbolically represents the so-called "lost ten tribes" of the northern nation, though these tribes were not as lost as is sometimes alleged inasmuch as representatives of these tribes who could trace their lineage back into antiquity still existed in some Jewish communities.⁸⁹

Anna was very old, though it is not certain from the Greek text whether she had been a widow for 84 years (which would make her very old indeed) or was herself 84 years old. Daily she spent her time fasting and praying in the temple, and like Simeon, she represents the devout in Israel who were waiting for the messianic age. The phrase "redemption of Jerusalem" again draws from the Isaianic oracles (52:9), and like the Nunc Dimittis, it speaks of the fulfillment of the ancient promises which would be accomplished through Jesus. The redemption of Jerusalem would indeed occur; however, it was not to be a political redemption but a spiritual one. The old Jerusalem, as Luke makes clear, would be desolated (19:41-44; 21:20-24). The "redemption of Jerusalem" must be understood in the Christian sense, not the Jewish one.

2:39-40: Here Luke picks up the narrative which was broken off in 2:24. After their temple requirements had been met, Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth in Galilee. Luke makes no mention of the trip to Egypt (cf. Mt. 2:13ff.), so perhaps he was unaware of this tradition. The child Jesus, for his part, continued to mature physically and intellectually.

⁸⁷ According to the Talmud, there were only seven in Israel's history: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther (*Megilla* 14a), of. Ellis, 84.

⁸⁸ The flight of northern refugees to the southern nation is suggested by archaeological evidence which indicates that Jerusalem underwent a major expansion in the 8th century BC by a factor of three or four times its former size, cf. M. Broshi, "Part of the Lost Ten Tribes Located," *BAR* (Sept. 1975), 27, 32, and "The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh," *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974) 21. We also know that during the reign of Hezekiah, northerners were invited to celebrate in temple worship in Jerusalem (2 Chr. 30:1ff.), and some Asherites responded (2 Chr. 30:10-11). While the Chronicler states that they returned home after the festivals (2 Chr. 31:1), it is not unlikely that some may have remained.

⁸⁹ Paul, for instance, envisions the entirety of the 12 tribes in the Jewish communities as awaiting the messianic promise (Ac. 26:6-7).

Jesus in the Temple at the Age of Twelve (2:41-52)

The story of Jesus in the temple as a boy of twelve is the only such account in the canonical gospels which seeks to give information concerning the years between the birth of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry at about the age of thirty (cf. Lk. 3:23). Various efforts, both ancient⁹⁰ and modern,⁹¹ have been made to fill in the gaps of these hidden years of Jesus' life. However, the four evangelists did not seem to think this was necessary. Rather, but for this one exception, they ignored these early years, and even in Luke's gospel, the one story which is narrated is not so much given in order to satisfy curiosity as it is to provide a transition between the birth stories and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The Lukan adolescent story seems intended to indicate that the boy Jesus was gradually growing into a self-awareness of his messianic identity.

2:41-42: Torah prescribed that Jewish males should celebrate three festivals each year before Yahweh, Unleavened Bread, which included Passover, Weeks, also called Pentecost, and Booths, also called Tabernacles (Dt. 16:16). By the era in which Jesus lived, however, it had become customary for those who lived some distance away to come to Jerusalem only at Passover⁹². By Jewish standards, Jesus would have been on the threshold of adult life when he reached the age of twelve, for at thirteen he entered into the full responsibilities of adulthood.⁹³ Although at thirteen

⁹⁰ Probably the most striking ancient account is the second century work *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (about AD 125) which seems to be heavily influenced by the Hellenistic *theioi andres* (= divine men) concepts, cf. D. Cartledge and D. Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 92-97. It depicts Jesus as an adolescent wonder-worker who caused clay pigeons to fly, called down fatal curses upon people he did not like, performed healings, and raised the dead. Stories are told which are alleged to have happened when Jesus was five (2:1), six (11:1), eight (12:2) and twelve (19:1). Interestingly enough, the Lukan account is also reproduced in this document, and both accounts agree very closely, though it appears that the apocryphal account is probably based on Luke's gospel.

⁹¹ A modern effort, which is largely speculative, attempts to prove that Jesus was a student at the Essene community in Qumran, cf. C. Potter, *The Lost Years of Jesus Revealed*, rev. ed. (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1962).

⁹² Ellis, 85.

⁹³The Mishnah gives careful attention to the life stages of the Jewish male under the following rubric, cf. Edersheim, *Sketches*, 105.

At five, reading Scripture

At ten, learning Mishnah

At thirteen, bound to the commandments (*bar mitzvah*)

At fifteen, study of Talmud

At eighteen, marriage

At twenty, pursuit of vocation

At thirty, full vigor

At forty, maturity of reason

At fifty, able to counsel

At sixty, beginning of old age

a Jewish boy became a “son of the law” (*bar mitzvah*),⁹⁴ rabbinical law also instructed that a year or two before they were thirteen the boys should be brought to the temple so as to participate in the annual festivals.⁹⁵ It is in accord with this custom that Joseph and Mary brought Jesus during Passover when he was twelve. It is a popular idea that this was Jesus’ first visit to the temple, but the text does not say so, and Jewish tradition does not restrict younger boys from the annual festivals.

2:43-46: Although the Festival of Unleavened Bread lasted a full week, pilgrims were only required to stay through the first two days.⁹⁶ Apparently, Joseph and Mary began the return trip to Galilee with other pilgrims after fulfilling this requirement, only to discover at the end of the first day’s travel that Jesus was not with any of their relatives or friends in the caravan as they had thought. It took another day to return to Jerusalem, and they discovered Jesus on the third in the temple court. It was customary during the final days of Unleavened Bread for members of the Sanhedrin to sit in the temple terrace to teach and field questions from the pilgrims.⁹⁷ It is in the midst of this dialogue that Joseph and Mary found Jesus, posing questions and listening intently to the rabbis.

2:47-52: Jesus’ intelligence and insightful familiarity with Torah was apparent to the discussion group in the temple terrace. When his parents arrived, they too were amazed.⁹⁸ Mary, with some asperity, offered a rebuke to her son, but Jesus responded with the well known words “didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”⁹⁹ It is obvious that this question is the point of the whole story.¹⁰⁰ Luke seems to be telling the reader that even at this early age Jesus had begun to realize who he was and to

At seventy, grey age

At eighty, advanced old age

At ninety, bowed down

At one hundred, dead

It may be noted that the terminology *bar mitzvah* is a more modern expression as well as the ritual associated with it, but nevertheless, in the time of Jesus the age thirteen was the specified time when a Jewish boy became obligated to observe the Torah, cf. Fitzmyer, 440.

⁹⁴ *Abot*, 5.21.

⁹⁵ *Yoma*, 82a

⁹⁶ Marshall, 127.

⁹⁷ Edersheim, *Sketches*, 120.

⁹⁸ For the Lukan theme of amazement, see discussion under 2:15-20.

⁹⁹ The more familiar rendering of the KJV is “about my Father’s business.” However, in the Greek text the sentence literally reads, “Did you not know that it is necessary for me to be in the [?] of my Father?” As such, the object of the preposition must be supplied by the translator, and either translation is feasible, cf. Fitzmyer, 443-444.

¹⁰⁰ Some stories in the gospels, such as this one, are called apothegms or pronouncement stories precisely because the whole story revolves around an important saying of Jesus. The narrative functions as a vehicle for the saying, and the saying is the climax of the narrative itself, cf. D. Harrington, *Interpreting the New Testament* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979) 72-73.

discern the unique relationship he had with God, even though Mary and Joseph did not fully comprehend. Mary, though she was perplexed, did not forget this saying, and she reflected deeply upon it and its surrounding circumstances. To be sure, she also knew the unusual circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, but the full impact of what it all meant was not yet clear to her. In Mary's perplexity, the reader of Luke's gospel once more finds a paradigm for him/herself. Mary's quiet perplexity would someday blossom into faith (cf. Ac. 1:14), and if the reader will hear the entire testimony about Jesus, he/she too will be able to respond in faith.

After this incident, all one knows of Jesus' early life is that he went home with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth in Galilee and was an obedient son. The concluding fourfold description of Jesus' development reflects an intellectual, physical, spiritual and social growth (cf. 1 Sa. 2:26).

Part Two

The Matthean Birth and Infancy Narratives

THE MATTHEAN BIRTH AND INFANCY NARRATIVES

The Gospel according to Matthew was the most important gospel in the early history of Christianity. In most early canon lists it was placed first, it was the most widely read of the four, and it was more often quoted by early Christian writers than the others.¹⁰¹ While today most scholars agree Mark was probably written first (in about AD 65),¹⁰² Matthew's contribution to the four portraits of Jesus, generally thought to have been composed between AD 80--100,¹⁰³ is essential for a full picture of the early church's understanding of Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the earliest traditions regarding Matthew's gospel comes from Papias (early 2nd century) who wrote that Matthew "made an arrangement of the oracles [of Jesus] in the Hebrew language," though it is unclear whether this reference is to the First Gospel itself or to a collection of the sayings of Jesus no longer extant. This same tradition was preserved by Irenaeus, and later repeated by Origen, Eusebius, Augustine, and Jerome. Unfortunately, the Greek manuscript of Matthew's gospel does not bear any linguistic marks of having been translated from a Hebrew or an Aramaic original, as almost all scholars now agree, and so the tradition of Papias must be regarded as a possible reference to a shorter document, a collection of sayings perhaps, which might underlie the Greek Gospel of Matthew.¹⁰⁴

Of the Apostle Matthew himself we know little. The tradition of attaching his

¹⁰¹ D. Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1975) 1.43.

¹⁰² Many works address the literary relationships and dates of the synoptic gospels, but a very readable and thorough treatment may be found in W. Barclay, *Introduction to the First Three Gospels*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975).

¹⁰³ D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970) 46.

¹⁰⁴ D. Hagener, "Matthew, Gospel According to," *ISBE* (1986) 3.281

name to the anonymous First Gospel dates from the 2nd century and is unanimously supported in early Christian history, and while such tradition is not the same as absolute certainty, there is substantial reason to believe that it is accurate.¹⁰⁵ The Matthew of the NT was a Jewish tax gatherer, probably collecting tolls for Herod Antipas on the commercial traffic using the Damascus-Acre road and possibly assessing taxes on the fishing industries of Galilee.¹⁰⁶ When he was called by Jesus to be a disciple, Matthew staged an elaborate dinner in honor of Jesus (Mt. 9:9-13). The parallel accounts of this dinner in Mark and Luke identify Matthew by his other name, Levi (Mk.2:14; Lk. 5:27-29).

The First Gospel forms an important link to the OT in that it is usually understood, on the basis of internal characteristics, to have been written to a Jewish-Christian community, possibly Antioch.¹⁰⁷ It certainly demonstrates a concerted effort to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of the OT anticipation of Messiah. Matthew contains over sixty explicit or substantial quotations of the OT and many more allusions, more than twice as many as any other gospel.¹⁰⁸ Matthew's birth narratives are different than those of Luke, but they complement those of Luke and fill out the story of Jesus' birth.

The Genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17):

Matthew begins his gospel in a rather uninviting manner, at least to modern eyes. This family pedigree was extremely important in the ancient world, however, and particularly the Jewish world. Since the return from exile, racial purity was of paramount concern (Ezr. 2:59, 62//Ne. 7:61, 64; 9:1-2). Even the simplest Israelite, by the time of Jesus, knew his immediate ancestors and could identify to which of the twelve tribes he/she belonged, and the social classes of Jewry were dominated entirely by the exercise any civic rights or be permitted to participate in temple worship. To the ones with pure ancestry alone belonged entitlement to the prestigious category of "the true Israel". The greater number of Jews could trace their tribal descendancy through Judah, as is understandable given the Babylonian exile of Judah in the 6th century BC. and her return in the 5th century BC. The most important family in Judah was the family of David, especially since the messianic hope was frequently ideal of racial purity. Pure ancestry had to be proved if persons were allowed to thought to rest in this royal family.¹⁰⁹ One branch of the Davidic family

¹⁰⁵ See especially, N. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 1-47

¹⁰⁶ E. Blair, "Matthew," *IDB* (1962) 111.302

¹⁰⁷ While the geographical location of the readers of Matthew's gospel is still unsettled by scholars, Antioch of Syria is at least a likely candidate, cf. R. Brown and J. Meier, *Antioch and Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 18-27.

¹⁰⁸ Hagner, 284.

¹⁰⁹ It may be noted in passing that the expectation of the messiah from the family of David was not unanimous. A

had a number of messianic pretenders, and for more than a hundred years its members distinguished themselves by mutinies and pretensions to the throne, each of which were regularly suppressed by the Romans.¹¹⁰ Thus, when Matthew began his account of the life of *Iesous Christos* (= Jesus Messiah), his tracing of the genealogy through David and Abraham was no insignificant matter.

1:2-16: When one compares the genealogies of Matthew with those of 1 Chronicles 1:34; 2:1-15; 3:1, 5, 10-24 and Luke 3:23-38, it becomes apparent that they are not identical. Luke begins with Jesus and traces the genealogy backward to Adam whereas Matthew begins with Abraham and traces the genealogy forward to Jesus. Furthermore, Matthew divides his genealogy into three symmetrical groups of fourteen generations each, something not found in either the OT or in Luke. The first set of fourteen generations are identical between Matthew, Luke and the OT. The second set of fourteen generations has apparently been abridged by Matthew in order to achieve his number. In the third set, from the time of David onward, Matthew and Luke diverge sharply in most instances, and Luke is clearly following a different family line.

In the final group, it is unclear as to how Matthew arrives at the number fourteen, though he obviously intends this to be the case (cf. 1:17). It may be that David is counted twice (once at the end of the first group and once at the beginning of the second group) while Jeconiah belongs to the third group only. It may be that Jeconiah is counted twice, once at the end of the second group and once at the beginning of the third group. Alternately, if one is to avoid repeating a name, it may be that Mary is counted in the third group (as we have done here), thus alluding to the two different kinds of generation for Jesus, one legal (Joseph) and one natural (Mary). No solution is completely satisfactory at this time.

It is a tribute to Matthew's skill as a writer that he breaks the pattern of the verb structure in 1:16, moving from the active to the passive voice at precisely the right moment.¹¹¹ In the lengthy series of "A fathered B", and "B fathered C", and so

tradition which considered messiah to be from the priestly line (Levi) is to be found in intertestamental literature, the Qumran scrolls, and rabbinic discussions. Some considered the Davidic line to have been tainted by the illegal marriage of Judah and Tamar, the gentile status of Ruth, David's affair with Bathsheba, and the fact that the mother of Rehoboam ben Solomon was an Ammonitess (1 Ki. 14:31), cf. M. Johnson, "Genealogy of Jesus," *ISBE* (1982) 2.428.

¹¹⁰ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 270, 275-277. In the family mentioned above, Herod the Great executed the brigand Hezekiah in 47 B.C. Hezekiah's son, Judah, led a revolt in 4 BC and again in AD 6 (cf. Ac. 5:37). Judah's sons, James and Simon, were executed in AD 47, and Meriachem, another son, seized power in Jerusalem in AD 66, claiming the title of king. Finally, a kinsman of Judah led the defense of Masada against the Romans in AD 73.

¹¹¹ From the beginning of the genealogy, Matthew has used the aorist, active form (= to father, beget), but when he brings in Mary, he shifts to the aorist passive form *ex hes egennethe Iesous* (= out of whom was fathered Jesus), thus

forth, Matthew broke this pattern when he said "Jacob fathered Joseph, the husband of Mary, out of whom¹¹² was born Jesus."

Matthew	1 Chronicles 1st Fourteen Generations	Luke
		Adam to Abraham
Abraham	Abraham	Abraham
Isaac	Isaac	Isaac
Jacob	Israel	Jacob
Judah	Judah	Judah
Perez	Perez	Perez
Hezron	Hezron	Hezron
Ram	Ram	Ram
Amminadab	Amminadab	Amminadab
Nahshon	Nahshon	Nahshon
Salmon	Salma or Salmon	Salmon or Sala
Boaz	Boaz	Boaz
Obed	Obed	Obed
Jesse	Jesse	Jesse
David	David	David

leaving the father unnamed. This ambiguity cries out for clarification, and Matthew will provide it in the succeeding story of the virgin birth.

¹¹² It is worth pointing out that the relative pronoun *hes* (of whom) is feminine and cannot refer to Joseph.

2nd Fourteen Generations

Solomon ben David	Solomon ben David	Nathan ben David
Rehoboam	Rehoboam	Mattatha
Abijah	Abijah	Menna
Asa	Asa	Melea
Jehoshaphat	Jehoshaphat	Eliakim
Joram	Joram	Jonam
Uzziah (Ahaziah)	Ahaziah (Uzziah)	Joseph
	Joash	Judah
	Amaziah	Simeon
	Azariah	Levi
Jotham	Jotham	Matthat
Ahaz	Ahaz	Jorim
Hezekiah	Hezekiah	Eliezer
Manasseh	Manasseh	Joshua
Amon	Amon	Er
Josiah	Josiah	Elmadam
	Jehoiakim	Cosam
Jeconiah (Jehoiachin)	Jeconiah (Jehoiachin)	Addi

**3rd Fourteen
Generations**

		Melki
		Neri
Shealtiel	Pedaiah ¹¹³	Shealtiel
Zerubbabel	Zerubbabel	Zerubbabel
Abiud	Hananiah	Rhesa
Eliakim	Shecaniah	Joanan
Azor	Neariah	Joda
Zadok	Elioenai	Josech
Akim		Semein
Eliud		Mattathias
Eleazar		Maath
Matthan		Naggai
Jacob		Eсли
		Nahum
		Amos
		Mattathias
		Joseph
		Jannai
		Melki
		Levi
		Matthat
		Heli
Joseph/Mary		Joseph
Jesus		Jesus

1:1, 17: At the outset, it is apparent that Matthew has structured his genealogy of Jesus in a very special way. In the first place, he begins with the phrase *biblos*

¹¹³ Both Matthew and Luke follow the LXX and Ezr. 3:2, 8; 5:2; Ne. 12:1. The MT makes Pedaiah ben Jeconiah the father of Zerubbabel, but a widely accepted explanation is that Shealtiel died childless, and his brother, Pedaiah, fathered a son through levirate marriage so that it was reckoned to the deceased, cf. H. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 57.

geneseos (= [the] book of [the] generation), a phrase which exactly corresponds to the *toledot* (= generations) of Genesis in the LXX (cf. Ge. 2:4a; 5:1). As such, then, the birth of Jesus, like the creation of the heavens and earth and the creation of the first humans, marks a new era in time, the beginning of a new creation. The term *genesis* (= generation, origin, birth, course of life) is telescopic in that it can refer not only to the immediately following genealogy but also to the birth of Jesus itself (and does so in 1:18) as well as his personal life-story which is taken up in the gospel as a whole.¹¹⁴

Second, Matthew sets up the genealogy in three symmetrical periods of fourteen generations each, a structure which required the tailoring of the genealogical tables available from the OT. The reason for this careful structuring, while no doubt clear enough to the original readers, is not immediately clear to the modern reader. One popular idea is that the number fourteen was derived by *gematria*, a symbolic way of expressing an idea through the numerical value of alphabetical letters. If so, then the number fourteen emphasizes that Jesus was of the family of David, since the numerical equivalent of the name David in Hebrew fourteen. This is probably the best solution.¹¹⁵ Other possibilities are that Matthew was consciously comparing the genealogy of Jesus with that of Pharisaic tradition, which also may have been structured in fourteen units,¹¹⁶ that he adopted his genealogy from one or more popular extant genealogies (either bridged or incomplete) which were at his disposal,¹¹⁷ or that he consciously reflected a structuring of sacred history after a pattern found in apocalyptic literature.¹¹⁸ Whatever his source, it is obvious that Matthew intends the three sets of fourteen generations to be significant.

The historical demarcations of the three sets is also suggestive. To Abraham was given the first covenant which gave to Israel a special place in the purposes of God (Ge. 12:1-3). To David, also, was given a profound covenant that his throne would be established forever (2 Sa. 7:16). In the days of exile, both the promises to Abraham and David were jeopardized because the nation lost her land and her Davidic king. The way in which Matthew structures this genealogy suggests that this latter period of jeopardy is now complete. God has acted to fulfill his promises to Abraham and David.

Above all, of course, are the highly suggestive titles “son of David” and “son

¹¹⁴ J. Fenton, *Saint Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 36.

¹¹⁵ Before Arabic numerals came into usage, letters of the alphabet served as numbers, and thus words had a numerical equivalent. The numerical equivalent of the Hebrew name “David” (*daleth/waw/daleth* = 4 + 6 + 4) is fourteen, and if this hypothesis is correct, then the genealogy gives a triple emphasis that Jesus was of the family of David, cf. F. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1981) 61.

¹¹⁶ Johnson, “Genealogy of Jesus,” *ISBE* (1982) 2.428.

¹¹⁷ R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 69-70.

¹¹⁸ M. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969) 193-194.

of Abraham”. The significance of the latter is obvious, for it places Jesus squarely in the nation of Israel as one of the seed to whom the promises were originally made. The term “son of David” had become a virtual synonym for messiah by the time of Jesus, based on Yahweh’s promise to David that his throne would be established forever (2 Sa. 7:16). The OT prophets kept this theme alive (Is. 9:6-7; Je. 30:9; 33:15; Eze. 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Ho. 3:5), and it was repeated in the intertestamental literature (cf. Sirach 47:2, 11, 22; 1 Maccabees 2:57; Psalms of Solomon 17:4, 21-44). Later, in the apostolic era, the descendancy of Jesus from David became a way of expressing his messiahship and was explained as part of the good news that God had fulfilled his messianic promises (Ac. 13:22-23; Ro. 1:3; 2 Ti. 2:8; Re. 5:5; 22:16).

Various explanations have been given to try to resolve the genealogical differences between Matthew and Luke, and two deserve special mention. The most popular one is probably that Matthew gives the family descent of Joseph, Jesus’ legal father, while Luke gives the descent of Mary, Jesus’ mother¹¹⁹. Another, and one perhaps standing up better to scholarly and linguistic investigation, is that Matthew traces the royal line of Jesus while Luke traces the natural line.¹²⁰ It is to be observed that Matthew, unlike Luke, does indeed trace Jesus’ ancestry back through the kings of Judah. A less convincing alternative is that Matthew has composed a partly historical genealogy but interposed free creations which have symbolic value.¹²¹

There is one other striking feature of Matthew’s genealogy which must not be passed over, and that is the listing of the four women in addition to Mary herself. The appearance of a woman in a Jewish genealogy was not unprecedented, but it was rare, being found usually in those cases where there was an irregularity of descent or where here was something significant about the woman’s name.¹²² That Matthew includes four is unusual in itself, but that he includes these particular four demonstrates an intentionality that would not have been missed by those familiar with the OT.

In the first place, all four were considered to be gentiles. Tamar, the daughter-

¹¹⁹ This harmonization goes back at least to the time of Luther and places great stress on the phrase in Lk. 3:23 that Jesus was “the son, so it was thought, of Joseph.” Accordingly, it is suggested that this phrase links Jesus to Mary rather than to Joseph, and there is a supporting reference in the Talmud that Mary was the daughter of Heli, cf. L. Sweet, “Genealogy of Christ,” *ISBE* (1943) 2.1198.

¹²⁰ J. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1930) 207-209.

¹²¹ R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 14-19. This method of writing follows the Jewish practice of midrash in which Scripture is interpreted in ways other than strictly historical so as to comfort, edify, exhort, or strengthen faith. See especially Gundry’s theological postscript where he attempts to defend Matthew’s use of symbolic genre and harmonize it with a belief in biblical inerrancy.

¹²² J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 207 (note 1).

in-law of Judah, was probably Canaanite, like her mother-in-law (Ge. 38:2, 6). Rahab was a native of Canaanite Jericho (Jos. 2:1). Ruth was a Moabitess (Ru. 1:4). Bathsheba married Uriah, a Hittite (2 Sa. 11:3), and while there is no direct information regarding her nationality, it is significant that Matthew never calls her by name but emphasizes the gentile connection by calling her “Uriah’s wife”. This non-Jewish character of the four women seems to fit into Matthew’s larger theological scheme that the message about Jesus was international. Yahweh’s promise to Abraham was that all the nations would be blessed through his seed (Ge. 12:3), and Matthew closes his gospel with a commission for universal proclamation (Mt. 28:19). These women had been the subject of a rabbinic controversy related to the descent of David and the popular expectation of a Davidic messiah. While a minority argued that the descent of David was tainted by these women, the Pharisees championed their presence in the lineage, a position with which Matthew concurs.¹²³

The other striking feature about these women is that, like Mary, there was some irregularity in the procreation of their offspring. Tamar, because she was deprived of her levirate rights, seduced her father-in-law Judah by posing as a cult prostitute, and by this method gave birth to Perez and Zerah (Ge. 38:6-30). Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho (Jos. 2:1), and though there is no OT information regarding her as the mother of Boaz, Matthew apparently gleaned this information from some unknown source. Ruth was descended from a nation which had its roots in incest (Ge. 19:30-37), a situation so grievous that Moabites were prohibited from Israel’s worship for ten generations (Dt. 23:3). Furthermore, Ruth’s child Obed was born out of a levirate marriage (Ru. 2:20; 3:2, 9, 13; 4:9-13). Finally, Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon, was seduced by David, who arranged to have her husband killed (2 Sa. 11:2-27). All four of these women found themselves outside the normal patriarchal structures of ancient society, and all four were restored or brought under the protection of God’s providential care. The mention of these four women seems designed to suggest to the reader that Mary, the fifth woman in the story, would also suffer alienation from society but would come under the protection of God in giving birth to her child under unusual circumstances.

The Virginal Conception of Jesus (Mt. 1:18-25)

Most English Versions begin the narrative in 1:18 by rendering the Greek word *genesis* as “birth” (KJV, RSV, NEB, TCNT, NASB, Phillips, etc.). While this is an adequate translation, it has the unfortunate aspect that it obscures a careful connection which Matthew seems to have intended, that is, that the term *genesis* (= origin, generation) is repeated in 1:18 from 1:1.¹²⁴ As such, the story of how Mary

¹²³ M. Johnson, “Genealogy of Jesus,” *ISBE* (1982) 2.429.

¹²⁴ It may be noted that there is a textual discrepancy here between *genesis* (= generation) and *gennesis* (=

came to be pregnant is directly connected with the whole genealogical scheme in 1:1-17 and provides a direct answer to the implicit question which Matthew has raised by using the passive construction “out of whom was fathered Jesus” (1:16). In the genealogy proper, Matthew has not told his readers who fathered Jesus, but now he addresses this question specifically. Furthermore, the term “virginal conception” is more descriptive of the present passage than the traditional term “virgin birth” since the passage does not as yet describe a birth but only a conception.¹²⁵

1:18-19: To appreciate the circumstances of Mary’s pregnancy, it is advantageous to know something of marriage customs among Jewry of the first century in Palestine. Marriage was completed in two stages, a betrothal and a hometaking. In the betrothal, which usually occurred when the girl was between twelve and twelve and a half years of age, the father of the girl received from the prospective groom the *mohar* (= bride price) in the presence of witnesses. This began the transfer of the girl from her father’s power to her husband’s power. Once the betrothal was valid, the girl was called the “wife” of the man since betrothal was considered to be permanent. Even though she would not yet live with him for a time, she could be widowed, divorced, or executed for adultery. In Judea, the betrothed couple might engage in sexual relations under certain circumstances, but in Galilee, where Mary lived, no such liberties were tolerated; the bride had to be taken to her husband’s home as a virgin. The hometaking, which usually occurred about a year or so after the betrothal, was celebrated with a processional to the new home followed by a wedding feast. At this time, the bride came under the full power of her husband.¹²⁶

According to Matthew, between the betrothal and the hometaking, Mary was found to be pregnant. How the discovery was made or how far along Mary was in the pregnancy is not explained,¹²⁷ but Matthew is quite clear that the news deeply disturbed Joseph. Matthew is also careful to inform the reader that the pregnancy was a miraculous conception “through the Holy Spirit,” something that Joseph did not know as yet. Joseph was left to figure the problem out for himself, and he could only conclude the worst. He knew the child was not his, and seemingly the only other

engendering), but the earliest witnesses to the NT text all agree in support of *genesis*, cf. Philadelphia Papyri (3rd century), Codex Vaticanus (fourth century), Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century), etc.

¹²⁵ The term “virginal conception” has another advantage in that it avoids confusion with the Roman Catholic tradition which understands the virginity of Mary in a threefold way, i.e., as a virginity in conception, as a virginity in birthing (usually specified as a birth without pain and/or without rupturing the hymen), and as a perpetual virginity thereafter, cf. R. Brown, *The Virginal Conception & Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973) 27.

¹²⁶ O.Baab, “Marriage,” *IDB* (1962) 3.284-285; Jeremias, 364-368; A. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 148ff.; Brown, *Birth*, 124; Schaberg, 42-44.

¹²⁷ It may be noted that in Luke’s account, Mary was informed that she would become pregnant through the action of the Holy Spirit prior to the event (Lk. 1:26-38), but Joseph was not afforded this advance information

options were seduction and rape. Thus, Joseph resolved to divorce Mary privately rather than publicly expose her.

The two expressions *deigmatissai* (= to publicly expose) and *lathra apolysa* (secretly divorce) are significant in that they suggest that Joseph considered both seduction and rape as possible causes of Mary's pregnancy. According to Torah, if the encounter had occurred in a town, the woman was then assumed to have been seduced since she had not been heard screaming for help. Both parties were to be executed. If it happened in the country, she was given the benefit of the doubt, since she could have been forced. In this case only the male was executed (Dt. 22:23-27). If there was only suspicion of seduction but no proof, the woman was required to submit to a judicial ordeal, an appeal to divine judgment to absolve or condemn her through the drinking of filthy water and the imposition of a curse (Nu. 5:11-31).¹²⁸

Rabbinic sources are not as clear as one might like regarding how the Jews approached the subject at the time of Jesus. Apparently, the judicial ordeal could have been declined and a divorce could have been effected privately before two witnesses.¹²⁹ It is possible that some Jews felt that divorce was required in the case of rape while others felt⁷ that it was at least allowed though not mandatory.¹³⁰ Thus, if Mary had been raped, Joseph could either have married her or divorced her. If she had been unfaithful, she was subject to execution¹³¹ according to Mosaic law, though the severity of this judgment was probably relaxed by the time of Jesus, and divorce was more than likely to have been the judgment rather than execution. Thus, Joseph wrestled with the most acute dilemma. Mary, his betrothed, was pregnant, and he knew not how. Was it her fault, or was it someone else's? Being a "righteous" man (a man devoted to Torah), he struggled with the alternatives, finally choosing private divorce in order to spare Mary the worst. He elected not to resort to the judicial ordeal, but chose to shield Mary through a merciful alternative. With nothing being proven against her, she could return to her father's home and hope for another marriage in the future.

1:20-21: It was in the midst of his acute dilemma but after he had chosen a particular course of action that God intervened to change Joseph's mind. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, urging him to complete the home-taking rather than proceed with a private divorce.

¹²⁸ The judicial ordeal of drinking filthy water was not unknown in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, such as Man and among the Hittites. According to rabbinic literature, the suspected woman was forced to drink holy water from the layer mixed with dirt from underneath a slab to the right of the sanctuary entrance. The slab was fixed with a ring so that it might be easily lifted, cf. T. Frymer, "Ordeal, judicial," *IDBSup* (1976) 640

¹²⁹ Schaberg, 51.

¹³⁰ Schaberg, 49-50.

¹³¹ See discussion, Schaberg, 51-53.

The messenger to Joseph, the “angel of the Lord”, is the familiar figure of the *Mal’ak Yahweh* (= messenger of Yahweh) from the OT, a figure that appeared more than once in connection with either an annunciation or a dilemma of a parent and child (Ge. 16:7-16; 22:11-18; Jg. 13:2-22). It was part of the paradoxical character of the *Mal’ak Yahweh* that he could speak both for God and as God, and it is worth noting that on several occasions, when one saw the *Mal’ak Yahweh* it was equivalent to seeing God (cf. Ge. 16:13; 31:13; 32:30; Jg. 13:22). This figure appears two times more in Matthew’s prologue, each time to insure the protection of the child Jesus (2:13, 19).

Dreams figure significantly in Matthew’s narrative, and no less than five dreams are recounted (1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22). This is in keeping with the OT pattern that revelatory dreams seem to have appeared in clusters (i.e., patriarchal era, time of Daniel). The OT writers may not have made a clear distinction between dreams and night visions, but in the case of Joseph at least, it is clear that he was asleep when the first angelic appearance was made (1:24).

When the angel addressed Joseph, he called him the “son of David”, a point that Matthew has already substantiated in the genealogy. As is common in annunciation stories in general, this annunciation follows the stereotypical pattern found elsewhere in the Bible:¹³²

1. The appearance of an angel
2. The person is saluted by name
3. The person is urged not to be afraid
4. A pregnancy is announced and explained
5. The child is named in advance
6. The significance of the name is explained
7. The future accomplishments of the child are indicated

Joseph was counseled not to be afraid of completing the home-taking, the second stage of Jewish marriage. Of course, to complete the marriage meant that he would be called upon to bear Mary’s stigma as well. It meant that while he was willing to protect her from the overt charges of seduction or rape, he could never remove any popular suspicion that seduction or rape had actually occurred nor could he exempt himself from being suspected of intercourse prior to the home-taking. That suspicions of illegitimacy were indeed fostered in the Jewish community is hinted at

¹³² Brown, *Birth*, 156.

in the NT (Mk. 6:2-3; Jn. 8:41) and explicitly stated in non-biblical traditions.¹³³

The divine action which resulted in Mary's pregnancy is explained by the phrase, "...what is conceived in her is through the Holy Spirit." Virtually all scholars agree that this passage intends to teach the virginal conception of Jesus.¹³⁴ The phrase is uniformly included in the historic creeds of the church, and the virginal conception of Jesus points toward his uniqueness as both human and divine.¹³⁵ There is mystery here, of course, and if one wishes to know the exact biological processes of the virginal conception, he/she can only be partially satisfied, though it should be pointed out that from even a strictly biological point of view, a virginal conception is not nearly so absurd a notion as was popularly supposed by biologists a century ago.¹³⁶

After the birth, Joseph was instructed to name the child "Jesus", an instruction which Mary had received earlier (Lk. 1:31) and which would normally have taken place at the circumcision, eight days after the birth. That Joseph was involved in the naming of the child was important for legal reasons, since according to the Mishna (*Baba Bathra* 8:6) this constituted Joseph as the legal father of Jesus in spite of the unusual circumstances of the birth and the fact that Joseph was not the real father.¹³⁷

The name "Jesus" was common enough in Jewry, since was the Greek equivalent to the OT name "Joshua"¹³⁸, though by the 2nd century it had disappeared

¹³³ In the pseudipigraphic *Gospel of Nicodemus*, also called the *Acts of Pilate* (AD 4th or 5th century or earlier), the accusers of Jesus at his trial are depicted as charging that he was "born of fornication" (Chap. 2). In the pseudipigraphic *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* (about AD 140), there is an enigmatic saying which may refer to Jesus as the son of a harlot (*Logion* 105). Celsus, a pagan philosopher who wrote in about AD 178, says that Jewish opinion held Jesus to be the son of Mary and Panthera, a Roman soldier who corrupted Mary, and that the story of the virgin birth was "not believed" (*Origen Against Celsus*, 1.28, 32, 39, 69). Rabbinic literature follows this same line, referring to Jesus as Yeshua ben Pantera (= Jesus son of Pantera) as well as by other derogatory epithets of illegitimacy, cf. Schaberg, 169-178.

¹³⁴ Non-evangelical scholars may be reluctant to believe what Matthew asserts, of course. J. A. T. Robinson sums up this position of doubt about the historical reliability of the gospel accounts when he states, "We are not bound to think of the Virgin Birth as a physical event, in order to believe that Jesus' [sic] whole life is 'of God,' cf. J. Robinson, *But That I Can't Believe* (New York: New American Library, 1967) 44. Such skepticism, however, arises largely from the philosophical and scientific convictions that the world has advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold to the New Testament view [i.e., supernatural] of the world, cf. C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1987) 73-74. Intelligent Christians are not bound by such presuppositions, cf. C. Brown, *That You May Believe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). It may be noted that at least one scholar seeks to prove that Jesus could have been conceived "through the Holy Spirit" while at the same time being born through normal male-female intercourse, but this controversial approach stands against the historic faith of the church, cf. Schaberg, 62-68.

¹³⁵ The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and even the "Rule of Faith", which preceded them both, contain the phrase or its equivalents "born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary", cf. D. Wright, "What the First Christians Believed," *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. T. Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 113-115.

¹³⁶ For a brief discussion of the biological factors of a virginal conception, see G. MacGregor, "The Virgin Birth," *The Nicene Creed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 61-62.

¹³⁷ Brown, *Birth*, 139.

¹³⁸ Joshua ben Nun of the OT is *Iesous* (Jesus) in the LXX, and in at least two references in the Greek NT, Joshua is

as a proper name when the Jews began to consciously avoid it.¹³⁹ In addition to the successor of Moses, there were at least three other “Joshuas” in the OT (1 Sa. 6:14; 2 Ki. 23:8; Ezr. 2:2). In the NT, Barabbas, who was freed during Christ’s trial, was surnamed Jesus (Mt. 27:16, NEB)¹⁴⁰. One of the ancestors in Luke’s genealogy was Jesus ben Eliezer (Lk. 3:29). A Jewish sorcerer in Paphos was named Bar-Jesus (Ac. 13:6). A certain Jesus-Justus was a fellow worker of the Apostle Paul (Cal. 4:11). The name itself, though obviously fairly common, was of great significance to Matthew because of its theological meaning. The equivalents *Iesous* (Greek), *Yeshua* (Aramaic), and *Yehoshua* (Hebrew) may be traced etymologically to the combination of the short form of the name Yahweh (= *Yah*) with the Hebrew hiphil verb *hoshi’a* (= to save), and means “Yahweh saves” or “Yahweh is salvation”¹⁴¹. Theologically, the name “Jesus” recalls the promise in the OT that “He [Yahweh] himself will redeem Israel from all their sins” (Ps. 130:8).

1:22-23: In the virginal conception of Jesus, Matthew saw a connection with a prophecy given by Isaiah in the 8th century BC. Since fulfilled prophecy is of major importance to Matthew,¹⁴² it is necessary to explain how he makes prophetic connections. The concept of fulfillment (*pleroo* = to fulfill, make full, bring to completion), as it is used by Matthew and other NT writers, is somewhat broader than might be supposed at first glance. There are at least four distinct ways in which NT writers in general, and Matthew in particular, understood statements to have been “made full” or “fulfilled”¹⁴³:

1. **Prediction/Verification:** In this kind of fulfillment, which is generally the most familiar, a future event is announced in advance, and it is fulfilled when that event takes place (cf. Mt. 2:5-6; Mic. 5:2).
2. **Enigmatic Passages Clarified:** Some passages in the OT were

referred to in this same way (Ac. 7:45; He. 4:8).

¹³⁹ W. Foerster, “*Iesous*,” *TDNT* (1965) 111.285-286.

¹⁴⁰ The reading “Jesus Barabbas” is not found in all manuscripts, so there are some English versions which retain it and some which do not. However, the majority of the committee behind the critical UBS text agreed that both names are probably in the original text of Matthew, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, rev. ed. (London: United Bible societies 1975) 68.

¹⁴¹ The actual coinage of this name is credited directly to Moses when he changed the name of Hoshea ben Nun (= salvation) to Joshua ben Nun (= Yahweh saves), cf. Nu. 13:8, 16.

¹⁴² Matthew has a stereotyped literary formula for introducing his connections between OT prophecies and NT fulfillments. More than a dozen times he uses such a formula or its equivalent: “This took place that it might be fulfilled...” (1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9 and 27:35 in the *Textus Receptus*, though this last one was probably a gloss in that it is absent in virtually all the important early witnesses to the text). In all but one of these citations (2:5), he uses the verb *pleroo* (= to fulfill) or a cognate.

¹⁴³ See the insightful discussion in R. Longenecker, “‘Who is the prophet talking about?’ Some reflections on the New Testament’s use of the Old,” *Themelios* (Oct./Nov. 1987) 4-8.

ambiguous at the time of writing, and yet in the Christ-event, the NT writers realized that the ambiguity was resolved. In Ps. 110:1, for instance, where it says “Yahweh said to ‘adonay...,” there was no clear understanding as to whom the title ‘*adonay* (= lord, sir) referred. In intertestamental Judaism, it was conjectured that Yahweh might have been speaking to Abraham, David, or even to Hezekiah. Matthew clarifies this ambiguity by asserting that Yahweh was speaking to Jesus himself (Mt. 22:41-46).

3. **Within Corporate Solidarity:** It was a common Hebrew conception that one individual could represent the many and vice versa (cf. Jn. 11:50). For instance, the Servant of Yahweh in the Book of Isaiah sometimes refers to the nation of Israel (41:8-9; 44:1) and sometimes to a lonely individual who would suffer on behalf of others (42:1; 52:13). In at least one passage, the servant is referred to both as an individual and also as the nation (49:3, 5). This fluidity between the one and the many became a very important way of connecting Jesus (the one) with the true Israel (the many). Passages which in one sense seem to refer to the nation (Ho. 11:1) can in another way refer to the representative of the nation (Mt. 2:15) so that in his life Jesus fulfilled a representative role for the many. In a fulfillment sense, Jesus himself embodied the true Israel.
4. **Recapitulation:** In some cases, there were scant correspondences between an event in the OT and an event in the life of Jesus, a sort of “history repeats itself” kind of fulfillment. As such, when Jeremiah used the poetic figure of Rachel as the ghostly mother weeping over her children in Assyrian exile,¹⁴⁴ Matthew saw a recapitulation of this same grief in Herod’s slaughter of the innocents (Mt. 2:17-18).

Matthew’s first fulfillment passage goes back to a distinctive section of the Book of Isaiah sometimes called the “Book of Immanuel” (Is. 7:1-12:6), because of the centrality of the Immanuel figure (7:14; 8:8, 10).

This was the time of Judah’s political crisis during the reign of Ahaz in about 734 BC. Assyria was emerging as a Mesopotamian superpower, threatening the lands on the Mediterranean seaboard. Ephraim (Israel) had formed an alliance with Aram (Syria) in order to withstand any Assyrian aggression. This Syro-Ephraimite league wanted Judah, the Israelite southern nation, to join their coalition, but Ahaz, the king of Judah, hesitated in indecision. His reluctance incited the leaders of the Syro-

¹⁴⁴ See J. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 573.

Ephraimite league, Rezin of Damascus and Pekah Ben-Remaliah, to invade Judah, an attack which included the threat of deposing Ahaz and replacing him with their own man, Ben-Tabeel, a man who was not even of the Davidic family (2 Ki. 16:5; Is. 7:1-2, 5-6). While Jerusalem was under siege, Isaiah was directed by God to meet Ahaz and assure him that the Syro-Ephraimite threat was an empty one and that Ahaz must trust in God (Is. 7:3-4, 7-9). It was in connection with this message to trust in God's protection that Isaiah spoke for Yahweh and instructed Ahaz to ask for a sign which would confirm the promised divine security (Is. 7:10-11).

Ahaz, however, refused under the guise of pseudo-humility; he would not "put Yahweh to the test" (Is. 7:12). In actuality, Ahaz was not a serious worshiper of Yahweh (2 Ki. 16:1-4), and his refusal was only evidence of his lack of faith. Yahweh was angered at this impudence and gave a sign anyway, a historical sign that a maiden¹⁴⁵ would give birth to a son and would name him Immanuel (Is. 7:13-14). Isaiah does not clearly identify this maiden, though doubtless Ahaz knew of whom he was speaking. While there is some debate,¹⁴⁶ it seems most likely that the maiden was either the wife or soon to be wife of Isaiah.¹⁴⁷

The name of the child, Immanuel, means "God with us", a reflection of the divine promise to protect Ahaz if he would put his faith in Yahweh (Is. 7:4, 7-9). God's presence would be evident in the fact that before Immanuel had reached adolescence, the lands of the Syro-Ephraimite coalition would be devastated (Is. 7:16). However, God's presence would be there not only to protect, but also to judge, and while Judah would be protected from Ephraim and Aram, she would soon be invaded by Assyria as a further sign of God's presence (Is. 7:16-25). Thus, the Immanuel sign to Ahaz was double-edged; it was a sign of protection on the one hand, but a sign of judgment on the other. This double-edged character of the sign is reflected in the two names given to the sign-child.¹⁴⁸ Not only was he to be called

¹⁴⁵ A tremendous amount of discussion has been given to the Hebrew word *'alma* rendered either "virgin" (ASV, RSVmg, NIV, NAB, NASB) or "young woman" (RSV, ASVmg, NEB, NASBmg). The word probably refers to a girl of marriageable age, cf. Holladay, 274; *BDB* 761. However, the word itself is not as precise in meaning as one might hope or as precise as the English translations might seem to suggest. There are a few scholars who contend that it must necessarily mean "virgin", cf. A. Macrae, "1630," *TWOT*, ed. Harris, Archer, Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2.672. However, the evidence is very slim and the conclusion of Youngblood is probably the most honest, that is, "The most that can be said of *'alma* is that in all of its OT occurrences it seems to be used of an unmarried woman, a 'damsel' which, in situations such as the one before us, carries with it a strong presumption in favor of virginity," R. Youngblood, "Immanuel," *ISBE* (1982) 2.807.

¹⁴⁶ Other suggestions are that the maiden was the wife of Ahaz, or some other maiden who was known to both Ahaz and Isaiah. While some conservatives, on the basis of Mt. 1:23, see the prediction as referring exclusively to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the context of the passage militates against such an interpretation for it would make the sign to Ahaz completely irrelevant, cf. G. Grogan, "Isaiah," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelien (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 6.64.

¹⁴⁷ R. Youngblood, "Immanuel," *ISBE* (1982) II.807.

¹⁴⁸ Alternative names are quite common in the OT (Ge. 17:5, 15; 32:28; Is. 62:4; Je. 20:3; Ru. 1:20).

Immanuel (= God with us), he was also to be called Maher-shalal-hash-baz (= the spoil hastens, the plunder comes quickly) (Is. 8:1-2).

The predicted sign came to pass when Isaiah's second son was born, and at the time of the birth, the word of Yahweh came to Isaiah confirming to him that this son was indeed the promised sign (Is. 8:3-4). The promise of protection from Ephraim and Aram was to be kept. Yet the promise of judgment from Assyria would also be kept (Is. 8:5-8). The land of the young Immanuel would suffer an invasion so serious that Jerusalem, the capital, would be surrounded by Assyrian armies, so much so, that the city could be compared to someone standing in water up to the neck. That Isaiah's son was the sign-child is further emphasized by a direct statement to that effect (Is.8:18).

Over 700 years later, Matthew, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, saw a prophetic connection between the prediction of a sign-child given by Isaiah to Ahaz and the birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus "made full" the word of Yahweh given to Isaiah about the Immanuel child. Matthew seems to be using the term *pleroo* (= to fulfill) in the sense of recapitulation, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, since Jesus was miraculously born "of the Holy Spirit", he was Immanuel in the fullest sense of the word—not merely God invisibly among us (to protect and judge us), but God visibly among us (to save us from sin)!

1:24-25: Joseph's dream was decisive! He immediately completed the hometaking, just as he had been instructed by the angel. However, as Matthew is careful to point out, Joseph did not have intercourse with Mary until after the birth.¹⁴⁹ When the promised child had been born, he named him Jesus. Since Matthew's account of the nativity is largely from the perspective of Joseph (unlike Luke's which is largely from the perspective of Mary), he does not describe the circumstances of the birth itself. Rather, he will continue those parts of the narrative which keep Joseph central.

The Visit of the Magi (Mt. 2:1-12):

The visit of the Magi has long been one of the favorite stories of Christmas. The Magi, more popularly known in the earlier English Versions as the Wise Men (KJV, RSV, ASV), have been enlarged in Christian tradition with several non-biblical accretions. In Matthew's Gospel, their number is indeterminate, though in Western Christian tradition they are usually spoken of as three.¹⁵⁰ This traditional

¹⁴⁹ While the expression *heos* (= until) does not require that Joseph and Mary engaged in marital relations after the birth of Jesus, it strongly suggests as much, contra J. McKenzie, "Matthew," JBC (1968) 2.67. In any case, the Roman Catholic tradition of the eternal virginity of Mary has no biblical support, and in fact, Matthew implies just the opposite.

¹⁵⁰ However, in Syrian Christian tradition the number is twelve, of. N. Opperwall, "Melchior," *ISBE* (1986) 3.312.

number is probably derived from the three gifts which are mentioned later (2:11), but it would not have been a particularly wise individual who attempted a desert trek with only two other fellows. More than likely, they came in a caravan. The tradition that they were kings is also speculative, possibly derived from the richness of their gifts or from the OT statements that kings would worship the messiah (cf. Ps. 68:29, 31; 72:10-11; Is. 49:7; 60:1-6). That they came from “the East” is specified in the text, but this term must not be confused with any modern definition of “the East”. They hardly came from the Orient, or were the kings of Arabia, Persia and India.¹⁵¹

By the 6th century they had received names, Melchior, Balthazar and Caspar, but these are purely legendary,¹⁵² and later, even personal descriptions were added.¹⁵³ Another legend asserts that they were found in Persia by the Apostle Thomas, who baptized them and commissioned them as evangelists. Their relics were supposedly discovered in the 4th century by Helena, the mother of Constantine, and by AD 1162 the relics were moved to Cologne where they are presently enshrined. How Helena could possibly identify them after 400 years of decomposition strains the story beyond credibility.

2:1-2: Matthew agrees with Luke that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the ancestral home of David, about five miles south of Jerusalem. The precise time of the birth is not known, though most scholars fix the year at about 5 or 4 BC. The season of the year is also uncertain, though the tradition that it was on December 25th comes from early as the 2nd century and may well be genuine.¹⁵⁴ Also like Luke, Matthew places the birth in the time of Herod the Great, 47--4 BC. (Lk. 1:5).

It was during this period that the Magi came from the East to Jerusalem looking for the one who had been born king of the Jews. The term *magoi* (= magi, astrologers) is not easy to identify with precision. The term loosely covered those who interpreted signs and dreams, were specialists in astrology, and were practitioners of magic.¹⁵⁵ The only other two NT references to *magos* are both negative (Ac. 8:9-11; 13:6, 8). Matthew, however, introduces them with approval. That they came from “the East” is also a very general designation, though Babylon in

¹⁵¹ The 14th century *Armenian Infancy Gospel* cites this tradition.

¹⁵² The legendary names appear first in the 6th century *Excerpta Latina Barbari* as Bithisarea, Melchior and Gathaspa. Traditional spellings were developed later, and the Venerable Bede, the famous English theologian of the 8th century, interpreted them as representing the three divisions of the human race as descended from Noah, i.e., Africa, Asia and Europe, of. Opperwall, 3.312.

¹⁵³ Melchior was an old man with grey hair and a long beard, Caspar was young and beardless, and Balthazar was swarthy with a fresh beard, cf. W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 1.31

¹⁵⁴ W. Armstrong and J. Finegan, “Chronology of the NT,” *ISBE* (1979) 1.688.

¹⁵⁵ Originally, the *magoi* were apparently members of a Persian priestly caste, but by the time of Jesus the term came to signify generally someone who had supernatural knowledge and abilities, cf. G. Delling, *TDNT* (1967) IV. 356-357.

Mesopotamia is not unlikely as the place of their origin. In Babylon, they would have had direct contact with the scholarly Jewish diaspora and the rabbinic messianic interpretation of Numbers 24:17.¹⁵⁶ Spurred on by astrological calculations which were connected with the Jewish expectation of a kingly figure, they came searching.¹⁵⁷

Astronomers have made careful studies of the celestial decade of 14-4 BC, and three candidates have been proposed as possible stellar phenomena which would fit into Matthew's description. Johannes Kepler of the 17th century argued that the star was possibly a nova or supernova, a stellar explosion which gives out a tremendous amount of light for several weeks or even months. An alternative theory is that Halley's Comet, which made an appearance in about 12-11 BC, might have been what the Magi saw. Somewhat more plausible is the suggestion that the star was a planetary configuration of Saturn and Jupiter which had three high points of conjunction in May/June, September/October and December of 7 BC.¹⁵⁸ Some theologians hold that the star was supernatural and/or that it was seen exclusively by the Magi, though the text does not require either of these conclusions. In the final analysis, the reader simply cannot know with certainty exactly what the Magi saw.

For Matthew, the significance of the Magi lay, not in their astrological abilities, but in their pagan origin. The questions the Magi asked in Jerusalem suggest that they were not Hebrews, and it appears that they had come from far away. The wonder, mystery, and reverence of these gentiles clearly fits with the universalism of Matthew's gospel.

2:3-8: The arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem with news of a newly born king deeply disturbed Herod. The last decade of Herod's reign had been very troubled. He was getting old, and there was much infighting among his sons by his various wives, each hoping to succeed him. Herod wrote and rewrote his will no less than six times during this period in the midst of family turmoil, court intrigue, imprisonments, executions and assassination attempts. The possibility of a new threat to the throne was all the more unsettling.¹⁵⁹ The people of Jerusalem were equally unsettled, though probably not out of reverence for Herod's kingship. Herod, because he was half-Idumean, was not well-liked, and recently two rabbis, Judas and Matthias, had incited

¹⁵⁶ W. Buehler, "Wise Men (NT)," *ISBE* (1988) IV.1084; D. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) VIII.86.

¹⁵⁷ See especially, W. Ramsey, "The Magi at the Birth of Jesus," *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 140-149.

¹⁵⁸ Brown, *Birth* 170-173; J. Wright, "Astrology," *ISBE* (1979) 1.344. The latter possibility might also bear upon the translation of the Greek in 2:2, which can be alternately rendered "star in the east" or "star when it arose" (see NIV text and margin). The rising of a particular constellation in the zodiac at the time of a person's birth has from ancient times been interpreted astrologically as a sign.

¹⁵⁹ H. Hoehner, "Herod," *ISBE* (1982) 11.692-693.

the citizens of the city to tear down the offensive Roman eagle from the temple gate. The offenders were seized and ordered to be burned alive. Thus, the Jerusalemites were troubled out of fear of Herod's reactionary violence.¹⁶⁰

Herod made careful inquiries as to the predicted location of the Messiah's birth from the leading priests and the experts in Torah and Jewish oral law, possibly appealing to the entire Sanhedrin since he uses the term *pas* (= all). Their response was that the prophet indicated Bethlehem, David's ancestral city (cf. Jn. 7:41-42). Matthew even quotes for his readers the OT passage, and he closes the quotation by conflating it with a phrase from yet another passage referring to David's kingship (Mic. 5:2; 2 Sa. 5:2).

After hearing their views, Herod privately conferred with the Magi about the time when they first observed the star. His expressed desire to worship the newborn king was no more than a ploy. That he did not intend to trust the Magi to find the child is evident in that he did not even send with them an escort. Rather, he now possessed the two important pieces of information which he needed to carry out a terrible purge—the place of the birth and the time of the birth. Matthew will return to Herod's treachery later.

2:9-12: When the Magi left Herod, the star which they had originally seen when they were still in their homelands once more appeared to them. It is traditional that the Magi "followed the star" all the way from the east to Bethlehem,¹⁶¹ but this is not strictly according to the text, since the star apparently was not visible to them during their journey from the east. They came to Jerusalem, no doubt, because as the capital it was the natural place for a king to be born. It was only upon leaving Jerusalem, however, that the star reappeared to them once more. This reappearance was a powerful confirmation, and when they saw it they were overjoyed. Matthew does not say that the star actually indicated to them which house was the residence of the newborn child, and it is likely that they made inquiries of the local people in order to find it.

When they finally arrived, they worshiped Jesus, the child of Mary. Once again, tradition has reconstructed the story incorrectly in that it usually pictures the Magi as coming on the night of the birth, along with the Bethlehem shepherds, to the manger. This is hardly correct. Three details strongly suggest that the visit of the Magi may have been a considerable time after the birth of Jesus, perhaps as long as two years. First, Herod's slaughter of the Bethlehem children two years and under seems to suggest that the original appearance of the star to the Magi had been two years previous, an appearance that the Magi believed pointed toward a royal birth,

¹⁶⁰ Hoehner, "Herod," *ISBE* (1982) 11.693.

¹⁶¹ Such phraseology appears in the familiar carols "The First Noel", "O Holy Night" and "We Three Kings".

and a time factor that Herod was anxious to ascertain as accurately as possible (2:7). To be sure, Herod may have given himself a margin of safety, but even then, the trek from the east must have taken some appreciable amount of time. Second, by the time the Magi arrived, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were staying in a house (2:11). Third, we know from Luke's account that some forty days after the birth, when Joseph and Mary offered the customary holocaust and sin offering for post-natal purification, they presented an offering which was prescribed for the poor (cf. Lk. 2:22-24; Le. 12:6-8; 5:7-10), an offering which seems to reflect nothing of recently acquired gold, incense and myrrh.

The expensive gifts¹⁶² were providential in that Joseph would shortly need them to finance a trip to Egypt. Such gifts to royal persons were important in the ancient Near East as symbols of homage. When the Magi had concluded their presentations and their worship, they did not return home by way of Jerusalem but chose another route due to a warning they received in a dream.

The Flight to Egypt (2:13-18)

After the Magi had begun their journey home, Joseph received his second dream warning him to flee to Egypt. Egypt, under Roman occupation since 30 B.C., was outside the jurisdiction of Herod. Furthermore, there was a large Jewish community in Alexandria, a metropolitan city which had burgeoned to half a million people by 60 B.C.¹⁶³ It is not unlikely that Joseph took his family there.

A number of Christian legends have arisen about the stay in Egypt, none of which have biblical verification. Miracles were said to have been worked in their favor, lions and leopards wagged their tails in homage, and palm trees bent down to feed them. In one location, Jesus supposedly was responsible for the growth of balsam trees, a legend which eventually found its way into the Muslim Koran. At another place, the idols in pagan temples were said to have fallen down as the family passed through. Churches and monasteries, each with diverse traditional claims relating to the family's sojourn in Egypt, have become sites for pilgrimages. One of the most fascinating legends is the story of two robbers who accosted the family, and later¹⁵ turned out to be the thieves who were crucified with Jesus.¹⁶⁴

2:13-15: Joseph's flight to Egypt was immediate, and he left the same night as

¹⁶²The value of gold needs no comment. Frankincense was a gum extracted from trees growing in southern Arabia and India, a substance with a strong balsamic odor when heated and valued for fumigation and embalming, cf. R. Harrison, "Frankincense," *ISBE* (1982) 2.360. Myrrh was a valuable resinous perfume, also extracted from shrubs in Arabia and Ethiopia, which was compounded with oil and used for perfuming clothes and general deodorant purposes, R. Harrison, "Myrrh," *ISBE* (1986) III.450-451

¹⁶³ J. Thompson, "Alexandria," *ISBE* (1979) 1.89-94.

¹⁶⁴ Brown, *Birth*, 203-204.

his forewarning. The stay in Egypt was to be indefinite, and Joseph was not free to return to his homeland until he had been instructed by the angel.

The stay in Egypt also made full another OT statement so that Matthew can say that the prophet's words were "fulfilled". The original statement by Hosea was not a prediction, and its fulfillment must be understood in the sense of solidarity, as discussed earlier (see comments under 1:22-23). The prophet Hosea, in describing God's love for the nation Israel, employs an extended metaphor in which he compares Yahweh to a loving but anguished parent, and Israel to a prodigal child (Ho. 11:1-4). The statement by Yahweh, "Out of Egypt I called my son," clearly refers backward to the account of the exodus. In the exodus account, the nation Israel was described as God's son by Moses to Pharaoh: "Israel is my firstborn son." Yahweh continued to Pharaoh, "Let my son go" (Ex. 4:22-23). Drawing from this imagery, Hosea recalls that Egypt was the place from which this "son", God's national people, began the trek toward Canaan. Matthew's allusion to the passage in connection with the childhood of Jesus is far from arbitrary. Just as the nation Israel found refuge in Egypt but had to return to Canaan to fulfill its calling, so Jesus also found refuge in Egypt but had to return to Palestine to fulfill his.¹⁶⁵

In the sense of solidarity, Jesus summed up in his life all that Israel was called to be. He was the true Israel. Like Israel in her forty year sojourn in the desert, Jesus was driven into the desert for forty days. Just as Israel's mission was to dispossess the Canaanites in holy war, so Jesus' mission was to vanquish the powers of Satan in his life, death and resurrection. Just as Israel suffered exile and abandonment from Yahweh, so Jesus experienced the reality of abandonment on the cross. And just as Israel was called back from exile into a new existence, so Jesus was resurrected from the dead by the Father. Paul, as well as the gospel writers, also saw this same kind of connection between the exodus events and the life of Jesus (1 Co. 10:1-4).

2:16-18: From the early 3rd century, the children whom Herod executed were considered to be martyrs, and by the mid-4th century, they were called the "Innocents", and the phrase "Slaughter of the Innocents" became the traditional title for the massacre. The number of executed children is not known, though Eastern Orthodoxy canonized 14,000 of them early on and later expanded that figure to 144,000. These figures seem unnecessarily large, particularly with regard to a profound silence in Josephus, the 1st century Jewish historian, regarding the event, and especially since Josephus detailed other horrors perpetrated by Herod. Nevertheless, such a massacre is certainly within what is known of the brutal character of Herod¹⁶⁶ and his paranoia regarding throne succession. In his career,

¹⁶⁵ D. Kider, *Love to the Loveless: The Message of Hosea* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981) 100-102.

¹⁶⁶ L. Sweet, "Innocents, Massacre of the," *ISBE* (1982) 2.828-829.

Herod severely punished both the Pharisees and Jewish populace who opposed him, he executed and confiscated the property of 45 Sadducees, he executed more than one rival to his throne, including several in his own household, and even executed own wife.¹⁶⁷ A few male children in Bethlehem were certainly not likely to weigh heavily on his conscience.

Once more, Matthew explains a prophetic connection with the OT. Rachel, the ancient mother of the Benjamite tribe in the southern nation of Judah and the ancient grandmother of Ephraim, the primary tribe in the northern nation of Israel during the divided monarchy (Ge. 30:22-24; 41:50-52), was depicted by Jeremiah in a poetic metaphor as a ghostly weeping mother, bewailing the tragic loss of her children in exile (Je. 31:15). In a profound recapitulation of that ancient description, Matthew saw once again the weeping figure of Rachel, this time not because of exile but because of Herod's treachery. As in the case of Hosea, the words of Jeremiah are not a prediction. However, they lend themselves well to historical recapitulation, similar to Matthew's earlier use of the OT.

The Return to Nazareth (2:19-23)

Herod died in 4 BC, and his death prepared the way for Joseph to return to his homeland. Once more in a dream, Joseph was told that it was time to leave Egypt and to return to Israel (cf. 2:13b). Apparently, Joseph had hoped to settle in Judea, but when he heard that Archelaus reigned there, he was fearful to stay. Herod's jurisdiction had been divided among his three sons, Archelaus receiving Judea, Samaria and Idumea, Herod Antipas receiving Galilee and Perea, and Herod Phillip receiving Gaulanitis, Auranitis, Batanea, Trachonitis, Paneas and Ituraea, the regions north and east of Galilee.¹⁶⁸ Afraid to stay in Judea, Joseph continued north, being directed in yet another dream, until he eventually reached Galilee. Here he settled in his previous home town of Nazareth (Lk. 1:26-27). The settlement in Nazareth became yet another fulfillment of the OT.

Matthew's allusion to the statement, "He shall be called a Nazarene," is unusual in two respects. First, unlike his previous fulfillments, he refers to the OT prophets in the plural, a fact that seems to infer that he is not thinking of one particular OT passage but a general reference to several such passages. Second, there is no OT quotation that corresponds to the statement in 2:23b. Matthew's meaning in this fulfillment passage is far from clear, but there are significant interpretations, among several others,¹⁶⁹ which are worth examination.

¹⁶⁷ Hoehner, "Herod," *ISBE* (1982) 2.688-694.

¹⁶⁸ H. Hoehner, "Herod," *ISBE* (1982) 2.694-696.

¹⁶⁹ For a survey of other treatments, see Brown, *Birth*, 207-213, 223-225.

One is that the term “Nazarene” is a pejorative name, used as an insult (cf. Jn. 1:46; of. 7:42, 52). Christians were later called Nazarenes in this same pejorative fashion (Ac. 24:5), and in fact, Christians are still known as “Nazarenes” in the Jewish Talmud. The earliest known usage of the term in a pejorative sense in Hebrew occurs in the *birkat ha-minim* (the curse upon heretics) which was adopted in Jewish synagogue liturgies in the late 1st century.¹⁷⁰ As such, then, Matthew may only be saying that Jesus’ residence in Nazareth would climax in rejection, a rejection that is predicted in several OT passages (cf. Ps. 22: 6-8, 13, 16-18; 69:8, 20-21; Is. 49:7; 53:2-3, 7-8; Da. 9:26).¹⁷¹

Another possibility is that the fulfillment involves a type of word-play between the Greek form *Nazoraios* (= Nazarene) in Mt. 2:23 and the Hebrew term *netser* (= branch) in Is. 11:1. The passage in Isaiah is clearly messianic, and some regard it as a double entendre, referring both to the “branch” who would become messiah as well as to the one who would come from Nazareth.¹⁷² If this interpretation is adopted, the fulfillment would fall under the category of clarifying an OT ambiguity. On the whole, however, this solution seems less satisfactory than the previous one.

¹⁷⁰ F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 465.

¹⁷¹ D. Carson, 97.

¹⁷² E. Ellis, “How the New Testament Uses the Old,” *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 202; D. Wallace, “Nazarene,” ISBE (1986) III.500.