

The Birth of Jesus  
According to the Gospels



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Joseph F. Kelly



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*To László Törzsök Jr.,  
a good friend and  
a good man*



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## Preface

**T**he Scriptures lie at the heart of Christianity. Our faith in Jesus derives from what the gospels tell us about him and from the witness of the earliest Christians to him. Without the Scriptures, Jesus is simply unknown to us.

This brief book focuses on a very limited area of the Scriptures—a total of four chapters from all of the New Testament, two each from two gospels (Matt 1–2; Luke 1–2). But those four valuable chapters contain the only accounts of Jesus' birth, and scholars call them the infancy narratives. Thanks to the feast of Christmas, they are the most widely known of all New Testament passages, yet they can present problems for believers, even those who do not actually read the gospels. During Advent or the Christmas season a regular churchgoer might one day hear a gospel reading about how the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary who lived in Nazareth of Galilee, and then on another day hear a reading about how Joseph and Mary decided not to return from Egypt to their home in Judea but instead went to Nazareth of Galilee. The attentive churchgoer might wonder if Joseph and Mary lived in Galilee at the time of the annunciation or if they settled there after their return from Egypt. Even more, this churchgoer would legitimately question why the Bible contains apparently contradictory accounts. It is my hope that this book will help the interested reader to understand the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and to answer questions like this.

In this project I have utilized the most recent findings of biblical scholars and have tried to present them in an accessible way. Furthermore, much of what is in the book derives from my classes and from the questions that my students ask; I suspect that many of their questions may be similar to yours. But let me first answer one question that was asked of me, partly in jest and partly in concern: Will knowing about the infancy narratives somehow “spoil” Christmas? After all, professors often have a well-earned reputation for spoiling people’s traditional views, especially about religion. My answer can only be that a better, more thorough knowledge of the Scriptures cannot harm anyone’s faith, but rather it can only strengthen that faith. Maybe reading this book might change a little how you have viewed the birth of Jesus, but more accurate understanding of the Nativity will not “spoil” Christmas. After all, even professors celebrate Christmas.

The book’s focus falls upon historical and theological questions, but a brief pastoral reflection follows each gospel passage in chapters 3 and 4. I hardly claim expertise in that area, but I hope some readers may find these thoughts helpful.

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Lynch-Huggins, for their assistance in reading the manuscript. Very special thanks go to Mrs. Gina Messina-Dysert, whose graduate thesis on the infancy narratives and the Old Testament helped me better to understand the relationship between the two, and some of whose insights appear in the text. Further special thanks to our department secretary, Kathryn Merhar, whose remarkable efficiency allowed an overworked and underappreciated department chairperson (as I usually think of myself) to have some spare time to work on this book. Any deficiencies in the book are solely my responsibility.

As always, my sincerest thanks go to my wife Ellen, a thoughtful and generous spouse, who took time from her own busy schedule to make myriad sacrifices, both large and small, so that I would have the time to write.

This book is dedicated to László Törzsök Jr., a good friend to my wife and me for three decades.

*Joseph F. Kelly*

*Feast of Saint Nicholas, 2007*

*Some helps to following the text:*

This book will cite the Bible frequently, so here is an explanation of the citations:

Mark 4:1-12 means the Gospel of Mark, chapter 4, verses 1 to 12.

You need not have a Bible with you to read the book, but you may want to look up a passage or two. For example, the book will often cite a verse without quoting it, such as Micah 5:2, which refers to a prophecy by the Israelite prophet Micah, which the gospel writer Matthew says that Jesus' birth fulfilled. You may want to look up the passage in Micah on your own. Also, this book gives the text of the infancy narratives in pieces as part of the discussion, but it may be helpful to first read through each of the narratives straight through (Matt 1–2 and Luke 1–2) in the Bible before getting deeper into the discussion in this book.

The New Testament books will be cited most frequently, so here is a list of them:

*Gospels:* Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

*Epistles:* Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philemon, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians (*these are epistles written by Paul*); 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus (*these are epistles attributed to Paul but not actually written by him*); James, Jude, 1, 2, and 3 John, 1 and 2 Peter

*Theological history of first community:* Acts of the Apostles (cited simply as Acts)

*Visionary book:* Revelation (also called the Apocalypse)

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Gospels and History

Surprisingly for many Christians, the birth of Jesus appears in just two places in the New Testament (NT), the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel and the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. Although pagan and Jewish sources can fill in some background, what we directly know of the Nativity depends upon what those gospels tell us. So naturally we have to ask, what exactly do the gospel accounts say? It sounds like a straightforward question, but nothing is straightforward in modern biblical studies.

Unfortunately, for centuries the gospels have been understood as "lives" or biographies of Jesus, and many contemporary Christians still use those terms. But even a quick reading shows that this cannot be so. Only two gospels give an account of his birth, and neither of them gives the day or the year. Only one, Luke (2:41-50), mentions anything about Jesus between his birth and his public career. All four gospels focus on Jesus' ministry in Galilee and then his brief but fateful journey to Jerusalem and death, but no gospel gives the exact date of his death. Clearly these are not biographies as modern people understand the term. Can you imagine reading a biography of Jane Austen or Abraham Lincoln that provided no dates and started when the subject was already almost thirty years old (Luke 3:23)?

Furthermore, when we compare the gospel narratives about Jesus' public career, we find that they do not always agree with

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one another. For example, Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus drove the money-changers from the temple at the end of his ministry, whereas John puts that episode at the beginning. Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 have different versions of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew's is the familiar one). Clearly, "lives" of Jesus that do not agree with one another on the basic facts or words cannot be biographies as we think of them today.

Does this mean that we have no reliable information about Jesus' life? Absolutely not. But it does mean that we must understand what the gospels actually are.

Rather than biographies, they are theological accounts of Jesus' public career. The *evangelists* (gospel writers) wrote as believing Christians for other believing Christians, not as secular historians writing for a general audience. To use a technical term, each evangelist produced a *Christology*, that is, a theology of Christ.

When a theologian writes a Christology, she or he tries to show that the mystery of Christ, comprehensible only by faith, can be truly if incompletely understood by the believer. The evangelists passed along their faith in Jesus as the Son of God, the redeemer of the world, the Messiah, the first-born of the new creation, and the founder and foundation of the Christian faith. Following the path laid down by the Apostle Paul in his letters, the evangelists ultimately wrote about the Risen Christ because if Christ were not risen, the Christians' faith was in vain (1 Cor 15:14). The resurrection vindicated all that Jesus said and did.

But in order for their readers to understand the risen Christ who continues to work for the salvation of believers, the evangelists had to give some account of Jesus' earthly life, since his whole life led up to his resurrection. We want to determine what biographical information the evangelists provide about his birth and how they incorporated the infancy narratives into their gospels.

To answer those questions, we must start with how the gospels came to be. Jesus himself did not write anything, and his

words and deeds were passed along orally for decades before being written down by his followers. In an era when we can record things on DVDs, CDs, the internet, digital cameras, hard drives, and even paper, it is difficult for us to understand oral tradition, but for the ancient world that was the norm. To use the second-most-famous ancient example, we have no writings from the great Greek philosopher Socrates (469–399 BC) but only accounts passed on primarily by his disciple, another great Greek philosopher, Plato (427–347 BC).

Yet even if we acknowledge that oral tradition was the ancient practice, we still have to worry that some event would slip out of its historical or chronological framework or that words could be forgotten or twisted around. That is true, but scholars can only work with what the ancients have left us. In fact, for many ancient people, the *advantage* of oral tradition was that a saying or event could be modified to suit an audience, something even modern Christians do. For example, in the parables, Jesus often uses rural imagery (wheat field, vineyard, sheep, sowing seed) which would be largely unfamiliar to children living in a city. Christians ministering in those areas might change the setting to a familiar urban one in order to make the spiritual point of Jesus' parable more understandable. We will examine examples of such adaptation when we get to the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Furthermore, ancient people who used oral traditions did not discard historical traditions wholesale, and most attempted to be historically accurate. As we shall soon see, the gospels show strong agreement on many major points in Jesus' life.

Several other characteristics of ancient writing impact our approach to the gospels. Modern historians strive for objectivity, but ancient writers did not. Instead, most wrote to push a political or patriotic point, such as showing the greatness of their peoples: the Greeks demonstrated their superiority to the Persian "barbarians," the Romans claimed that their empire fulfilled their destiny, and the Jews made the claim—so

absurd to the Greeks and Romans!—that the one God had chosen them among all the nations of the world to be his special people. When the evangelists wrote to proclaim their faith in Jesus rather than give an objective biography of him, they were writing like typical ancient historians.

We must understand even more about ancient historians: they were allowed to put speeches in the mouths of their characters in order to move the narrative along, something which would destroy the reputation of a modern historian. For example, the Roman historian Tacitus (AD 57–117) recorded the empire's conquest of Britain, and he recounts a brilliant speech by a British tribal leader who urged his soldiers to resist Roman tyranny. But Tacitus never went to Britain and knew not a word of the British language. He simply created a Latin speech that a British tribal leader *should* have given in those circumstances. This approach partly explains why we sometimes find different versions of Jesus' words in different gospels, and it will also explain some significant passages in Luke's infancy narrative.

Finally, we must also recall that the evangelists wrote decades after Jesus' death and outside of Palestine. Scholars date the gospel of Mark around the year 70, those of Matthew and Luke to the 80s, and John's gospel around 100. By the time they wrote, Christianity had expanded from its Near Eastern home into the wider Roman, Mediterranean world, and especially into the Jewish *Diaspora* or Dispersion, that is, the residence of Jews outside the historical land of Israel, which the Romans called Judea. Although the Diaspora started with the Babylonian Exile of the sixth century BC, it changed significantly two centuries later when the conquests of Alexander the Great brought Greek culture and language to the Near East. Many Diasporan Jews lived in Greek-speaking territories, such as Egypt and Syria, and in Mediterranean cities such as Alexandria and Antioch.

The first Christian writer, the Apostle Paul, was a Diasporan Jew from Roman Asia Minor (modern Turkey) who

brought Christianity into the world outside Judea, a world of Diasporan Jews and Gentile pagans. So when Paul, the evangelists, and all other NT authors composed their works, they wrote in Greek, the language of their intended readers. That sounds obvious, but it has a consequence. Jesus spoke a language called Aramaic, a Semitic dialect widely used in the Near East. Some Aramaic words (*talitha cum* and *ephphatha* in Mark 5:41 and 7:34) appear in the gospels, but otherwise Jesus' words are recorded *in Greek*, which means that the words of Jesus survive in a translation. Knowing this Greek background will help us to understand passages in the infancy narratives.

In recent years many believers have heard in the media about non-biblical books, such as the *Gospel of Judas*, which supposedly have biographical information about Jesus. These books form what scholars call the Apocryphal New Testament, that is, books which claim to be by or about NT figures but which were not accepted into the Bible by the early Christians. These books, mostly written in the second and third centuries, tell us a lot about the Christians who produced them and about their religious views, such as a significant interest in Jesus' birth, but no scholar considers them to be reliable historical sources, especially for biographical information about Jesus.

Clearly a huge gap exists between ourselves and the ancients on what constitutes history. Let me close this section by citing advice the Irish biblical scholar Wilfrid Harrington, OP, received early in his career: "When someone in our western culture hears a story, the spontaneous reaction is: 'Is it true?' When an ancient Semite heard a story, the spontaneous question was: 'What does it mean?' . . . We want the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke to be wholly historical. What we have to face is the fact that neither is conventionally historical—nor was ever intended to be" (for information on Harrington's book, see "Suggested Reading").

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When we acknowledge the gospels to be products of the ancient world, we can understand why they cannot be modern biographies. But do the gospels provide any reliable biographical information? Actually, they provide quite a bit, not in the sense that we can say that Jesus told a particular parable on March 10 in AD 31, but in the sense of a general chronological outline, some historical information, and insights into Jesus' character.

Here are some points which one or more of the gospels provide that we can consider biographical:

- Jesus' parents were named Mary (Miriam) and Joseph.
- Joseph was a carpenter.
- Jesus followed his father's profession, normal for a boy of that era.
- He was born in Bethlehem in Judea during the reign of Herod.
- He grew up in Nazareth in Galilee.
- His parents were pious Jews.
- He received a good education in his faith since at age twelve he could impress temple scholars with his knowledge.
- He had brothers and sisters (although many Christians believe them to have been cousins or some other relatives).
- He could read, unusual but not unheard of for a carpenter.
- The public ministry of John the Baptist preceded his own.
- Some of John's disciples left him and followed Jesus.
- He had disciples of both sexes who followed him.
- He chose twelve male disciples for special roles.
- His ministry was spent almost completely in Galilee.
- He was a popular preacher and wonder worker.
- He was a kind man, willing to help those on the margins of society.
- He spoke the truth, regardless of the price he had to pay.

- He had the common touch, able to relate to people of all classes, from aristocrats to beggars.
- He never discriminated against women but gave them the respect that ancient culture denied them.
- He saw past ethnic differences, seeing the good in Samaritans, Romans, and other non-Jews.
- He showed great respect for the Jewish Law.
- Although he believed in his mission, he observed the Jewish Law.
- He had conflicts with a religious group called the Pharisees.
- His debates with the Pharisees were often not about the Law but about the Pharisees' understanding of it.
- He could show respect for Roman law because God's law transcended mere human law, for example, the tribute money with Caesar's image.
- He was careful not to let people believe he had political goals and always stressed his ministry was religious.
- Even though he was a layperson and not a formal religious scholar, he could debate as an equal with priests, religious lawyers, and scholars.
- He had great insight into human nature and could see both the positives and negatives in people, such as the rich young man who truly wanted to follow him but could not abandon his wealth.
- He traveled constantly with his disciples, even into non-Jewish territories.
- He had a sense of his calling and the courage to fulfill it.
- After a ministry in Galilee, he went to Jerusalem, where some of the local authorities banded together against him.
- His enemies engineered his condemnation by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.
- He was crucified.
- He rose from the dead.

This list of items could be extended, but it demonstrates that even if the gospels are not modern biographies, they still provide much general biographical information about Jesus. With this in mind, we can turn to the infancy narratives as long as we remember one more point that relates especially to them.

When we read the infancy narratives, we do it through a wonderful prism, Christmas. The words "A decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled . . ." will always have us thinking of lights, trees, decorations, a crèche, and so much more. But there was no Christmas in the first century. To be sure, we often call the infancy narratives the first Christmas, but Christmas, *the feast that honors Jesus' birth*, did not come into existence until the third century and maybe not until the fourth, while "Christmas," an Anglo-Saxon word, did not appear until the eleventh century. This is why scholars refer to the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth as the Nativity rather than the first Christmas. This in turn means that Matthew and Luke did not write their infancy narratives for a then non-existent feast but rather as the opening chapters of their gospels, and that is how the infancy narratives must be understood. We may not have to read the entire gospels of Matthew and Luke to understand the infancy narratives, but we should always bear in mind that the opening chapters are leading the reader toward Jesus' public life and ministry.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Matthew, Luke, and Their Gospels

### Matthew and Luke

Since only the gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us of Jesus' birth, let us consider what we know about these two evangelists.

#### *Matthew*

Matthew was a Galilean tax collector, called by Jesus to be one of the Twelve Apostles (Matt 9:9), right? Actually, no. Many misimpressions about the gospels have been around for centuries, and most books on Scripture have to begin by correcting those impressions—sometimes to the disappointment of readers—but scholarship can only help our understanding of the Bible.

The first gospel has had Matthew's name attached to it since the second century, but there is no name on the gospel itself, nor does this identification of Matthew as the evangelist appear anywhere else in the New Testament. If Matthew were a Galilean tax collector, he would have been a native Aramaic speaker and probably would have written his gospel in that language. But like all NT literature, Matthew's gospel survives in Greek. If the evangelist originally wrote it in a Semitic tongue, we would expect the Greek version to show the marks of a translation, such as stilted phraseology or jumbled sentence structure, yet we find none of that. The author

could have been a native Aramaic speaker who wrote in Greek, but then we would expect some evidence that Greek was not his first language, such as the occasional awkward phrase, but the evangelist wrote Greek fluently and easily. Clearly Greek was his native language, suggesting he was by birth a Diasporan rather than a Palestinian Jew.

Even stronger evidence survives that the evangelist was not one of the twelve apostles. Since the nineteenth century, scholars have recognized that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are related. One scholar suggested the relationship was so strong that one could look at them all with one eye, giving rise to the term "Synoptic" or "with the eye" gospels. If you put these three gospels in three parallel columns, you can go through the columns and see how much material the gospels share. Clearly the evangelists were drawing from similar sources, but biblical scholars believe that one gospel was the major source for the other two. But which one?

On the surface, we have an easy answer. Matthew, one of the Twelve, wrote first, and Mark and Luke, who did not know Jesus during his lifetime, naturally depended upon Matthew the eyewitness. But this simple explanation has a major flaw, and that is the Gospel of Mark. Christian tradition since the second century identified the author of the second gospel as Mark, sometimes called John Mark, one of Paul's disciples (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37, 39; Phlm 24). While modern scholars generally deny that this Mark wrote the gospel, the important point here is that its author was not one of the Twelve as Matthew supposedly was.

Mark is the shortest gospel and has the smallest amount of unique material. Fully 91 percent of what is in Mark appears in either Matthew or Luke, while much of what is in the other two does not appear in Mark. To focus just on Matthew and Mark, if Matthew wrote first, and if Mark read his gospel and then abbreviated what he took from it, we must wonder why Mark would have left out so much. Not only does his gospel have no infancy narrative, it also lacks the Lord's

Prayer, the eight beatitudes, major parables, and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. Omission of one or two of these might make some sense, but all of them?

When Mark does include material that Matthew has, more problems emerge. For example, Mark says simply that Satan tempted Jesus (1:13), whereas Matthew describes the scene more fully, including a dialogue between Jesus and Satan (4:1-11). Why would Mark leave that out? It simply defies credulity that Mark would have had Matthew's gospel in front of him when he wrote and discarded all of this remarkable material.

Mark's style also presents problems if he borrowed from Matthew. To put it charitably, Mark writes clumsily at times. Many examples survive, but one story demonstrates it best.

On that day, when evening had come, he [Jesus] said to them, "Let us go across to the other side [of the lake]." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. *Other boats* were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and *they woke him up* and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" *He woke up* and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. (Mark 4:35-39, emphasis added)

Notice that Mark never tells us what happened to the other boats, a significant omission given the severity of the storm. Far more problematically, Jesus wakes up *twice*, the second time occurring when the disciples had already been talking to him!

Matthew recounts the same event (8:23-27), but he makes no mention of other boats, and Jesus wakes up only once, a far more logical and sensible account. We must ask, what makes more sense: that Mark took Matthew's account and added confusing and even contradictory details or that Matthew took Mark's account and deleted the confusing details? And to this example, many others could be added.

But if Matthew used Mark's gospel, the crucial issue arises: if Matthew were indeed one of the twelve apostles, why would he, an eyewitness to Jesus' public ministry, rely upon an account written by someone who was not?

The good quality of Matthew's Greek, the additional material, the sharper writing, all point in the same direction. Matthew used Mark as a basis for his gospel. The author of the first gospel and the Matthew of the twelve apostles were different persons.

So who then was the author of the first gospel? To begin with, we cannot be sure if his name was Matthew since that comes from a second-century source which identified him with the Galilean tax collector. But since we have no other name, scholars use the familiar one to refer to the evangelist.

All the evidence about him comes from the gospel itself. First, he was a native Greek speaker and thus not likely to have grown up in Galilee. Second, he knew Jewish customs well, and, as we shall see in some detail, he put much emphasis on connections between Jesus and the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament), so he most likely converted to Christianity from Judaism and was thus a Diasporan Jew from the Eastern Mediterranean. He probably wrote his gospel in that area, although he surely had visited Palestine.

When the Acts of the Apostles recounts Paul's life, it tells of opposition and even conflict between Christians and Jews. Matthew's gospel (28:11-15) indicates that his community also had poor relations with the local Jewish community, which explains some of his defensiveness about Jesus' Judaism, as we shall see.

He may well have been a civil servant of some kind, and possibly even a tax collector, since he could write in an age when few people did. His gospel also contains sophisticated theology, which indicates more than a basic education.

Beyond this little bit, we cannot say more about the author of the first gospel. But this sparse information does not weaken the gospel's value. The key point is that the early

Christians accepted this as an inspired book, worthy of inclusion in the biblical canon.

### *Luke*

What about the author of the third gospel? Like that of Matthew, this gospel has no name attached. Second-century Christian tradition attributes it to Luke, a “fellow worker” of Paul (Phlm 24), who reappears in 2 Timothy (4:11) and who is called “the beloved physician” in Colossians 4:14, two letters attributed to Paul but not actually written by him. The identification of the evangelist with the NT Luke is debated, and so scholars hesitate to identify the two, although, as with Matthew, they use the familiar name. But we do know one very sure thing about Luke besides what this gospel tells us, and that is essential for understanding the gospel: he wrote the Acts of the Apostles, thus being the only evangelist to write a second book. The first half of Acts recounts the story of the Jerusalem church immediately after the resurrection, while the second half focuses on Luke’s hero, the apostle Paul. Scholars often rely upon Acts to interpret passages in the gospel and vice versa. Many scholars refer to the two books together as Luke-Acts, an indication of their fundamental unity.

These two books strongly suggest that Luke was a Gentile. He knows the Gentile world very well, whereas he makes some mistakes about Jewish geography and customs, as we shall see. He knows how the Roman Empire functions. In his books governors and proconsuls and centurions are all exactly where they should be, as are local municipal officials. Scholars cannot pinpoint where he wrote his gospel—possibly Syria (Antioch) or Greece or even Rome—but they date the gospel to the 80s of the first century, that is, contemporaneous with Matthew, although, as the infancy narratives demonstrate, they did not know one another’s works.

Luke had a superb education because he is the New Testament’s best stylist. Everyone from rich to poor speaks well in his books, even at the cost of historical accuracy. For example,

illiterate peasants and Roman governors sound more or less alike. The verbal class distinctions of *My Fair Lady* do not exist in this gospel. Also, no evangelist could tell a story like Luke. The proof is simple: his parables are the ones we remember most easily—the Prodigal Son, the Pharisee and Publican (also referred to as the Tax Collector), the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Good Samaritan. Like Matthew, he was also a good theologian.

Was the author of the third gospel the physician so familiar in Christian tradition? He does use medical terminology occasionally, but he uses terms familiar to most educated people, much the way modern people with no medical training speak of germs and viruses. On the other hand, if the terms were so familiar, why is he the only NT writer to use them? And did the Luke who is mentioned in the NT books even write this gospel? The questions remain unanswered, and they really do not impact our understanding of the book. As with Matthew, the book's importance lies in its acceptance as inspired and canonical by the early church.

### **The Gospels of Matthew and Luke**

Before turning to the two gospels, we should deal with the widespread notions that the evangelists wrote their gospels to prove to Jews and pagans that Jesus was the true Messiah sent by God, and that the evangelists achieved this by recounting Jesus' miracles. Not so on either count. Let us take the second point first.

In the gospels themselves, Jesus does not perform miracles so that people will believe in him. Repeatedly Jesus expects faith *before* performing a miracle. He tells the Canaanite woman whose daughter he heals, "Woman, great is your faith" (Matt 15:28). He tells Jairus and his wife to have faith, and their daughter will be healed (Luke 8:50). He assures the blind man, "your faith has saved you" (Luke 18:42). Sometimes the faith is not of an individual but of a group, as in the

cure of the paralytic. "When Jesus saw *their* faith [the friends who carried the paralytic on a pallet] . . ." (Mark 2:5).

The evangelists followed their Lord; they did not use miracles to engender faith but presumed that their readers had it already. So when we look at the infancy narratives, we must recall that the miraculous elements (the star, the angels appearing to the shepherds) are not there to win over pagans or Jews, but because they were genuine traditions about Jesus' birth known to Matthew and Luke and most likely to the communities for which they wrote.

This leads us to the first point: like all biblical authors, the evangelists wrote as believing Christians for other believing Christians, as members of early Christian communities for other members of those communities. The evangelists do not try to prove Jesus is the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, or anything else. Mark's gospel begins directly: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). Mark just states it, and that is that. The other evangelists followed Mark's lead, and they got this approach from the familiar source of so many early Christian practices, the Jews.

Look how the ancient Israelites began the Old Testament: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. . ." (Gen 1:1). Notice there is no attempt to prove that God exists but just a description of his creative work, because the author was a believing Israelite writing for other believing Israelites. The book of Isaiah opens with a direct assertion: "The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." No skepticism about the authenticity of the vision, but rather a simple acceptance that God spoke to and through the great prophet. All the biblical books are books of faith, and the same can be said of the sacred books of other world religions.

Now that we understand that Matthew and Luke wrote for their fellow believers, we must ask why they added infancy narratives to the basic account provided by Mark. As we saw,

they were not writing accounts of Jesus' birth for a feast day, but rather they were writing the introductory chapters of their gospels. That means that somewhere between the writing of Mark's gospel about the year 70 and the writing of their own gospels in the 80s, Matthew and Luke saw the need to add to Mark's gospel narrative an account of Jesus' birth. What was that need?

The need was a basic one: Christology. Matthew and Luke felt uncomfortable with Mark's portrayal of Jesus, and especially with how he showed Jesus achieving recognition of his divine sonship. The first event in Jesus' life narrated by Mark is his baptism by John the Baptist. "And just as he [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10-11).

To modern Christians, who know all four gospels and who consider John the Baptist as a forerunner of Jesus, this passage presents no problems. But look at it in mid-first century terms when Mark's was still the *only* written gospel. Mark says that God recognized Jesus as his son *after* his baptism. First-century Christians might understandably wonder if God had recognized him before that. More problematically, these Christians may have wondered if there were a causal relationship between the baptism and the recognition. If so, that would make John the Baptist a major factor, perhaps *the* major factor, in Jesus' receiving divine recognition. Scholars do not believe that this is what Mark meant, but we can see how such confusion could have arisen.

But there is more. Everyone "knows" that John played the role of forerunner to Jesus, and he decreased as Jesus increased (John 3:30). Not exactly. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that in the mid-50s, two of the apostle Paul's coworkers in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila, met a Jew named Apollos, who came from Alexandria in Egypt and who "knew only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25). When Paul himself

was in Ephesus, he met a dozen disciples who knew nothing about the Holy Spirit but had received the baptism of John (Acts 19:1-7). Although we cannot say for sure if these were disciples of Christ or John, the key point is that John's movement did not die with him. Christians encountered people who had been baptized by his disciples and maybe even were his disciples, and they encountered them twenty-five years after John's death and hundreds of miles from Palestine. At the very least John's life and teaching continued to move people for some time after his death. On some occasions and in some places the movements might have rivaled each other.

A non-biblical support for a possible rivalry can be found in a third-century work entitled *The Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*, written in Greek, definitely from the Eastern Mediterranean, and possibly containing material that dates to the first century. The book claims to be the work of Clement of Rome, a Christian writer of the end of the first century and, in Roman Catholic tradition, the third successor of Peter the apostle as bishop of Rome. Many pseudepigraphic (falsely named) texts are attributed to him. In the *Recognitions*, one of John the Baptist's disciples tells Jesus' disciples that "[John] is the Christ and not Jesus, just as Jesus himself said concerning him. . . ." A tradition of John's superiority to Jesus, although not widespread, survived in the Eastern Mediterranean for at least two centuries.

Now the concern of Matthew and Luke makes sense. They did not wish believers to think that Jesus owed his recognition as God's son to his baptism by John. They had to demonstrate that he had such recognition long before his baptism, and so, collecting traditions about Jesus' nativity, they demonstrated that he received divine recognition at his very birth. Indeed, the annunciation stories showed he received the recognition even before his birth. Thanks to Matthew and Luke, Jesus' story begins not with his baptism but with his birth, which these two evangelists added to Mark's basic narrative.

But they added a great deal more than just the infancy narratives. Reworking Mark's material and adding to it, Matthew and Luke created their own Christologies, ones suitable for their own communities.

This can raise concerns among modern believers. How could the evangelists have created their own Christologies? Jesus was one person, not four. Would not four Christologies distort our understanding of him?

Rare for biblical scholarship, this problem has a simple answer. Think of who you are. You are one person to your family members, another to your coworkers or fellow students, another to your neighbors, yet another to people in clubs or on teams, and, if you have joined an internet chat group, you present still another picture to people who have not even met you. You are a different person to different people, yet you are one and the same.

The New Testament refers to Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior, the Lamb of God, the Son of Man, the vine, the eternal high priest, the fulfillment of prophecies, the Word, the Good Shepherd, the way, the truth, and the life, and the Alpha and Omega—and this is just a partial list. Nor is such an approach to Jesus just a literary one. He was ethnically Jewish, but medieval and renaissance artists portrayed him as a European. Today Third World Christians portray him as an African, a Latin American, or an Asian, and not just visually. Yet all these portrayals are of one and the same person.

So why are there so many different portrayals? Because all Christians believe that Jesus has relevance for them, and they want to express that. The New Testament authors shared this view. They wrote for diverse audiences, stressing particular aspects of Jesus' person and mission, but they never equated those aspects with the totality of his person and mission. The unknown author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is the only NT writer who calls Jesus a high priest, clearly an issue of importance to Jewish converts who grew up with devotion to the temple and who were prominent among the epistle's readers.

But the author of Hebrews does not claim that “high priest” is the sole way to understand Jesus. Rather, this is the understanding of Jesus which he wishes to develop for his readers. Matthew and Luke would do the same for their readers.

### *Matthew’s Gospel*

We already know that Matthew wrote for a Greek-speaking audience, most likely a combined community of both Gentiles and Diasporan Jews. Strikingly, Matthew ends his gospel with the risen Christ’s words to his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19). This famous verse makes it clear that the Christian message must go to all peoples, the vast majority of whom would have been Gentiles. The passage says clearly what appears in more subtle ways throughout the gospel, for example, at Jesus’ death. “Now when the centurion and those with him [under the cross], who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’” (27:54). Gentiles, the very Romans who executed Jesus, recognized who he was, while the Jewish leaders refused to do so. Matthew leaves no doubt that this growing religious movement has its future in Gentile lands.

But this gospel also pays more attention to Judaism than any other gospel. Matthew cites the Old Testament (OT) twice as often as any other evangelist, and he cites more different passages from the OT than any other evangelist. Only Matthew records Jesus’ words, “I have come not to abolish [the law] but to fulfill it. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (5:17-18). Such a stunning validation of the Mosaic Law from Jesus himself would have immense significance for Jewish converts, who naturally would have wondered about the status of the Law that God had given to their people. Matthew further

expressed his reverence for the Law by paralleling Jesus with Moses, the great lawgiver of ancient Israel.

Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, and in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), Jesus gives the new law. Scholars believe that although Jesus no doubt used local high places to teach, the Sermon is largely of Matthew’s creation. They think this because if you look at the parallel passages in the gospels, sayings uttered by Jesus in one sermon in Matthew appear in a variety of places in Luke. Does it make more sense that Luke knew about a brilliant sermon but deliberately broke it up or that Matthew took a number of sayings and put them into a larger sermon? Most scholars think the latter, and for good reason—Jewish converts would recognize the Moses/Jesus parallels. Including the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records five long discourses of Jesus (5:1–7:29; 10:35–11:1; 13:1–52; 18:1–35; 24:1–25:46), and possibly he wanted to parallel these with the five books of the Torah, traditionally attributed to Moses. At the Transfiguration, Jesus’ face “shone like the sun” (Matt 17:2), paralleling Exodus 34:30 which recounts that Moses’ face shone like the sun when he came down from Mount Sinai.

Many other appeals to Jewish converts appear in the book, often in less obvious ways. For example, although Matthew shows Jesus in spirited debates with the Pharisees, he often shows Jesus giving them respect, something Luke rarely does. Both gospels rework Mark’s account (Mark 2:23–28) of how Jesus’ disciples picked grain on the Sabbath, a violation of that sacred day, which Jesus justifies by an appeal to a similar act by the great Israelite king David (Matt 12:1–8; Luke 6:1–5). In Luke’s gospel, when the Pharisees see what is happening, they say to Jesus, “Why are *you* doing what is wrong on the Sabbath?” They outright accuse Jesus himself. But Matthew, aware of Jewish sensibilities, treats the matter very differently.

For starters, he adds the important detail that the disciples were hungry, so they did not just pick the grain arbitrarily. The Pharisees do not accuse Jesus of violating the Sabbath

but instead say to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath," thus implying that Jesus may not have known what the disciples were up to. Unlike Luke, who has the Pharisees accuse Jesus, Matthew shows the Pharisees treating Jesus fairly and giving him the benefit of the doubt. When Jesus responds to them, he uses the same Davidic example that Mark and Luke do, but he also does the Pharisees the courtesy of providing a second example. Jesus recognizes them as scholars of the Law, and he wants to justify his disciples' actions.

A final example of Matthew's concern for the sensitivities of Jewish converts is a very subtle one. All three synoptic evangelists recount how a Jerusalem mob, incited by Jesus' enemies, demanded that Pilate release Barabbas and execute Jesus, that is, they chose the evil man over the good one. Mark 15:7 and Luke 23:19 identify Barabbas as a revolutionary, but Matthew says simply that he was "a notorious prisoner" (27:16). Why would Matthew leave out so important a fact as Barabbas' being a revolutionary? Because Jewish readers might consider a rebel against Rome to be a hero, which would frustrate Matthew's central point, that the mob chose the evil man over the good one.

Matthew's Christology gives us a very Jewish Jesus, who indeed comes to save all peoples but who respects Jewish institutions, traditions and groups, who observes the Law, and who fulfills the Old Testament prophecies. For Matthew's Jewish-Christian readers, fulfilling the prophecies proves that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, who came not on clouds and power but instead to serve, to suffer, and to die to redeem the human race from its sins. This Jewish Jesus will dominate Matthew's infancy narrative, but never to the exclusion of the Savior's mission to the Gentiles as well.

### *Luke's Gospel*

When we turn not only to the Gospel of Luke but also to the Acts of the Apostles, we find a writer who portrays a Jewish

Jesus and who shows the apostle Paul agonizing over the relation of Christianity to Judaism, but whose overall approach differs considerably from Matthew's because Luke is writing for a mostly Gentile audience. This focus appears in a variety of ways, and here is a small but telling one. All three gospels tell how Jesus cured the paralytic whose friends brought him to Jesus. Recall that the friends cannot get into the building where Jesus is preaching, so they go up on the roof, where Mark (2:4) says they "dug through" the roof, something they could do to a typical Palestinian roof made of sticks and packed earth, which in turn would be something difficult for Greeks and Romans to comprehend. When Luke retells the narrative, he says that they *removed the tiles* (5:19), proving that he wrote for an audience familiar with Greek and Roman houses.

Another good example appears in the story of Jesus and Barabbas. As we saw, Matthew does not mention that Barabbas was a revolutionary, not wanting to make him sympathetic to Jewish readers. In his account, Luke focuses on Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Aware that Gentiles would react in anger or disgust at learning that Jesus died a traitor's death and that they would want nothing to do with a religion founded by someone condemned by the imperial government, Luke works overtime to show that Jesus was innocent and died only because of a weak and incompetent Roman governor.

Three times (23:4, 14, 23) Pilate publicly acknowledges Jesus' innocence. While Mark says that Barabbas committed murder during an insurrection, Luke asserts Barabbas was in prison for "insurrection and murder" (23:25), effectively separating the two crimes and implying that Barabbas did not kill someone in the confused melee of an insurrection but was actually both a revolutionary and a murderer. This is the man whom Pilate set free! Nor does Luke actually mention Pilate's order for Jesus' execution; rather "he handed Jesus over as they wished" (23:25), that is, the governor caved in to the

mob. Luke emphasizes Pilate's moral weakness and appalling incompetence. So anxious is the evangelist to prove the injustice of Jesus' death that he becomes heavy-handed. Whereas Matthew and Mark show the Roman centurion under the cross acknowledging, "Truly this man was God's son," Luke has the centurion say, "Certainly this man was innocent" (23:47).

Luke makes his point: Greeks and Romans need not worry about this new religion. Far from being a criminal, its founder was a good man who fell victim to a venal, weak, pathetic governor who openly acknowledged the founder's innocence—a far different interpretation of the Jesus-Barabbas account than that which Matthew gave to his Jewish-Christian audience.

Other details appear that would relate to a Gentile audience. Only Luke mentions any of the Caesars by name, Augustus (2:1), Tiberius (3:1), and Claudius (Acts 11:28), so he sets the events of Jesus' life and that of the early church in a Roman context. Luke even tells how the Apostle Paul debated with "some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" (Acts 17:18), showing the new revelation encountering the wisdom of the classical world. As noted earlier, Luke places Roman officials exactly where they are supposed to be, and he does not need to identify their functions for his readers.

So what Christology does Luke offer his Gentile audience? He emphasizes Jesus as the universal savior. For example, only in Luke do we find the parable of the Good Samaritan, that is, a non-Jew and a member of a people whom most Jews loathed (10:29-37). Jesus tells it in response to a question from a religious lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?" When he asks the lawyer which of the three men in the story was the neighbor of the robbers' victim, the lawyer responds, "The one who showed him mercy." He cannot even bring himself to mention the word "Samaritan," yet this Samaritan is the one whom Jesus chose as a model of charity. This universalism appears repeatedly in the Acts of the Apostles, where Roman

officials repeatedly save Paul's life from angry pagan and Jewish mobs (Acts 19:28-41; 21:30-22:29).

But Luke extended his universality beyond geographic lines to include social ones. Because Jewish tax collectors worked for the Romans and had to handle coins with the images of emperors and even pagan deities, which was an impious act, most Jews had contempt for them. Yet in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (traditionally called the publican), Jesus asserts that the humble tax collector, who admits he is a sinner, "went down to his home justified" while the self-righteous Pharisee, who measured his sanctity quantitatively, did not (18:9-14).

The poor almost always find themselves outcasts, but Luke effectively shows Jesus standing up for them in a passage unfamiliar to many Christians. We all know the eight beatitudes from Matthew 5:1-10, including the famous, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It is a beautiful saying, but note that Matthew has "poor *in spirit*," so this saying can apply to those who are not actually poor in money and goods. Furthermore, by using the third person, Matthew has Jesus enunciate an ethical principle.

Almost no one knows Luke's beatitudes (6:20-26), but there Jesus says, "Blessed are you *who are poor*, for yours is the kingdom of God" (v. 20). These people are poor, not "in spirit," but genuinely poor. Note also that instead of articulating ethical principles, Jesus speaks directly to them ("*you who are poor*"). Luke goes on in this same vein: "Blessed are *you who are hungry now*, for you will be filled" (v. 21). These people do not "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt 5:6); they are without food now, and again Jesus speaks directly to them. Luke's presentation of the beatitudes is not the only instance of this concern for the impoverished. He returns to this theme in his well-known parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus (16:19-31).

Besides Gentiles, social outcasts, and the poor, Luke shows Jesus caring for women who, in that era, were routinely op-

pressed and abused. The evangelist repeatedly shows Jesus rising above the prejudices of his age. Luke alone tells how Jesus raised from the dead the “only son” of the widow of Nain (7:11-17). “Only” is the operative word because a widow who lost her only son would have no man to care for her, which in ancient society meant destitution. Luke is also the only evangelist to give credit to the women who financially supported Jesus and his disciples (8:1-3), no small kindness for people always on the move and in constant need of food and shelter. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells of four unnamed women who prophesy (21:9), of Priscilla who taught the faith (18:26), of the mother of John Mark (12:12) and the convert Lydia (16:14-15) who may have headed local house churches. But it is his infancy narrative in which Luke includes his most important presentations of women—of Elizabeth, of Anna, and especially of Jesus’ mother Mary, the model disciple for this evangelist.

Even this brief sketch demonstrates that Matthew and Luke never overlooked or omitted the focus of the other’s gospel. Just as Matthew’s Jesus saves all people, Luke’s Jesus respects the Law. But this sketch also demonstrates that the two evangelists offer their own portraits of Jesus, their own Christologies. Just as Jesus the Jewish savior will dominate Matthew’s infancy narrative, so Jesus the universal savior will dominate Luke’s infancy narrative.

Let us now turn to those narratives.