Key to Symbols

- Brief summary of each gospel
- Author of the gospel
- Date of composition
- Description of content
- Description of main characters
- Definitions and explanations of terms and ideas
- Not-so-minor characters who move the story along
- Archaeological insights
- Social justice teachings
- Prayer starters
- Liturgical use of Scripture
them where the Messiah was to be born.” They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judaea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

6“And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

7Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. 8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.” 9After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. 10They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Dreams feature in both OT and NT stories as vehicles for revealing God’s will to human beings. In Genesis Jacob’s dream expresses contact with God (Gn 28:12). Also, another Joseph is honored for his “dreams,” though they make his brothers jealous; his ability to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams properly saves him (Gn 37–41). In Matthew, God uses dreams to direct Joseph to accept Mary as his wife and Jesus as his son. The magi also receive dreams to avoid contact with the evil King Herod. Even Pilate’s wife receives a dream that testifies to Jesus’ innocence (Mt 27:19). Dreams, then, are a means of divine communication that can have serious consequences in human affairs.

The Flight to Egypt

13“When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.” 14Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. 15He stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

The Massacre of the Infants

16When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the magi, he became furious. He ordered

who will deliver Israel from Egypt and the king makes plans to destroy him. Matthew 2:11: Cf. Psalm 72:10, 15; Isaiah 60:6. These Old Testament texts led to the interpretation of the magi as kings.

2:11 Psalm 72:10; Psalm 72:15; Isaiah 60:6; These Old Testament texts led to the interpretation of the magi as kings.

2:13-23 Biblical and nonbiblical traditions about Moses are here applied to the child Jesus, though the dominant Old Testament type is not Moses but Israel (2:15).

2:13 Flee to Egypt: Egypt was a traditional place of refuge for those fleeing from danger in Palestine (see 1 Kgs 11:40; Jer 26:21), but the main reason why the child is to be taken to Egypt is that he may relive the Exodus experience of Israel.

2:15 The fulfillment citation is taken from Hosea 11:1. Israel, God’s son, was called out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus; Jesus, the Son of God, will similarly be called out of that land in a new exodus. The father-son relationship between God and the nation is set in a higher key. Here the son is not a group adopted as “son of God,” but the child who, as conceived by the holy Spirit, stands in unique relation to God. He is son of David and of Abraham, of Mary and of Joseph, but, above all, of God.
the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the magi. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet:

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled, since they were no more."

The Return from Egypt

19 When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20 and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead." 21 He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. 23 He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazorean."

II: The Proclamation of the Kingdom

The Preaching of John the Baptist

3 1a In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea 2b and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" 3c It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:

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2:18 Jeremiah 31:15 portrays Rachel, wife of the patriarch Jacob, weeping for her children taken into exile at the time of the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom (722–21 B.C.). Bethlehem was traditionally identified with Ephrath, the place near which Rachel was buried (see Gn 35:18; 48:7), and the mourning of Rachel is here applied to her lost children of a later age. Ramah: about six miles north of Jerusalem. The lamentation of Rachel is so great as to be heard at a far distance.

2:20 For those who sought the child’s life are dead: Moses, who had fled from Egypt because the Pharaoh sought to kill him (see Ex 2:15), was told to return there, "for all the men who sought your life are dead" (Ex 4:19).

2:22 With the agreement of the emperor Augustus, Archelaus received half of his father’s kingdom, including Judea, after Herod’s death. He had the title “ethnarch” (i.e., “ruler of a nation”) and reigned from 4 B.C. to A.D. 6.

2:23 Nazareth . . . he shall be called a Nazorean: the tradition of Jesus’ residence in Nazareth was firmly established, and Matthew sees it as being in accordance with the foreannounced plan of God. The town of Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament, and no such prophecy can be found there. The vague expression “through the prophets” may be due to Matthew’s seeing a connection between Nazareth and certain texts in which there are words with a remote similarity to the name of that town. Some such Old Testament texts are Isaiah 11:1 where the Davidic king of the future is called “a bud” (néger) that shall blossom from the roots of Jesse, and Judges 13:5, 7 where Samson, the future deliverer of Israel from the Philistines, is called one who shall be consecrated (a názir) to God.

3:1-12 Here Matthew takes up the order of Jesus’ ministry found in the gospel of Mark, beginning with the preparatory preaching of John the Baptist.

3:1 Unlike Luke, Matthew says nothing of the Baptist’s origins and does not make him a relative of Jesus. The desert of Judea: the barren region west of the Dead Sea extending up the Jordan valley.

3:2 Repent: the Baptist calls for a change of heart and conduct, a turning of one’s life from rebellion to obedience towards God. The kingdom of heaven is at hand: “heaven” (literally, “the heavens”) is a substitute for the name “God” that was avoided by devout Jews of the time out of reverence. The expression “the kingdom of heaven” occurs only in the gospel of Matthew. It means the effective rule of God over his people. In its fullness it includes not only human obedience to God’s word, but the triumph of God over physical evils, supremely over death. In the expectation found in Jewish apocalyptic, the kingdom was to be ushered in by a judgment in which sinners would be condemned and perish, an expectation shared by the Baptist. This was modified in Christian understanding where the kingdom was seen as being established in stages, culminating with the parousia of Jesus.

3:3 See the note on John 1:23.
“A voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.’”

John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.” His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The Baptism of Jesus

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. John tried to prevent him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?” Jesus said to him in reply, “Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all
righteousness.” Then he allowed him. 16 After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened [for him], and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove [and] coming upon him. 17 And a voice came from the heavens, saying, “This is my beloved Son,” with whom I am well pleased.”

The Temptation of Jesus

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. 29 He fasted for forty days and forty nights,” and afterwards he was hungry. 30 The tempter approached and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.” 31 He said in reply, “It is written:

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.”

Getting It Right . . . Demons and Devils

The Bible speaks of numerous supernatural figures of evil. Although they are generally identified with one another, they actually have long, complex histories and are sometimes distinct.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Key References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satan</td>
<td>A Persian title that crept into the Bible; originally designated not an evil power but a kind of prosecuting attorney, part of God’s heavenly retinue, whose job was to ensure good faith on earth; later is identified with the devil</td>
<td>Jb 1:6-2:7; Zec 3:1-12; Mt 4:10; Mk 1:13; 4:15; Lk 22:33; Jn 13:27; Acts 5:3</td>
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<td>Beelzebul (NT)</td>
<td>Literally, “the lord of the flies”; the name of a Philistine god; becomes explicitly identified with Satan as the prince of evil and master of demons (Mk 3:22-23)</td>
<td>Mt 12:24-27; Mk 3:22; Lk 11:15-19; cf. 2 Kgs 1:2-16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baal-zebub (OT)</td>
<td>Term used to translate Hebrew satan in LXX (the Septuagint); is explicitly (Rev 12:9; 20:2) and implicitly (cf. Mt 4:1 and 10) identified with Satan, God’s supernatural enemy; the embodiment of evil and the tempter who tests people and can lead them astray; is sometimes contrasted with the archangel Michael</td>
<td>Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13; Jn 8:44; 13:2; 1 Pt 5:8; Jude 1:9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demons</td>
<td>Minor spiritual beings who are lesser minions of the devil; they can cause illness, disease, and possession; later Jewish tradition identified them as fallen angels; they were thought to dwell in the desert and wilderness</td>
<td>Tb 6:8; Mt 8:28-33; Lk 4:41; 8:26-39; cf. Mk 1:13</td>
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3:17 This is my beloved Son: the Marcan address to Jesus (Mk 1:11) is changed into a proclamation. The Father’s voice speaks in terms that reflect Isaiah 42:1; Psalm 2:7; Genesis 22:2.
4:1-11 Jesus, proclaimed Son of God at his baptism, is subjected to a triple temptation. Obedience to the Father is a characteristic of true sonship, and Jesus is tempted by the devil to rebel against God, overtly in the third case, more subtly in the first two. Each refusal of Jesus is expressed in language taken from the Book of Deuteronomy (Dt 8:3; 6:13, 16). The testings of Jesus resemble those of Israel during the wandering in the desert and later in Canaan, and the victory of Jesus, the true Israel and the true Son, contrasts with the failure of the ancient and disobedient "son," the old Israel. In the temptation account Matthew is almost identical with Luke; both seem to have drawn upon the same source.
4:2 Forty days and forty nights: the same time as that during which Moses remained on Sinai (Ex 24:18). The time reference, however, seems primarily intended to recall the forty years during which Israel was tempted in the desert (Dt 8:2).
4:4 Cf. Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus refuses to use his power for his own benefit and accepts whatever God wills.
Cleansing of the Temple
15*They came to Jerusalem, and on entering the temple area he began to drive out those selling and buying there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. 16*He did not permit anyone to carry anything through the temple area. 17*Then he taught them saying, “Is it not written:

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’? But you have made it a den of thieves.”

18*The chief priests and the scribes came to hear of it and were seeking a way to put him to death, yet they feared him because the whole crowd was astonished at his teaching. 19*When evening came, they went out of the city.

The Withered Fig Tree
20*Early in the morning, as they were walking along, they saw the fig tree withered to its roots.
21*Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” 22*Jesus said to them in reply, “Have faith in God. 23*Amen, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it shall be done for him. 24*Therefore I tell you, all that you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it and it shall be yours. 25*When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance, so that your heavenly Father may in turn forgive you your transgressions.” 26*

The Authority of Jesus Questioned
27*They returned once more to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple area, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders approached him 28*and said to him, “By what authority are you doing these things? Or who gave you this authority to do them?” 29*Jesus said to them, “I shall ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 30*Was John’s baptism of heavenly or of human origin? Answer

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11:15-19 See the note on Matthew 21:12-17.
11:26 This verse, which reads, “But if you do not forgive, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your transgressions,” is omitted in the best manuscripts. It was probably added by copyists under the influence of Matthew 6:15.

11:27-33 The mounting hostility toward Jesus came from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (11:27); the Herodians and the Pharisees (12:13); and the Sadducees (12:18). By their rejection of God’s messengers, John the Baptist and Jesus, they incurred the divine judgment implied in Mark 11:27-33 and confirmed in the parable of the vineyard tenants (12:1-12).
They discussed this among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘Of heavenly origin,’ he will say, ‘[Then] why did you not believe him?’ 32 But shall we say, ‘Of human origin’”—they feared the crowd, for they all thought John really was a prophet. 33 So they said to Jesus in reply, “We do not know.” Then Jesus said to them, “Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

**Parable of the Tenants**

He began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenant farmers and left on a journey. At the proper time he sent a servant to the tenants to obtain from them some of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent them another servant. And that one they beat over the head and treated shamefully. He sent yet another whom they killed. So, too, many others; some they beat, others they killed. He had one other to send, a beloved son. He sent him to them last of all, thinking, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they seized him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What [then] will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come, put the tenants to death, and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture passage:

‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes’?”

They were seeking to arrest him, but they feared the crowd, for they realized that he had addressed the parable to them. So they left him and went away.

**Paying Taxes to the Emperor**

They sent some Pharisees and Herodians to him to ensnare him in his speech. They came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion. You do not regard a person’s status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or should we not pay?” Knowing their hypocrisy he said to them, “Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius to look at.” They brought one to him and he said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” They replied to him, “Caesar’s.” So Jesus said to them, “Repay to

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**12:1-12** The vineyard denotes Israel (Is 5:1-7). The tenant farmers are the religious leaders of Israel. God is the owner of the vineyard. His servants are his messengers, the prophets. The beloved son is Jesus (1:11; 9:7; Mt 3:17; 17:5; Lk 3:22; 9:35). The punishment of the tenants refers to the religious leaders, and the transfer of the vineyard to others refers to the people of the new Israel.

**12:13-34** In the ensuing conflicts (cf. also 2:1-3:6) Jesus vanquishes his adversaries by his responses to their questions and reduces them to silence (12:34).

**12:13-17** See the note on Matthew 22:15-22.
The Crucifixion

They brought him to the place of Golgotha (which is translated Place of the Skull). They gave him wine drugged with myrrh, but he did not take it. Then they crucified him and divided his garments by casting lots for them to see what each should take. It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” With him they crucified two revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left. Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross.” Likewise the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him among themselves and said, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him.

The Death of Jesus

At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Some of the bystanders who heard it said, “Look, he is calling Elijah.” One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down.” Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When Jesus, I can hardly imagine the abandonment you must have felt on the cross. As I look at our war-torn countries around the world I see many whose loved ones have been tragically killed or maimed. I hear them echo your cry of abandonment. Reveal to us how to reach out to those who feel forsaken by God.
the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” 40There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome. 41These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him. There were also many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

The Burial of Jesus

42When it was already evening, since it was the day of preparation, the day before the sabbath, 43Joseph of Arimathea,* a distinguished member of the council, who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God, came and courageously went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44Pilate was amazed that he was already dead. He summoned the centurion and asked him if Jesus had already died. 45And when he learned of it from the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph. 46Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down, wrapped him in the linen cloth and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. 47Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses watched where he was laid.

Faithful Women Followers

That the gospels make mention of women followers of Jesus, some of them by name, is just one more indication of the barriers that Jesus overcame as he proclaimed the kingdom of God. Class, race, culture, and gender were seemingly unimportant among the followers of Jesus. We hear of tax collectors, sinners, a member of the Sanhedrin, single women and groups of women, young and old men, the blind and lame, and the hale and hearty—an unheard of combination in any social institution of the time.

The faithfulness of the women is noted or described on more than one occasion. They are with Jesus at his crucifixion when by most accounts his disciples have fled (here, and cf. Mt 27:55-56; Lk 23:48-49; Jn 19:25). Earlier, women are known to have traveled with Jesus and the Twelve and even used their resources to provide for their needs (cf. Lk 8:1-3). Finally, women are among the first to witness the reality of the risen Jesus.

Their faithfulness placed them near Jesus in all circumstances and challenges us to find ourselves with him too.

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15:40-41 See the note on Matthew 27:55-56.